

Interview with Join Together

1. Your work, briefly.

Join Together builds high quality digital services for unions. Our objective is simple – to give members the very best digital experience possible, particularly when they're joining a union.

We're working with the movement because we strongly believe in unions as a key way of shaping political and economic power away from capital, and towards working people. In the past decades, that balance has shifted in the wrong direction, and the emergence of technologies such as AI seriously risks pushing it further. Our view is that a strong union movement is one of the best ways to keep people's needs at the centre of our economy and democracy.

For us, that means being interested not just in technology itself, but in how technology can help unions organise, recruit, involve and serve their members more effectively.

2. What hostile actors do well.

The right consistently demonises unions and produces content that divides, rather than unites, working people. To counter this, unions need to do much more to tell positive stories of impact and demystify themselves as organisations.

Some of this will involve adopting some tactics used by those hostile to the movement, for example by directly supporting a wider range of spokespeople, particularly younger ones who are more natively "online" than many in union leadership. The argument that the right is "winning" online culture has some merit, even if they cannot out-organise and out-mobilise us in the real world. But it is not impossible to confront them in this area too.

As a movement we must also get better at using technology to build solidarity and develop union democracy, bringing members together in a way that goes beyond work to include social life and "fun". The movement should look at ways technology can help rebuild the informal social bonds of the past. The right is, to some extent, using technology to fill the social gap being caused by technology, we need to find ways of leveraging them out of this space, or leveraging union members into new ones.

This is a difficult ask when technology's built-in incentives are to divide and distract, but the internet remains the most powerful organising force in history (see recent youth-led revolutions in Nepal and Bangladesh for examples of this continuing power – it did not end with the election of Barack Obama or the Arab Spring). The movement and its allies need to continue to experiment, and find ways to use tech to bring people together to achieve more in our collective interest, rather than accept the status quo.

3. The opportunity for unions.

For me, the very biggest opportunity of all is not technology per se, but in technology policy. The union movement should play more of a role in trying to shape our information environment, and in the direction of technology development.

Apart from a few exceptional publications, British unions have always lived with a hostile media. The current one, including social media, may be more so than ever. Although unions must tell better, more relevant and engaging stories through their own channels, they also need to play a role in shaping the bigger picture structurally.

For example, much of the far-right content we all see online is monetised via so-called "blue tick" influencer programmes. Platform algorithms feed this emotive, controversial content to people day-in-day out. Unions should pressure and support the government to regulate towards a fairer, more pro-democratic and transparent information environment, one that serves the public interest and is more factful, deliberative and slow.

Similarly with AI, the headlong rush towards "the future" is leaving millions uncertain about the years ahead. Will they still work? In what form? Unions must play an aggressive policy role in promoting alternatives to the capital-driven, rent-seeking AI default. Unions must try to foster a form of political thinking which accepts that technology can change things quickly, but if it does, it must deliver high standards of living to as many people as possible, rather than allowing all the gains to be delivered to the wealth-owning American investor class. Unions need to be a source of and a supporter of radical ideas, backed by working people, to act as a counterweight to the current trajectory. This is going to require a lot more theory, and a much deeper engagement on the various trajectories AI might take.

4. Where it's easy, where it's hard.

One of the biggest barriers is that many unions have been understandably cautious about technology investment. That caution came from three places.

The first is the challenges associated with larger, knottier past projects (namely CRM supplier relationships and website rebuild projects). These, because they reach across the entire union and its membership, can be very complex, requiring skill, persistence, politics and, often, luck. They aren't easy, and rarely run entirely smoothly, with many unions feeling burned by them, and therefore by the idea of "technology change". Second, is that tech was conceptualised as another publishing tool, rather than a series of services for aiding and organising members. This meant "the website" and "social media" became the roles to be filled, rather than thinking about the tasks and outcomes a union needs to achieve to be successful. These both contributed to the third thing – that unions became locked into either bad or temporary relationships with their tech suppliers, where the quality of their technology was no longer improving, but costs were high and lead times for new things very slow – there was a lack of pressure to improve in the market.

Thankfully, this is starting to change, as more tech-native people reach higher rungs of the union ladder, and as the benefits of making things better, seen elsewhere, become too painfully obvious.

For Join Together, we're looking to help unions break out of this cycle by delivering beneficial tech for members in months, weeks or days, rather than years, with small teams and faster feedback cycles. By focusing on the online joining experience, we see unions starting to think immediately about what happens afterwards, recognising that, having raised new members' expectations, they have to continue to meet them going forward.

We're trying to show that smaller technology changes can start prompting much bigger organisational questions. We think of this as being a speedboat (vs. the "supertanker" of the big CRM project).

5. What unions misunderstand.

Unions have often confused having the ability to put things on the internet, with the ability to make things "of the internet". For many unions, investment in digital has meant hiring one or two people in communications able to manage the flow of output a union wants to produce (mostly

creating email newsletters and tactical social media posts). For the most part, this meets an internal requirement, but not a need that members have.

Unions, though they serve different groups of workers and are structured differently, can be thought of as a series of quite consistent "journeys" – joining, being a new member, getting more involved, needing support etc. A radical re-thinking of union operations would organise them along these lines, with special attention paid to the interfaces between the journeys (i.e. so someone who has just joined smoothly finds their way towards the new member piece of the member experience. The current corporate structure of many unions makes achieving this difficult or impossible, as the gaps between local branch, regions and national, organising, comms, digital and IT, membership (and so on and so on) are hard to cross.

Restructuring unions around a single picture of what the membership needs to do, and how it can best do it, would be a very radical change, but one that could realise significant benefits. But even without such a re-structure, thinking in these terms is a path to delivering real benefits (and savings).

6. Being better partners.

The best relationships start from the point of – what can we do better for our members?

Every union needs a compelling front door for members to walk in through, and the services, designs and patterns our product replaces are often very outdated and inefficient – unions would (and should) never go back to them. The more enduring challenge is trying to take a similar approach to the other services members need, rather than lumping them behind a password in a "portal" where badly designed services are hidden away where no one has to think about them.

Tech that seems to struggle to last in unions tends to be more on the campaigning and communications side, where shorter-term investments, personal taste (for a particular tool or toolkit), uneven adoption across union structures and fashion (importing ideas from campaigning in other areas) have led to a lot of work that feels "half done" from a transformation perspective.

So the answer isn't really about technology. It's clearer, longer term ownership, better user-centred design and a willingness to keep improving services and moving them across union structures after they launch.

7. Preparing for the future.

It's not clear in what forms AI might benefit unions at this point in time. It lowers the cost of experimentation, but most organisations seem not to have seen terrific improvements in their enduring operational capacity or capability yet, to the extent that the vast majority wouldn't be affected if AI were to entirely disappear tomorrow.

The interesting things, for me, are the greenfield opportunities, where the cost and difficulty of organising has always been too great for unions. Mainly, this is the challenge of organising smaller employers in the private sector. Building new forms of tech-enabled, low-cost unionism could be fantastically useful, particularly if the more cataclysmic forecasts about AI job replacement start to materialise.

Unions should be working to prepare, at least conceptually, for what's needed if that starts to happen.