

Unions and Technology: A Survey of Union Use of Information Technology

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Résumé de l'article

Malgré le nombre croissant de recherches sur l'attitude des syndicats face aux nouvelles technologies, il n'y en a pratiquement pas sur leur utilisation par les syndicats canadiens dans leur administration. Cette enquête vise à circonscrire comment et pour quelles raisons les syndicats ont recours à l'informatique. Plus spécifiquement, l'étude s'intéresse aux questions suivantes : jusqu'à quel point les syndicats canadiens utilisent l'informatique, les sortes de systèmes utilisés, la façon dont ils sont implantés, le degré de satisfaction obtenu et les projets d'implantation de nouvelles méthodes pour l'avenir. En conséquence, cette étude vise à obtenir deux sortes d'information : l'usage actuel de l'informatique dans les syndicats et la perception syndicale des attitudes face aux nouvelles technologies chez les syndicats-mêmes et dans les milieux de travail de leurs membres. Un questionnaire fut envoyé à 250 syndicats au Canada incluant des syndicats dont le siège social était au Canada et d'autres aux États-Unis. Les réponses étaient anonymes. Un questionnaire préliminaire avait d'abord été envoyé par courrier à trois syndicats importants. Ceci a permis de le modifier afin de tenir compte de plusieurs améliorations suggérées par ces syndicats. On a adressé les questionnaires définitifs aux présidents de syndicats et aux directeurs des sections locales canadiennes si leur siège social se trouvait aux États-Unis. On a envoyé une traduction française du questionnaire aux syndicats du Québec ainsi qu'aux autres répondants qui le demandaient. On a reçu 127 retours, soit un taux de réponse de 50,8 %. Parmi les répondants, 87,4 % (111) provenaient de syndicats dont le siège social était au Canada et 12,6 % (16) de sections locales affiliées aux syndicats américains. La moyenne des membres du groupe canadien était de 9 583 et la médiane 2 500 alors que la moyenne des membres des syndicats dont le siège social se trouvait aux États-Unis s'établissait à 256 148 et la médiane à 151 000. Environ 73 % (91) des syndicats ont déclaré qu'ils regroupaient des membres qui travaillaient dans des entreprises en voie de changements technologiques accélérés. Dans ces 91 syndicats, on estimait que 51 % de l'effectif était touché par ces transformations. 77 % environ (98) des syndicats ont indiqué qu'ils utilisaient l'informatique sous une forme ou une autre et plusieurs recouraient à plus d'une technique. On a demandé aux répondants de scinder l'utilisation qu'ils font de l'informatique en deux groupes distincts : l'administration interne du syndicat et les services de négociations collectives. Aux fins d'administration, la plupart des associations utilisent l'informatique pour simplifier le travail courant de bureau (53 %), assurer la tenue des livres et la comptabilité (39 %), envoyer de l'information aux membres (43 %) et produire des bulletins d'information (39 %). En ce qui a trait aux services reliés aux négociations collectives, ils recourent surtout à l'informatique pour renseigner leurs membres. Chose intéressante, alors que 90 % des répondants ont déclaré que l'informatique donnait de bons résultats, 34 % seulement estimaient qu'ils avaient pu réduire leurs dépenses par l'usage de cette méthode de travail. Cependant, 41 % des syndicats espéraient qu'ils pourraient par ce moyen diminuer leurs dépenses dans l'avenir. En ce qui concerne l'emploi futur de l'informatique, 63 associations (64 %) y recourant déjà ont indiqué qu'elles s'engageraient dans l'emploi de nouveaux procédés d'ici les deux prochaines années. Celles qui envisageaient l'implantation de nouvelles technologies espéraient pouvoir le faire dans les secteurs suivants : acheminement du courrier (30 %), comptabilité (22 %), cueillette et emmagasinement de données essentielles (16 %), systèmes de traitement de textes (10 %), programmations nouvelles (8 %), données en prévision des négociations (6 %) et divers (8 %). Il est possible de conclure, à partir des résultats de l'enquête, que les syndicats ont adopté la microtechnologie pour les aider à disposer des tâches routinières de bureau. La plupart de ceux-ci toutefois, n'ont pas encore utilisé l'informatique à des fins plus innovatrices telles que les communications avec leurs bureaux régionaux, l'analyse des caractéristiques de leurs effectifs pour prévoir certains changements ou développer des stratégies. De plus, ils utilisent très peu l'informatique dans le domaine de la négociation collective pour, par exemple, faire des analyses de coûts ou réécrire les textes des conventions collectives. Selon les résultats obtenus, la majorité des syndicats prennent très au sérieux les conséquences sociales que peut avoir l'introduction de technologies nouvelles et ils y voient l'occasion de démontrer aux employeurs comment il faut agir en matière d'instauration de ces méthodes de travail. On peut conclure, à partir des constatations de cette enquête, que les associations acceptent avec enthousiasme le défi de moderniser leur fonctionnement. C'est là une découverte encourageante, car il est de plus en plus évident, à l'âge de l'informatique, que ce n'est que si les syndicats relèvent ce défi qu'ils pourront être en mesure d'entreprendre de bonnes campagnes de recrutement et des rondes de négociations fructueuses.

