European Work Councils (EWCs)

The European Work Councils Directive of 1994 seeks to improve employees' rights to information and consultation. It applies to companies or groups of undertakings employing at least 1,000 workers within the EU and where there are 150 or more employees in two or more member states. Companies covered by the Directive are under a duty to negotiate with employees' representatives to establish a European-wide work council.

The aim of the Directive is “to improve the right to information and consultation of employees”. Consultation is defined as “the exchange of views and the establishment of dialogue between employees’ representatives and central management”. The terms of reference and the procedure of each EWC are set out in a formal document, usually referred to as the Agreement or Protocol.

The need for language training

By definition EWCs involve representatives from different countries and hence there is a need to ensure that effective communication can take place. While interpreters are usually employed to service the main meetings between employer and employee representatives, there is a need for direct communication for on-going discussions, networking and informal exchanges. Language learning for EWC members is usually conducted:

- for delegates from different companies
- within a single-company framework

Individual members of EWCs have clearly recognised the need to develop their language skills.
Provision of language training for EWC delegates from different companies

**Individual members of EWCs** have clearly recognised the need to develop their language skills in order to fulfil their role and be able to participate comfortably in meetings. ETUCO (now ETUI-REHS Education) has continued to organise regular training courses for individual members of EWCs at Northumbria University in Newcastle. To a large extent this provides an opportunity to bring together a homogenous group of learners as the courses can be offered at specific language levels—generally at intermediate and advanced levels.

At the same time highly motivated individuals attend whatever training courses are available and so they may also often be found on general language courses. Although these guidelines are directed more towards the needs of trainers on courses for single-company EWCs, trainers of representatives from different companies may find the suggestions listed below of relevance to some of their needs.

Provision for language training within a single-company framework

**In order to make these bodies effective** channels of communication there is usually some provision for training workers’ representatives. This can include language training and this is sometimes specifically highlighted in Agreements.

Where an Agreement makes provision for language training then this provides EWC members with the opportunity to develop language skills within the specific framework of the work they are called to do as EWC delegates (for each of whom there is generally a substitute or deputy delegate).

Characteristics of single-company language learner groups

**The size and composition of the EWC** depends on the total numbers employed by the company and the geographical spread of its operations. Hence it may be concentrated in as few as three or four countries or it may extend to 15 or even 25. On average it is more like to consist of 6 to 10 countries.

The number of delegates and deputies per country will be established in the Agreement and will generally be in proportion to the size of the workforce in each country. The potential number of learners may therefore range from about 12 to 40. Past experience indicates that about 24 delegates and deputy delegates can be recruited to follow a language course.

The delegates and deputy delegates are elected to represent their workplace in accordance with the practices for electing workplace representatives that prevail in the different countries in which the company is located. They are chosen for their qualities as representatives and not for their foreign language skills and hence there
Language training for European trade unionists – a guide

is likely to be a great disparity in language levels- usually ranging from complete beginners to advanced learners.

As well as coming from different countries, the group of learners may contain a great variety of occupations and grades. They may be white-collar office workers or blue-collar shop-floor workers. There may even be non-union as well as union representatives and there may be members from national confederations which do not always sit easily together.

Pre-course preparation

Trainers will need to work closely with the course organisers who may be full-time trade union officers or members of the steering committee of the EWC itself. In either case it is clearly important to establish two key areas (a) language level and (b) needs.

The language level of the learners.

It is often impracticable to test the learners prior to the commencement of the course and at best the trainer needs to rely on an assessment provided by the course organiser based on their awareness of previous communications in the target language. A simple questionnaire can also be used along the following lines:

- How long have you studied the target language?
- When did you last study the target language?
- Which level do you think you have achieved?
- Write a few sentences in the target language
- Which other languages do you speak?

Coping with differing levels

With single company courses trainers are naturally presented with a wide range of language levels often from complete beginners to very fluent advanced learners. The question is how to cope with this type of disparity? Hopefully the provisions of the Agreement will include sufficient funding to employ an adequate number of trainers. Ideally, a ratio of 3 tutors for 24 participants allows the formation of a beginners, an intermediate and an advanced group. However, there will still be a wide range within each group. Tutors will need to draw upon their experience to provide for the needs of the participants within the groups especially in the case of the beginners group which is likely to be the most diverse, containing false as well as genuine beginners. Sub-groups may therefore be needed to work on designated tasks such as listening comprehension tasks while others are engaged in tutor-led activities.
The perceived needs of the learners.

