Organising the Soloists?
Trade Union Work for IT Professionals

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"Why do we need trade unions? In any case, we have more than they can offer us." So say Indian IT experts, who even without the benefit of collective protection see themselves as usually being well treated by the jobs market[1]: well above average salaries, attractive social security benefits offered by many enterprises, and promising career prospects give professionals a feeling of being able to get along fine on their own.

India, the country of booming software exports, is certainly not representative of the situation of IT employees in other countries. After the end of the New Economy boom, the euphoria among IT experts has often yielded to disillusionment, especially in Western industrialised countries: company crises and dismissals, outsourcing strategies and rising pressures on salaries have changed market sentiment. Nevertheless, in the eyes of most IT professionals, even now trade unions do not (yet) have the capacity to play a significant role in their professional success. "I can't imagine what trade unions could do for me," explains an IT consultant. "Well trained IT people get attractive jobs and can manage on their own without much difficulty." Across countries, the rate of unionisation in the information and telecommunication sector - and in particular in software and services - is far below that of other industries.

For trade unions, the disinclination of IT Professionals to unionise is ominous: employment levels in highly qualified IT jobs – as in the services sector in general – continue to rise, while in the traditionally highly unionised sectors (especially in manufacturing) they are declining. In order to gain ground in industries of growing importance, trade unions must find solutions that suit the specific situation and needs of potential members.

Around the world, trade unions are experimenting with initiatives designed for new target groups, in order to compensate for declining membership numbers in traditional sectors and to establish themselves as important actors in areas that show promise of expanding in the future. An important element in that respect is to also offer something to employees who do not benefit from collective agreements - either because they work in companies that are not bound by an agreement or because they belong to those groups of employees who negotiate their conditions individually. While collective bargaining remains an important cornerstone of trade union activities, the development of personal services is increasingly moving to the forefront of the activities of many organisations. They seek to thereby effectively address the specific situation of highly qualified workers - in a style that is attractive to their mindsets and attitudes. That requires more than just rhetoric or a polished-up image: in order to meet the demands of IT experts, the establishment of specific structures, and often a change of mentalities, is needed.

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[1] See Sinha, Pravin 2004

In the following sections, first some basic characteristics of IT working life are described. Then different initiatives are presented, through which trade unions are approaching IT professionals. The paper also weaves in several interviews that the author has conducted with IT specialists, trade union representatives and works councillors in IT companies.

1. ITC Sector: Rising Employment, Weak Trade Unions

Employment growth also after the crisis

The information and telecommunication industry is growing - not even the dot.com crisis at the turn of the century has changed that permanently. Since the 1970s, employment has nearly continually grown more strongly than in other industries. Driving that growth is primarily the software and service sector, while employment levels and value added are declining in the hardware sector. In proportion to total employment, the ITC sector, with 3-4%, is still rather small (OECD 2004). However, its economic importance becomes apparent when the turnover figures are considered: in 2000, the ITC sector in Western Europe contributed 6.9% to Gross National Product (EIRO 2001).

Cross-sectoral demand for IT specialists

By no means do IT professionals work only in the ITC sector; they are also in manufacturing companies, commerce, banks and insurance and other user industries. According to rough estimates, only about half of all IT experts work in the ITC sector (Rand 2005, p. 31; Dostal 2002). From a trade union perspective, the high number of IT professionals outside the information and communication industry is of great importance. Because only with difficulty can trade unions, which are organised on an industrial basis, reach high-tech professionals who are scattered over many sectors.

Below average collective agreement coverage

As regards collective agreement coverage, the picture is mixed: in the telecommunication and hardware sectors there is a tradition of, for the most part, established collective bargaining structures: many telecommunication companies emerged from former state monopolies and continue to conclude company-level collective agreements with the trade unions, whereas the industry-wide collective agreements of the metal or electronic industries are often applied to the employees of hardware manufacturers. The situation in the software and services sector is very different: it is (with various exceptions like SAP and Microsoft) dominated by small and medium enterprises, which mostly present a low level of collectively-agreed regulation (EIRO 2001). Especially in new areas, without clear jurisdiction lines between the trade unions, there are various representation disputes between individual organisations. They seriously damage the image of trade unions and weaken their bargaining power (van Gyes 2005, p. 90; Menez / Töpsch 2003, p. 29).

Unionisation density: far below normal rates

Also the share of trade union members in the total high-tech industry workforce is well below average – in some countries (such as the Netherlands and the UK) that share amounts to a quarter

of the unionisation density of other industries; in countries with generally higher membership unions (such as Sweden and Norway) it amounts to about 75% of the otherwise common rate (EIRO 2001). At the same time, unionisation rates in the various sectors of the IT industry vary considerably. In the telecommunication sector as well as in the many hardware companies, relatively many employees are organised, whereas only few workers in the software and services sector have joined a union. An important reason for this, along with the youth of the latter sector, is its smaller workplaces, where trade unions are usually more sparsely established than in big companies.

