



*Colin has had a career in human resources spanning 30 years, across many sectors and countries. His experience has seen growth, contraction, acquisition and just about everything in between. Born in Dover in Kent, he saw many industrial disputes growing up – the railways, merchant navy/cross channel ferries and of course the miners’ strike which affected the Kent coalfields. He’s lived in Liverpool for the last 33 years, apart from 3 years on assignment in Madrid. The presence of trade unions and works councils has featured in many of these experiences, so we asked Colin for his view on recent events and what we can learn from the past and our own lived experiences. He founded Strategy-Inc Ltd a strategic people consultancy in 2021, the aim being to make sure that your people strategy is incorporated in your business strategy.*

Working title – Better together. If theres a place for colleague voice there has to be a place for trade unions

From a young age I was very aware of the industrial and associated social unrest around me. Born in 1967, so growing up in the 70s/80s there always seemed to be something going on. Id lost both parents by the time I was 17, so it was off into the world of work for me. Usdaw was the first union I joined when at Tesco. Followed by UCATT whilst at the Channel Tunnel. In between I took part in a wildcat strike at Dover Engineering Works which was equally exciting and scary! After this, as my career in HR developed, I found myself working with unions as opposed to only being a member. Along the way I worked with BIFU, Unify, MSF, Siptu 16 and 17 in Ireland, along with Usdaw, NACO, TGWU, CWU, GMB, Connect, Prospect as well as works councils from across Europe, chairing Telefonica’s European Forum. I’ve had the benefit, and I mean this sincerely, of working with some of the finest officials and representatives around, which aided my own professional development and understanding of how unions work.

Its fair to say I have encountered some officials and reps I wouldn’t want to work with again, and plenty of managers as well! I’ve been accused of being a fully paid-up member of various unions due to my preferred style of relationship based consultation and negotiation. I grew up in the traditional model of industrial relations, a fair amount of adversarial jousting, a bit lively at times, silence and then an agreement. There was always (well, 99% of the time) an agreement to be had.

History determined that many of the union officials and representatives were male, this has changed in recent years which is positive, and like employment generally, well overdue. The importance of listening to, hearing and quoting colleagues perspectives was always an important part of my approach. Its very powerful to hear your own word recited back to you. There is something respectful here that can have an impact. This doesn’t mean that all can be agreed, as a minimum it shows the colleague has been heard. As the workforce changed in its composition, so did the topics for discussion and the world of work is better for this diversity.

The drop in union membership has followed the decline of certain industries and professions. Sadly, the union movement hasn't kept pace with the new professions and so there are many organisations that don't have colleague representation but rather a colleague voice approach, more of that later. In parallel there is a generation of HR professionals that have minimal if any experience of hands on industrial relations – it just wasn't needed due to political, legal and social changes. So when we see the current turbulence arising from the dispute between Network Rail and the RMT, for many this is fascinating, some say a throw back to times gone by. For those with some knowledge of IR and politics, there's almost a maudlin sense of familiarity. At a time when many are longing for a much stronger political opposition to this government, Mick Lynch and the RMT are winning many arguments through logic, data and highlighting the injustices of a skewed distribution of wealth and standards of living in this country. Chapeau Mick and Eddie!

*The European model of workplace representation and enterprise prosperity, lets call them works councils, are rarely fully understood by UK based companies. They are often incorrectly placed alongside trade unions with the stereotypes also being unhelpfully attributed to them. Works councils exist for the benefit and dare I say protection of the enterprise first and foremost. Yes colleagues are within the conversation, and by association if the organisation prospers so do the employees. My personal experience is that works councils are populated with highly competent professionals who have an interest in how well a company is run. I have worked with works councils in Ireland, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Spain and the Netherlands. Interestingly, individually they all wanted to brief me on the difference between trade unions and works councils, just to make sure I knew the difference. Doesn't that say something about how UK industrial and workplace relations are viewed outside the UK?*

Colleague voice is an excellent way of opening up dialogue across your organisation. It offers an opportunity for well meaning people and teams to contribute to improving their workplace. Its not an automatic platform to use for pay and benefits negotiation, some companies will respond many will not. The onset of market data, benchmarking and affordability has seen a decline in the perceived generosity of pay/compensation plans. Sadly this has resulted in undue pressure on workers as inflation spirals, cost of fuel and domestic bills are out of control, ridiculously high public transport costs meaning that we see millions of people and children living in food poverty, having to rely on in work benefits, job insecurity and of course post pandemic recovery. The impact on public health is clear, at a time when our beloved NHS faces the cruelest of treatment from government.

One area that we hear very little of regarding consultation on org changes is the need for formal proposals to be backed up by a business rationale. The shareholder focus has intensified at the expense of the colleague and sometimes the enterprise. Too often do we hear about profit warnings, which...spoiler alert...are often self-imposed. A profit warning is not an excuse to cull workers rights or workers. How about a little less profit this year? How about no shareholder dividends? How about controlled executive pay?...said no one ever.

A time for action then?! Well, yes. Ordinarily we would hear louder voices from the opposition benches, its not loud enough. There are various unions raising pay claims to offer some relief to their members. Non-members will benefit as well thankfully. The deconstruction of ministers, MPs and (worryingly) some journalists arguments re the impact of potential industrial action is a refreshing development.

The trade union movement need renewed energy for a membership drive to recover the lost generations of professions and sectors. This will give them a renewed sense of purpose and the strength to organise and represent their members, and ultimately create the platform for a more inclusive social and political environment that encompasses many more people than before – and then, a chance for real change.

I also call on my HR colleagues to apply some broader thinking to these challenges, and some wise compassion. There's a very simple test you can apply to difficult situations, I call it "the me test" ...what if this was me, Colin, facing this pressure, insecurity, how would I want to be treated.

We are back where we started – being heard, being respected. Being human.

Solidarity.