Unions and Technology

A Survey of Union Use of Information Technology

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and
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The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which unions in Canada use information technology, the types of technology used, the way in which the technology is implemented, the general level of satisfaction with the new methods and proposals for the implementation of new methods in the future.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEW TECHNOLOGY TO UNIONS

Labour-management relations in Canada are in transition and unions are under increasing pressures, particularly those resulting from the onset of new information technology (Kumar, Coates and Arrowsmith, 1986).

There are two main reasons why unions must be concerned about new technology. In the first place, new technology is important for the future viability of unions. The Federal Task Force on Micro-electronics and Technology (Jain, 1983) clearly and unequivocally endorsed the introduction of new technology in Canada, viewing it as having the potential to create jobs, to increase productivity and to improve economic growth. The Task Force specifically argued the value of a genuine labour-management cooperation and the need for unions which are sufficiently technologically sophisticated to meet the challenge of the new technology.

The second reason why unions should be concerned about new technology is the critical difference that the union's role can make to the effective adoption of new technology. A recent Economic Council of Canada survey (Betcherman, 1987; Newton, 1987) illustrates this. It was found that

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the presence or absence of a union, while not influencing the extent of new technology, had a very definite impact on how new technology was introduced. The union had an important role to play in ensuring that true «socio-technical systems design» was employed in planning for new technology. This is not easily achieved since socio-technical systems design requires a cooperative perspective on the part of both unions and management which is very different from the confrontational perspective which is more usual in Canadian industrial relations.

THE UNION RESPONSE TO NEW TECHNOLOGY

Most of the research into the introduction of new technology in Canada has been from a managerial point of view¹. There is not as much research from a union point of view, and what there is has focussed on three areas: union attitudes towards new technology; the impact of new technology on unions; and the union's effect on the introduction of new technology.

Surveys of the attitudes of unions towards new technology (e.g. Peitchinis, 1983; Robins and Webster, 1982) suggest that unions are generally supportive, or at worst neutral, depending on the particular experiences of the impact of new technology on employment in the industry concerned. Canadian unions are generally somewhat cynical about the newer forms of work participation which typically accompany new technology (Long, 1987a; Newton, 1987), and seem to share the primary concern felt by British unions over possible employment losses following new technology (Chamot, 1981). There is a major difficulty in reconciling a fundamental acceptance of technological innovation with a deep-seated fear of its impact on work conditions and on unemployment.

There has been considerable attention given to the impact of new technology on unions. The doomsday scenarios of new technology illustrated by such dramatic statements as: «the labor movement is dead in the water» (*Financial Post*, 25th February, 1984, p. S5) have proved ridiculous. But it is true that new technology is resulting in major shifts in occupational mix, qualifications and skill requirements, and in the growth of part-time employment. Together, these are making it more difficult for the traditional blue-collar type union to remain competitive (Francis, 1986; Newton, 1987). Surveys appear to suggest that unions have supported the new working relationships which follow from new technology provided these have not threatened traditional union-management relations too much (Kumar, 1987; Newton, 1987).