**Course organisers should be able** to identify some key areas with regard to needs. Face to face communication is likely to take place in a number of different circumstances: small group meetings on specific issues, for example, meetings of the steering group, preparatory meetings of the workers’ representatives, follow-up meetings and informal discussions outside of the general forum.

Topics will range from social topics/ current affairs to more specific work-based topics, for example: the economic situation of individual plants, outsourcing, working practices, working-time and education and training.

It may be that regular communication is conducted by e-mail and if so there will be examples of the nature of the messages that are sent. Perhaps these are concerned with arrangements for meetings - availability to attend/apologies for absence, requests for information about details of travel, arrival and departure times. It may be that there are requests for information about on-going issues such as levels of employment/unemployment, accidents, health and safety.

Materials

**Having assessed as far as possible** the language levels and needs of the participants the trainer(s) will need to select the appropriate materials. Wherever possible these should have a workplace/trade union flavour. The materials are likely to include:

- Aspects of general language teaching to cover basic language structures (e.g. verb tenses) relevant to the differing levels within the learner group.
- Materials specifically designed for trade union learners (e.g. ETUCO English for European trade unionists Levels 1 & 2)
- Materials provided by the EWC members themselves from company sources e.g. discussion papers on health and safety, working time.

Methodology

**As with all trade union language training**, courses for EWCs are based on the principles of active participation and collaboration among the participants and their tutors. Participants are advised that they will be involved in group work, the preparation of mini-projects and in making presentations. They need to realise that this will probably mean a significant departure from the way they may have been taught perhaps a long time ago. The focus of their training is likely to have 50% of the time devoted to language work in specific level groups (structures, vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, etc) and 50% of the time being activity-based in mixed level groups (field work, data collection, interviews, presentations etc). There are a number of factors that need highlighting in these courses including:
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(a) confidence building
(b) team-building
(c) cultural awareness
(d) study skills

Confidence building

As with all language training everything possible needs to be done to boost the confidence of the learners. Many of the participants may have had poor experiences of language learning and will feel apprehensive about their prospects of being able to communicate. There may be a natural reluctance to speak in front of their peers especially if any hierarchical or status factors are involved. The early stages of the course need to be unthreatening and relaxing. It is best to avoid the correction of mistakes unless absolutely necessary in order to clarify understanding. Public utterances should be kept to a minimum in preference to pair work and/or small group activities. Initial introductions can be done in the mother-tongue to recognise the value of each language and to help participants feel comfortable.

Team building

Course organisers usually stress the importance of team–building in the context of all EWC courses and language training certainly provides an excellent opportunity to meet this objective. To this end it is important to ensure that participants have as many possibilities as possible to work with other colleagues and not just with those in the same language–level groups. The more advanced participants need to realise the importance (and the difficulty) of communicating with...
colleagues at lower levels and how the need to rephrase, select vocabulary and check understanding are important ingredients of authentic communication. The key here is to rotate the group membership in terms of language learning levels and nationalities as much as possible:

- Pair work where more advanced participants assist/explain specific language tasks and exercises
- Group work where the group compare experiences (working time, shift work, statutory holidays) and prepare a report
- Plenary sessions where delegates are required to present reports (for example, on information from their own plants regarding such topics as accidents, employment levels). Careful preparation is required for these sessions in order for the beginners’ level delegates to fulfil the task. However, this can produce a great source of satisfaction for all concerned.

Cultural awareness

The fact that delegates come from a number of different countries provides a need and an opportunity to explore some differing aspects of culture that may inevitably impinge on their meetings. Some members may be more reticent, others may be more voluble, there may be more acceptance of interruptions from some participants, and there may be differences regarding time-keeping. The awareness of differences in eating, drinking and relaxing are likewise elements that can be drawn upon.

There are a number of approaches that may be useful:

Cultural briefings

Delegates are advised prior to attending the course that they will have the opportunity to make a short presentation about their home town/region/country and that they should bring appropriate visual information and some local produce and/or music. In explaining something about their country they may like to advise potential visitors about behaviour which is acceptable and that which is best avoided. Tutors can present a model based on their own country prior to the other national briefings. Some time can also be given to the language and technique of presentations with emphasis on structuring the presentation and using language markers. With low level participants this can be done as a group exercise and/or they can follow a simple grid outlining the main headings to be followed.