2. Pampered by Success? The Situation of IT Professionals

That IT experts are difficult for unions to approach is attributable to a series of factors. Owing to their relatively privileged situation, many professionals prefer to rely on themselves in seeking to assert their interests, and see little need for support from a collective organisation. Also, a priority orientation towards professional issues and a high degree of personal autonomy hinder identification with a "mass organisation". Moreover, the structures of the companies where many IT professionals work play an important role – especially those of the young and often small firms in the software and services sector.

Usually well positioned – even after the crisis

IT professionals are considered, in comparison with the broad constituency of trade unions, a relatively well positioned employee group: with their high-level qualifications, attractive salaries and career possibilities as well as the possibility of in large measure working independently, many are far removed from a feeling of "collective deprivation" (van Gyes 2005, p.15).

After the end of the overheated New Economy phase, a certain measure of realism has taken hold. Many professionals were made to feel the crisis in the form of declining job offers and salaries as well as decreasing job security. Share-owning employees saw themselves being confronted by sudden price drops and therefore also often by losses in the value of their pension plans. Also, "extraordinary profits, which in the past gave one some room to contribute to many 'charities', are no longer possible," says a software architect. The IT industry has lost some of its glamour.

But the expertise of IT professionals continues to be in demand, not only in the immediate ITC industry, but also in many other sectors. Though unemployment rates among IT specialists may have risen, they are, at around 4% (for Europe), still comparatively low (Rand Europe 2005, p. 36). While less qualified or older colleagues are increasingly faced by precarious employment conditions, highly qualified professionals are still as sought after as ever.

Self-representation is the norm

As largely autonomous "problem solvers", IT professionals show a high degree of identification with their work and their profession. "The freedom to exercise professional judgement" is one of the central demands that professionals and engineers make of their work, according to a US study. Work satisfaction is comparatively high, and there is a marked desire to influence company policy

through direct communication with the management (Hurd / Bunge 2003, p.11). Given the high degree of personal responsibility they enjoy in their work and their relatively privileged position on the labour market, many IT experts figure that they themselves can manage to effectively advance their own interests in relation to their employers, without outside support.

Backing up their claim of being able to individually manage their interests are the work practices in many IT companies, which favour direct communication, participation and short decision-making lines. Especially in "young, expanding companies with a strong reliance on experts", the archetype of "individualised work regulation" is supposed to predominate. This pattern of regulation is marked by a low degree of standardisation of working and employment conditions, and personal employment contracts and objectives agreed between workers and supervisors are considered important regulatory instruments. Where disputes arise, bilateral problem resolution between employees and management is sought.

While the self-perception of IT experts is shaped by "the ethos of occupational specialisation" and a strong commitment to work, their identity as "workers" remains weak (Menez / Töpsch 2003, p. 17). Against this background, many professionals regard trade unions with misgivings. They are considered organisations for the weak – as a "useful thing for workers who don't have many options. But people who have a wide range of choices and earn good salaries don't need trade unions," claims an IT consultant.

Salaries: little collective regulation

A large number of IT professionals settle their salaries in bilateral negotiations with the employer. "With none of my employers so far have I come into contact with a collective agreement," declares and IT expert. "I have always negotiated my salary myself." In that process, the level of former earnings, information through personal contacts and the general economic situation provide a yardstick for an individual's demands: "In booms, one can aim higher. But when, in a tighter market, it took me several months to find a new job, I no longer placed my demands quite as high as before."

Many companies use, in addition to a basic salary, variable fringe benefits. That way, total pay depends largely on a company's results or on personal performance criteria, which are agreed in objectives discussions between employees and supervisors. Also, a person's project workload influences pay in some companies – as "the worker's personal turnover", which is determined by the relation between productive phases and "idle time". Business risks are thereby partly transferred to the employees.

Given the great importance of individualised pay determination, the classical trade union service of collective bargaining is of little use to many professionals. That means that, among these potential members, trade unions are losing ground precisely in their traditional field of collective pay bargaining.

A broad spectrum – manifold needs

There are considerable differences between the working conditions and the employment situation of different categories of IT specialists, so one can hardly speak of a single constituency.

While a large part of the professional workforce works in a permanent employment relationship, many are in atypical situations – on fixed-term contracts or as freelancers (van Gyes, 2005). The latter are characterised by higher turnover (also between the different sectors) – thus making it difficult for trade unions to build up stable contacts with them. Needs vary a great deal. Independents do not benefit from collective bargaining. Some trade unions have developed programmes that are aimed at the special situation of freelancers.