¹ For a survey of the current scene, see Betcherman and McMullen (1986).

There has been some research into the union's effect on the introduction of new technology, though not as much as in the area of union attitudes. In general, it appears that unionized organizations introduce new technology in a different way than non-unionized organizations. Betcherman (1987) found that unionized organizations emphasize cost cutting and control, whereas non-unionized organizations emphasize job redesign and the creation of new jobs. It is not clear whether this union impact is the result of other variables associated with union strength, such as size and type of industry, or whether management in union organizations specifically introduces certain types of new technology because of the additional control aspects offered by such technology².

What can be concluded from this research? In general, the union response is reactive, rather than pro-active. Unions are reasonably accepting of new technology, provided it doesn't upset the work situation too much or threaten job security. Other than voicing concerns over job security, unions appear to leave most of the new technology planning to the employer, though it is by no means clear whether this is from choice or not. Most of these conclusions are based on research into new technology introduced by the employer. It may be that we can get a more accurate picture of union attitudes to new technology and the support they are likely to give to technological innovation in the future by examining their own use of new technology.

The Union Use of New Technology

Despite the growing body of research into the union response to new technology, there appears to be virtually no research into the actual use of new technology by unions in Canada. This is an important area of research, since actual use of new technology may tell us much more than attitude surveys about the likely union response to new technology. In an extensive survey of the introduction of new technology into organizations (Boddy and Buchanan, 1986) demonstrated the positive impact of employees actually working with new technology on their attitudes towards technology and their ability to cope with technological change. Thus it is possible that positive attitudes on the part of union officials may translate into a greater willingness by them to deal constructively with technological change issues in collective bargaining for members.

² An interesting analysis of the «shopfloor politics» of new technology is provided in Wilkinson (1983).

In principle, there are many areas in which new technology, particularly the micro-computer, can assist unions. The flexibility offered by word processing and data-base systems enables unions to significantly increase the efficiency of their offices, the servicing of the members, and the effectiveness of their collective bargaining. A good software program can assist negotiators quickly to cost out different combinations of wage and fringe benefit packages. The availability of such information may be very significant in the last stages of bargaining, when the parties — in order to reach a settlement — may engage in intense trading of different items of the package. At such times, instantaneous access to cost estimates of alternatives could make a difference between an agreement and a strike. Cantrell (1984) gives an actual illustration of this in describing a bargaining session in which the two «new members present at the table» were micro-computers. She states that these new members made it possible to communicate faster, analyze better, and more accurately predict the consequences of the entire collective bargaining process.

There are many questions to be answered by research into the union use of new technology:

- Are unions the same as other organizations in the difficulties they face in implementing new technology?
- Why do unions automate? Is it likely to be for the same openly economic reasons given by business organizations?
- How do unions handle the major dilemmas inherent in new technology? In particular, balancing flexibility and cost-savings?
- Are unions trying to set a good example in the way they introduce new technology? e.g. In the way they handle the difficult «people» issues?
- Are unions stepping out of their «traditional» re-active role to be more pro-active in their adoption of new technology?
- What type of new technology have unions introduced and what are their future plans?

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study set out find out how and why unions are using new technology. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate: The extent to which unions in Canada use information technology; the types of technology used; the way in which the technology is implemented; the general level of satisfaction with the new methods; and proposals for the implementation of new methods in the future. Thus, the study covered two

different types of information: union reports on actual use of new technology; and union perceptions of attitudes towards new technology in their own and their members' work-places.

METHODOLOGY

A survey requesting anonymous responses was sent to 250 unions in Canada, including both those based in Canada, and those operating in Canada but based in the United States. In-depth discussions of the draft survey questionnaire were held with representatives of two major national labour organizations located in Ottawa. In addition, the survey was pre-tested by mail on three other major labour organizations. The instrument was modified to incorporate a number of suggested improvements.