Awareness activities

Specific activities can be used to highlight some of the important distinguishing characteristics found in different national groups. Participants can be asked to rate how voluble they think they are compared to other national groups; quizzes can devised to help identify some national features; the idea of stereotypes can be explored.
Study skills
Given that this training may be on a one-off basis or at best an annual event, participants need to be helped to develop some study skills in order to continue with the learning process. Such elements as the use of an appropriate grammar course book, specific guidance on vocabulary learning, the use of aural comprehension material and the use of dictionaries should be built into the course. Likewise, participants should be encouraged to develop regular learning activities through television viewing and reading. There may be some opportunity for e-learning and/or group networking in order to build upon the progress achieved through an intensive course. Hopefully, a successful training course will engender enthusiasm for appropriate follow-up stages.

(See section Study Skills for more details).

Delegates have the opportunity to make a short presentation about their home town
Example activities

Language training for EWC reps

**Levels 2,3,4**

**Activity 1  Your union organisation**

You are at an international meeting. You have to speak about your union organisation.

Prepare a visual aid (for example, a poster or an overhead transparency) to help you explain the key aspects of your organisation.

For example, you can include:

- its title in your own language and in translation
- when it was formed
- the number of members
- the economic sectors which it covers
- its structure and organisation (for example at national, regional and/or local level).
Activity 2  My company

Look at the following description of a company.

Founded in 1957, ULTRA is now one of the largest companies in the world. Its headquarters are located in Raleigh, North Carolina, and from here the company controls its operations throughout the world. The principal business of the company is in telecommunications, but it has a range of other interests too. The annual turnover of the company amounts to many billions of dollars, and despite very hard market conditions, the enterprise was still able to report a rise in profits in the last twelve months of approximately 12%. Unfortunately there has been a fall in the labour force the last three months.

Now use this model to describe your company or organisation. Work with other colleagues from your company to prepare a poster or an overhead transparency to present your company (or a company with which you are familiar) to your colleagues.
Activity 3  A health and safety inspection

Work in small groups and carry out a short health and safety inspection of the building you are in. First of all discuss what aspects you need to examine and divide the task between the members of the group. Carry out the inspection. Prepare a list of the key points on a poster or overhead transparency and present a verbal report to the whole group.

Activity 4  Works Councils/ Employee Councils/ Staff Forums/ Works Committees

At a national level (not a European level), Works Councils/ Employee Councils/ Staff Forums/ Works Committees are some of the channels of representation in different companies and in countries. They are established by law in some countries.

What is the situation in your country?

Working with colleagues from your country, prepare a poster or an overhead transparency to explain the system of works councils in your country. If such a system does not exist in your country, how are employees represented at company level?

➢ How are these organisations elected?
➢ What powers do they have?
➢ How are trade unions involved?
Activity 5  The advantages and disadvantages of EWCs

Work in two groups:

Group A: Prepare a list of advantages of EWCs.
➢ What reasons would you give to your colleagues to explain why they should be interested in the work of the EWC?

Group B: Prepare a list of disadvantages and difficulties of EWCs.
➢ What problems do you see for worker representation at European level?

Now exchange opinions on the advantages and disadvantages and try to agree a joint list of positive and negative aspects.

Activity 6  Exchanging information

You hear that the management of your plant with 1500 employees is going to outsource part of the production to a country outside of the EU. This means that about 180 workers will lose their jobs.

Discuss with your colleagues what you would do in this situation.
Prepare an e-mail to the chair of your EWC informing her/him of this decision and asking for help.
**Exercise**

*Provisions of a European Works Council Agreement*

A European Works Council Agreement usually includes reference to the provisions given in the table below.

**Definitions**

*Match the provisions in the list below with their definitions*

**Example:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provision</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Frequency</td>
<td>A (of the Agreement): how long the Agreement will last (for example, 4 years).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Location</td>
<td>B (of meetings): how often the EWC will meet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Duration</td>
<td>C The list of the issues to be discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facilities</td>
<td>D The powers of the EWC: what the EWC can discuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Competence</td>
<td>E (of information): things that have to remain secret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Agenda</td>
<td>F Preparatory meeting of delegates before the meeting of the full European Works Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Confidentiality</td>
<td>G Where the meetings will be held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Pre-meeting</td>
<td>H For the meetings, for example, interpreters, training, secretarial help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now comment on the above terms with reference to the EWC Agreement of your company (or suggest what you would negotiate in a new Agreement).