

Interview with Poteris CIC

1. Your work, briefly

I'm Peyman Owladi, founder of Poteris CIC, a technology collective. We exist to put good technology within reach of charities, campaigners and changemakers, through ongoing support to nonprofits under our Tech Canopy, and by building tools like Chalk for schools and Rep Coach for the union movement.

Rep Coach started as a Campaign Lab hack-day experiment: a doorknocking bot to help first-time canvassers practise before they go out and do it for real. Working with the TUC Digital Lab, Campaign Lab and union organisers, we rebuilt it for reps: an AI actor that lets them rehearse organising conversations in a safe space before the stakes are real, like a flight simulator for organising. We have made it customisable so any union can run it with their own personas, scenarios and branding.

What drew me to the movement is the same thing that drew me to founding Poteris: technology too often widens the gap between those who already have access and everyone else. We exist to bring as much of that power as we can to organisations who would otherwise be left behind. Also, at a time when AI is mostly experienced by workers as a threat, I'm keen to explore how it can be used to build worker power as well.

2. What hostile actors do well

The challenge is that a lot of what hostile actors do well isn't something unions or progressives should copy. They've been far less scrupulous about personal data (the Brexit and Cambridge Analytica scandal being the obvious example). In addition they're well funded, so they can buy off-the-shelf tools and hire expensive consultants. Unions neither can nor should compete on those terms.

The one thing genuinely worth learning is their appetite for trying things. They stay open to new technology that may or may not pan out, and that's how they learn quickly: This is a real advantage that's available to any organisation when new and disruptive technologies are available.

There's also an opportunity in the contrast. Since the AI boom, people are even more alert than before to how their data and attention are being manipulated. That makes it matter more, not less, that unions are visibly

thoughtful and ethical in how they use these tools, and puts them in a position to push back on the worst practices rather than imitate them.

3. The opportunity for unions

The starting point is that the barrier to entry has collapsed. Cheaper tooling and AI are democratising access, so progressive organisations and even grassroots movements can now do things that used to be out of financial reach. In that sense the gap is narrowing on the technology side.

Most of the opportunity lies in enhancing what organisers already do rather than replacing it. Rep Coach is our own example: it complements existing organising practice and uses new technology to build reps' confidence in a way that wasn't possible before.

The biggest unused opportunity is software customisation. Off-the-shelf tools like CRMs rarely fit the union use case well, and unions differ enormously from one another in structure and need. It's now far cheaper and easier to take something and make it work well for a specific context than it used to be. That points to a related priority: building in-house tech capacity sooner rather than later, so your tools actually integrate and work in your context. At Poteris we're building a network of technologists to back up exactly that kind of in-house capacity – supporting a smaller organisation's part-time techie, helping with strategy, and connecting them to peers who share learnings.

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

Results come quickly when we can build alongside the people who'll actually use the tool. Through the work with the TUC Digital Lab on Rep Coach, we had direct access to organisers throughout development – shaping the product around real needs rather than guessing at requirements and delivering at the end. For any technologist, that early access is the single biggest advantage there is.

Where it gets hard is structural. Unions are large organisations, rightly careful with two scarce resources – members' money and organisers' time – and that can bring with it barriers that make it slow to try anything new. The clearest symptom is when the first contact between a union and a builder is a document that defines what the solution should look like: guessed requirements, fixed in writing before builder and users have ever spoken.

5. What unions misunderstand

A big misunderstanding among a lot of organisations is treating technology adoption as a purchasing decision rather than a cultural one. The tools are the cheap part; what adoption really takes is a culture that lets people experiment safely, drive things that might not come to fruition, and trust their own expertise in how they use what's new. The real cost people underestimate isn't the software, it's the time and cultural space that testing things genuinely requires.

The correcting principle is one unions already own. Unions rightly insist that a workforce be consulted when an organisation makes significant changes, because the workers are the experts in what they need. The same logic applies to a union adopting technology: build it with the people who'll use it, not for them. Innovation isn't the enemy of good practice: Done with people rather than to people, it's an extension of the very principle unions stand for.

6. Being better partners

1. Dedicate a little capacity (both budget and staff time) specifically to trying things out, working across internal teams as well as with partners to avoid silos. Rather than coming up with requirements and commissioning a solution, this gives a path from "worth testing" to "embedded" once something works.
2. Involve the right people from the start: the staff and reps who'll actually use the tool.
3. Have the mechanisms ready in advance – standing panels or consultation groups who can quickly evaluate whether something works, giving the union a fast, low-stakes way to test before committing.
4. Begin any engagement with a conversation about needs rather than a specification: treat it as building with a partner, not buying from a vendor.

7. Preparing for the future

In some ways the tech advances we're seeing now are like the early internet: the technology is advancing fast, it's still largely unknown, and there's real value in being near the leading edge. New possibilities are emerging month by month and some tools that looked useful six months ago have been overtaken by events. So being genuinely ready isn't about picking the right ones now, it's about being an organisation that can find out quickly.

That means having the guardrails that enable experimentation: a clear policy that sets sensible limits and thereby gives people permission to try things, paired with funding and, above all, protected time to tinker safely. A union with that in place – permission, budget, time, and the testing mechanisms already ready – can adapt to whatever comes next.

8. What Unions 21 could do

The technology being this new is precisely why a body like Unions 21 matters. Shared infrastructure like the AI for Unions community and the published case studies means one union's experiment becomes every union's knowledge. And the most useful thing to share isn't just which tools worked, but what the process of innovating looked like: how a union of a particular size ran the trial, who was involved, what it took. That's what lets another union in a similar position say "we could do that too", and it matters most for smaller unions with the least room for trial and error.

The second role is trusted broker between unions and technologists. The best results come when builders and organisers meet early, in a low-stakes setting, and a convenor can make those introductions and host that collaboration. That's exactly how our own work on Rep Coach came about.

Third, there's a role in helping unions build the capacity to experiment at all – protecting a little time and budget for structured trials, or even pooling it across the movement (I believe an innovation fund has been suggested): Somewhere safe to test things before committing is what turns curiosity into adoption.

9. Anything else

The only other thing I'd add is that everything I've said about supporting staff with space to experiment (and treating failures as learnings, which comes with that) applies just as much to leadership and strategy. When the ground is shifting this fast beneath our feet (something I'm personally very aware of in the tech world right now), no strategy will survive intact, and that isn't a failure of leadership, it's the nature of the moment. Organisations need to give everyone, including those at the top, the space to change course without it being held against them.