The final surveys were mailed to union presidents, if the union was headquartered in Canada; and to Canadian section leaders, if the union was headquartered in the United States. A French translation of the questionnaire was sent to Québec-based unions, as well as to any respondents who requested it. Some 127 returns were received for a response rate of 50,8%.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Union Sample

Of the unions responding, 87,4% (111)³ were headquartered in Canada, while 12,6% (16) were based in the United States. The mean membership of the Canadian-based group was 9,583 and the median was 2,500; while the mean total membership of the U.S.-based group was 256,148 and the median was 151,000. The relative influence of a few large unions was indicated by the fact that the largest Canadian union responding had 260,000 members while the largest U.S. based union had 850,000 members in total. Findings on the influence of union size are reported later, but it should be noted that the presence of relatively large unions in the sample may produce results on the use of new technology that are more advanced than for a study of smaller unions. Larger unions have more resources and more occasions to use new technology.

In order to find out what type of employees were covered by the unions, respondents were asked to classify their membership in terms of its

³ Note that the number of unions corresponding with the percentage reported will vary slightly according to the number of respondents answering a particular question.

skill level. On average, the respondents classified 49% of their members as «white collar», 43% of their members as «blue collar» and 8% of their members as «other». The mean female membership was 40%, while the mean male membership was 60%. It appears as if the unions sampled covered a sufficiently broad range of members to enable meaningful conclusions to be drawn.

The Extent of Technological Change

A number of questions were asked to get an idea of the relative extent of the technological change being experienced by the unions. Unions were asked to estimate the proportion of their members employed in environments presently experiencing rapid technological change, and to outline the nature of the change.

Some 73% (91) of the unions stated that they represented members employed in environments presently experiencing rapid technological change. In those 91 unions, on average, some 51% of the membership was employed in environments experiencing rapid technological change. When asked to detail the nature of the technological change, the unions gave the following percentage breakdown: Manufacturing technology 35%; Office automation 27%; Computer training and development 14%; Medical technology 9%; Telecommunications 8%; and Other 4%.

Union Use of Information Technology

The major part of the survey dealt with the use of new technology by the unions. For research purposes, new technology was defined to mean «information technology» and to «include the use of personal computers, word processors and other forms of office automation to aid information transfer and storage». The unions were asked to indicate when they had first introduced new technology, what type of new technology was introduced, and where it was being used.

Some 77% (98) of the unions indicated that they used some form of information technology (many used more than one kind)⁴. In answer to the question of timing, it was found that on average new technology was first introduced 3,9 years ago (median 3,0). Given that most of the unions

⁴ The unions *not* using information technology were asked to indicate *why*. The two reasons given most often were that the union had a small membership dispersed over a large area and that the costs of implementation would be too great.

surveyed had been using information technology for less than four years, it is not surprising to find that many were caught up in the «newest wave» of high technology, i.e. the micro-computer. Thus 64 organizations were using personal computers, while 43 were using self-standing word processors, and only 34 were using terminals connected to a «main frame» computer.

Respondents were asked to differentiate their use of information technology into two categories: internal union administration and collective bargaining services. The response categories and the results of five-point Likert scales as per the survey, are given in Tables 1 and 2.

In terms of internal union administration, the greatest number of organizations used information technology to: simplify routine office work (53%); carry out bookkeeping and accounting (39%); disseminate information to members (43%); and produce newsletters (39%). Table 2 indicates that, in the area of collective bargaining services, unions use information technology most extensively in the preparation of newsletters.

TABLE 1
The Extent to Which Unions Use Information Technology for
Internal Union Administration
 (N = 98)

<i>Response</i>	<i>Considerably</i>			<i>Very little</i>	
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Category</i>					
Simplify routine office work	49	23	11	2	8
Carry out bookkeeping and accounting	35	13	10	9	24
Disseminate information to members	40	17	16	5	12
Coordinate group health/dental plans	10	7	3	3	56
Coordinate group insurance plans	13	9	3	3	50
Produce Newsletters	34	21	16	5	12
Other	17	4	2	3	0

TABLE 2
The Extent to Which Unions Use Information Technology for
Collective Bargaining Services
(N = 98)

<i>Response</i>	<i>Considerably</i>			<i>Very little</i>	
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Category</i>					
Calculate COLA & other economic analyses	12	7	16	6	40
Produce Newsletters	35	14	16	5	17
Assist lobbying efforts	7	12	17	11	32
Monitor grievance arbitration decisions	13	11	13	9	37
Monitor court decisions	6	7	8	9	52
Monitor changes in provincial/federal legislation	4	2	10	7	58
Other (Mostly, collect contract information for clauses in local agreements)	8	1	1	0	1

Union Evaluation of their New Technology

A number of questions were asked to find out how Canadian unions evaluated their new technology. In the first place, unions were asked to specify what their primary reason was for introducing new technology. A content analysis of the replies revealed that the most important reason for new technology was to speed up services to members. Fifty-four of the respondents (57%) stated that the primary reason for implementing change was to increase speed of services. This is in contrast with the 18 respondents who cited the next most prevalent reason, increasing *level* of services. A further 17 respondents mentioned cost effectiveness as their key reason, and the balance of 6 unions mentioned other reasons, such as the provision of special services to members. Some similar findings were obtained when the unions were asked how their employees had been affected by the implementation of information technology: 81 unions (89%) said work time was saved, 62 stated that errors were reduced and 45 indicated that inter- and intra-office communication was improved.

Interestingly, while 90% of the respondents answered that the introduction of new technology gave them the desired results, only 34% believed that they had been able to reduce expenses as a result of information technology. Nonetheless, 41% of the respondents believed that their unions could reduce expenses in the future.

Union Employees and New Technology

The relative satisfaction with new technology and optimism about its future benefits, may be the result of how technological change was implemented and the attitudes of union employees. Seventy-five of the unions (81%) consulted their employees prior to introducing information technology. Although the employees either actually chose the hardware or actually chose the system in only 22 cases (24%); in 57 cases (62%) the union asked for employee input prior to implementation.

As well as asking about how new technology was introduced, union officials were also asked to report what they thought their employees' present attitudes toward information technology were. This was measured on a five point scale measuring employee attitudes, where «1» was «very positive» and «5» was «very negative». Forty (43%) of the union leaders responded: «very positive», and the cumulative percentage total for categories «1», «2» and «3» was 91%. It should be noted that these are the union leaders' perceptions and not those reported by the employees themselves and that actual employee attitudes may differ. These findings do show, however, that union officials believe that they do consult with their employees as part of introducing new technology and that their employees have generally positive attitudes towards the new technology that has been introduced. Without further research, it is not possible to check on the accuracy of these perceptions, but it is likely that the union leaders believe that the generally positive attitudes of their employees can help facilitate future changes.

Future Use of Technology

On the theme of future use, 63 of the unions (64%) currently using information technology indicated they would be implementing additional new technology within the next two years. Those who were planning new technology, specified the following breakdown of what was planned: Office networking/electronic mail 30%, accounting systems 22%, database 16%, word processing 10%, new software 8%, new bargaining packages 6%, and other 8%.

Those who were planning new technology were then asked to specify what steps they had already taken. The following was mentioned: 79% said that they were discussing technological changes with current employees and 75% said that they had agreed to cover the cost of technology related training courses. But, while 71% of the unions said that their annual budget included the cost of technological expenditures, only 16% mentioned that they were seeking employees qualified in new technology. Of course, all this may indicate is that there is relatively little hiring of new office personnel, of any type, by unions in the current economic climate.

Further Analysis of the Impact of Union Size

Crosstabulations were performed between the variable, Size of union (as measured by Canadian membership) and the following variables: Union use of information technology; length of time the union had used information technology (Age of Technology); and future plans for introducing new technology⁵. Chi-square tests were performed for each crosstabulation, and were found to be significant at better than the 0,01 level for each of the variables. The crosstabulations and chi-square values are reported in Table 3.

From Table 3 it can be seen that large unions (those with more than 6,000 members) are more likely to use information technology than small unions (those with less than 1,500 members) or than medium size unions (those with between 1,500 and 6,000 members). Also, approximately 2/3 or 74 of the unions began using information technology within the last five years. Among the larger unions, however some 15 of 40 have used information technology for more than 5 years. The crosstabulation between size and whether or not the union planned to use information technology in the future shows that some 31 of 41 large unions have such plans, while only 15 of 42 small unions and 17 of 33 medium sized unions have such plans.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In evaluating what the findings mean, it is necessary to distinguish between the two types of data that were investigated, reports by union officials

⁵ The variables to be included in the crosstabulations were selected on the basis of the strongest correlations found in a correlation matrix of all variables. A copy of this matrix is available from the authors. The most consistent and significant correlations were found between union size and the other variables in the analysis. No significant relationship was found between union use of information technology and the type of industry organized by the union or the national base of the union (USA vs Canadian).

on their use of new technology, and the perceptions by the same officials of attitudes towards new technology. We can generally be more sure of the accuracy of the relatively factual technology use data, than of the attitude data, particularly where this attitude data involved perceptions of other individuals' attitudes. Thus, union officials had to make judgements on the likely attitudes of their own employees and members towards new technology. Provided this attitude data is interpreted with this caution in mind it may provide useful insights into union views of new technology, and certainly raises some interesting topics for further research.

TABLE 3
Union Size Cross Tabulations

		<i>Use Technology</i>				
		Yes	No		N	= 127
<i>SIZE</i>	Small	28	17		Chi-Square	= 12.124
	Medium	29	9		D.F.	= 2
	Large	41	3		Significance	= 0.002
		98	29	(127)		
		<i>Age of New Technology</i>				
		New	Medium	Old	N	= 95
<i>SIZE</i>	Small	11	15	1	Chi-Square	= 29.665
	Medium	13	10	5	D.F.	= 14
	Large	16	9	15	Significance	= 0.009
		40	34	21	(95)	
		<i>Further Technology Planned</i>				
		Yes	No	Unsure	N	= 116
<i>SIZE</i>	Small	15	17	10	Chi-Square	= 17.700
	Medium	17	8	8	D.F.	= 4
	Large	31	2	8	Significance	= 0.001
		63	27	26	(116)	

Notes

Size breakdown: Small = < 1,500 members; Medium = 1,500 - 6,000; Large > 6,000
Age of Technology: New = 0-2 years; Medium = 3-5 years; Old = > 5 years

One topic that needs to be studied further, is the relationship between union use of new technology and their attitudes towards its use in their members' workplaces. It was clear from our discussions while developing the draft questionnaire that unions had very definite attitudes towards new technology, especially towards the way it had been introduced into their

members' workplaces. For example, there was a concern over the relative lack of meaningful consultation by employers when planning for new technology, particularly over such issues as potential job loss, job deskilling and the monitoring of productivity made possible by certain forms of new technology.

While some tentative implications have been suggested in this study regarding the link between the union use of technology and the attitude data, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions, since the two sources of data are not independent. What is needed is a subsequent study in which independently measured union employee and member attitude data is correlated with their own union's use of new technology. It could be hypothesized that those unions which use new technology extensively themselves would be more likely to see the value of such technology than those who have little experience with it. Experience with new technology is also more likely to give unions an understanding of the problems associated with its implementation and may result in more sympathetic attitudes towards the actions taken by employers in introducing it. On the other hand, those unions who consider that they have been «model employers» in terms of the way they have involved their own employees in the introduction of new technology, may be even more critical of those employers who do not allow their members the same level of participation in new technology.

From the survey results it can be concluded that union use of information technology is at a nascent stage of development. Labour organizations have managed to adopt microtechnology to help them deal with routine office tasks. Most unions, however, have not yet adopted information technology for such innovative purposes as on-line communications with their regional offices, or the use of member data bases for scenario analyses of membership change or the development of future strategy. In particular, there is relatively little use of information technologies in the collective bargaining area for carrying out such activities as on-line cost analyses or the re-drafting of contract language.

If unions are to hold their own in bargaining with increasingly sophisticated employers new inroads will have to be made towards adopting microtechnology for the bargaining process. It is conceivable that in the future a local bargaining team might have access to the data base of the national office via a laptop personal computer and a telephone modem. Similarly, facsimile machines may speed-up the approval process of contracts by the membership and the national office.

To date, however it is only a few of the largest unions for whom the above scenario is likely to become a reality. The crosstabulations indicate that it is the largest unions who are currently most active in using informa-

tion technology; it is also the largest unions who are most likely to have plans to be active in the future. It may be that economies of scale make it cost effective for larger unions to implement new technology first, and it is these larger unions that have the resources to afford the considerable infrastructure necessary for new technology.

The results suggest that the majority of unions are serious about the social implications of introducing new technology and see this as an opportunity to «set a good example» and show employers how new technology should be introduced. The survey results show that, from the officials' point of view at least, union employees have been consulted about proposed new technology, and their employees are pleased with the results of the implementation. It would be advisable to confirm this finding by asking the union employees themselves, since it may be that the employees own perceptions of the level of consultation is less positive than the union officials think it is. It is likely that union employees have several concerns about new technology which will need to be addressed. Thus it is probable that as unions begin to use information technology for sophisticated purposes they will have to embark on ambitious educational campaigns to allay whatever fears their employees might have.

The results have suggested that it is the larger unions which will play a key role in the future use of information technology. This may have some significant implications for the structure of the labour movement in the coming years. Over the past two decades there have been a large number of amalgamations and mergers among unions in Canada. Will economies of scale in information technology accelerate this trend? It is incumbent on the major labour centrals and federations to monitor the use of information technology and to encourage the sharing and co-ordination of new technology. It is critical to ensure that workers represented by smaller unions are not left behind to be serviced by antiquated methods.

Similarly it will become increasingly important to clarify the role of government in assisting technological transfer to unions. In the interviews associated with the design of the questionnaire it was clear that unions had some real concerns about the role of government in new technology. In particular, it was felt that the government was too closely linked to employers and was typically too production oriented with respect to technological change. Government will need to demonstrate a clearer concern about the impact of information technology upon individual workers and be willing to provide the assistance and incentives necessary to encourage unions to adopt new technology themselves. This is based on the assumption that new technology will enable unions to be more efficient internally and to bargain on a more equal footing with employers who are already well along the road of new technology utilization.

Clearly, the use of information technology by unions in Canada is at an early stage of development. Nonetheless, the results of the survey indicate that unions are enthusiastically accepting the challenge to modernize their operations. This is an encouraging finding, since it is increasingly clear that only if unions meet this challenge can they be assured of being able to successfully organize and bargain in the information age!

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Enquête sur l'utilisation de l'informatique par les syndicats dans leur administration

Malgré le nombre croissant de recherches sur l'attitude des syndicats face aux nouvelles technologies, il n'y en a pratiquement pas sur leur utilisation par les syndicats canadiens dans leur administration.

Cette enquête vise à circonscrire comment et pour quelles raisons les syndicats ont recours à l'informatique. Plus spécifiquement, l'étude s'intéresse aux questions suivantes: jusqu'à quel point les syndicats canadiens utilisent l'informatique, les sortes de systèmes utilisés, la façon dont ils sont implantés, le degré de satisfaction obtenu et les projets d'implantation de nouvelles méthodes pour l'avenir. En conséquence, cette étude vise à obtenir deux sortes d'information: l'usage actuel de l'informatique dans les syndicats et la perception syndicale des attitudes face aux nouvelles technologies chez les syndicats-mêmes et dans les milieux de travail de leurs membres.

Un questionnaire fut envoyé à 250 syndicats au Canada incluant des syndicats dont le siège social était au Canada et d'autres aux États-Unis. Les réponses étaient anonymes. Un questionnaire préliminaire avait d'abord été envoyé par courrier à trois syndicats importants. Ceci a permis de le modifier afin de tenir compte de plusieurs améliorations suggérées par ces syndicats.

On a adressé les questionnaires définitifs aux présidents de syndicats et aux directeurs des sections locales canadiennes si leur siège social se trouvait aux États-Unis. On a envoyé une traduction française du questionnaire aux syndicats du Québec ainsi qu'aux autres répondants qui le demandaient. On a reçu 127 retours, soit un taux de réponses de 50,8%.

Parmi les répondants, 87,4% (111) provenaient de syndicats dont le siège social était au Canada et 12,6% (16) de sections locales affiliées aux syndicats américains. La moyenne des membres du groupe canadien était de 9 583 et la médiane 2 500 alors que la moyenne des membres des syndicats dont le siège social se trouvait aux États-Unis s'établissait à 256 148 et la médiane à 151 000.

Environ 73% (91) des syndicats ont déclaré qu'ils regroupaient des membres qui travaillaient dans des entreprises en voie de changements technologiques accélérés. Dans ces 91 syndicats, on estimait que 51% de l'effectif était touché par ces transformations.

77% environ (98) des syndicats ont indiqué qu'ils utilisaient l'informatique sous une forme ou une autre et plusieurs recouraient à plus d'une technique.

On a demandé aux répondants de scinder l'utilisation qu'ils font de l'informatique en deux groupes distincts: l'administration interne du syndicat et les services de négociations collectives.

Aux fins d'administration, la plupart des associations utilisent l'informatique pour simplifier le travail courant de bureau (53%), assurer la tenue des livres et la comptabilité (39%), envoyer de l'information aux membres (43%) et produire des bulletins d'information (39%). En ce qui a trait aux services reliés aux négociations collectives, ils recourent surtout à l'informatique pour renseigner leurs membres.

Chose intéressante, alors que 90% des répondants ont déclaré que l'informatique donnait de bons résultats, 34% seulement estimaient qu'ils avaient pu réduire leurs dépenses par l'usage de cette méthode de travail. Cependant, 41% des syndicats espéraient qu'ils pourraient par ce moyen diminuer leurs dépenses dans l'avenir.

En ce qui concerne l'emploi futur de l'informatique, 63 associations (64%) y recourant déjà ont indiqué qu'elles s'engageraient dans l'emploi de nouveaux procédés d'ici les deux prochaines années. Celles qui envisageaient l'implantation de nouvelles technologies espéraient pouvoir le faire dans les secteurs suivants: acheminement du courrier (30%), comptabilité (22%), cueillette et emmagasinement de données essentielles (16%), systèmes de traitement de textes (10%), programmations nouvelles (8%), données en prévision des négociations (6%) et divers (8%).

Il est possible de conclure, à partir des résultats de l'enquête, que les syndicats ont adopté la microtechnologie pour les aider à disposer des tâches routinières de bureau. La plupart de ceux-ci toutefois, n'ont pas encore utilisé l'informatique à des fins plus innovatrices telles que les communications avec leurs bureaux régionaux, l'analyse des caractéristiques de leurs effectifs pour prévoir certains changements ou développer des stratégies. De plus, ils utilisent très peu l'informatique dans le domaine de la négociation collective pour, par exemple, faire des analyses de coûts ou réécrire les textes des conventions collectives.

Selon les résultats obtenus, la majorité des syndicats prennent très au sérieux les conséquences sociales que peut avoir l'introduction de technologies nouvelles et ils y voient l'occasion de démontrer aux employeurs comment il faut agir en matière d'instauration de ces méthodes de travail.

On peut conclure, à partir des constatations de cette enquête, que les associations acceptent avec enthousiasme le défi de moderniser leur fonctionnement. C'est là une découverte encourageante, car il est de plus en plus évident, à l'âge de l'informatique, que ce n'est que si les syndicats relèvent ce défi qu'ils pourront être en mesure d'entreprendre de bonnes campagnes de recrutement et des rondes de négociations fructueuses.