As regards the labour market, there is polarisation between employees according to training and age: while young IT professionals with specialised training continue to be sought after even after the dot.com crisis, older professionals or lateral entrants without specific training face a far greater risk of decline (Dostal 2002). The types of support needed by IT experts vary accordingly.

Also in respect of work tasks and required skills, the spectrum is large, and subject to continual change. Many IT service providers are diversifying into the fields of consulting and business services and expect professionals to possess sound domain and business knowledge (Bibby 2006). Also technical innovations, a changing division of labour brought about by international relocation processes as well as the possibility of automating specific functions lead to a constant transformation of skill requirements. For trade unions, who have placed members' employability on their agendas, this implies the need to offer very differentiated services, and to constantly evaluate and modify them.

3. Trade Unions and IT Experts – Two Different Worlds?

A need for professionalism and pragmatism

The preponderantly positive attitude of IT experts towards their own profession plays an important role in their stance on workers' organisations. In the eyes of professionals, trade unions often represent "an environment in which the identity of working people is associated with alienation, impoverishment and lack of respect, along with the resulting protest and countervailing power" (Menez / Töpsch 2003, p. 21). Trade unions, which are sometimes seen as "the battle horses of the Old Economy", have, among IT experts, not yet fundamentally succeeded in ridding themselves of their dusty image. Where trade unions do not sufficiently adjust themselves to the needs of these potential members, many of those being wooed feel offended: "You get someone holding a speech for factory workers in the morning, and then hitting us with exactly the same speech in the afternoon," says a works councillor of an electronics company in explaining the displeasure of technical engineers.

In order to reach such target groups, a technically competent approach and a clear reference to the professional identity and mentality of IT professionals are necessary. "IT people want to hear from very discerning and moderate trade unions," says the works councillor of another IT company. "For them, anything else is like a red flag." An organisation that meets the expectations of most technical professionals operates, above all, in a professional, efficient and pragmatic manner. It is not bound by any ideologies of class struggle; in its relations with the employers, it sticks to a style that is oriented towards dialogue (Hurd / Bunge 2003). "The rhetoric of struggle, strikes and strife has little purchase on the opinions of employees who care more about 'getting on' than 'getting even'.

Potential members are also put off by a sense that unions are stuck in the past, fighting battles in a class war that is of little relevance to most people today." Requested, especially from the highly qualified, are positive approaches that include life-long learning, career development and broader opportunities (Coats 2005, p. 3 ff).

The sector's normalisation – a new impetus for trade unions?

A change in the tendency for IT professionals to be aloof towards collective forms of organisation emerged in the dot.com crisis, as a consequence of which many ITC companies and ITC jobs ran into difficulties. Declining job security and less abundant job offers have led to a certain "normalisation" among high-tech professionals. Also, companies' offshoring strategies often trigger employee insecurity.

With the sudden emergence of crisis in an industry that had been basking in an atmosphere of a new beginning, "the inherent differences in the roles of employers and workers became clear to all concerned" (Pol-di.net 2001). As a result, in many German IT companies, works-level representatives were set up, with trade-union support. "The willingness to organise has grown," explains Lothar Schröder of the services union ver.di, "because the usual conflicts in a tightening market are also spreading through the IT industry. Scepticism about trade unions has clearly abated." That view is shared by a software solutions architect at a multinational IT company. "Severe cost pressures and the threat of job relocations in a global economy are increasingly transforming our sector into a normal industry." That was leading to a rise in the desire for organised support: "The hitherto prevailing attitude among IT people was that they could effectively represent themselves and needed no help to do so. That attitude will diminish."

In that connection, some IT experts are recalling the trade-union function of fostering solidarity: "In a Siemens workplace there are three people who are all doing exactly the same work – but each under different conditions. It should not be possible to play off employees against each other," says an IT consultant. "The trade unions ought to engage themselves here." IT specialists expect, besides professional services, often also that trade unions act to counteract power imbalances on the market: "Trade unions are important – as a check to the philosophy that only turnover and profits count, no matter who bites the dust," says an IT expert. Trade unions are thus given an important role, going beyond the servicing of individual economic interests.

So far, the change in sentiment after the end of the dot.com boom has still hardly led to a noticeable rise in trade union membership. A well-targeted approach to IT professionals remains a challenge, requiring the special attention of trade unions. The relatively privileged position of professionals on the labour market, their strong identity with their profession as well as their heterogeneous needs make it difficult to find the right tone and exact needs of these potential members. Many organisations are still in the process of developing targeted services for highly qualified information workers – it's work in progress.

4. Winning Over IT Professionals: New Trade Union Approaches

Specialised is beautiful

Up to now, there have been hardly any special organisations for the IT sector or IT professionals – among the exceptions are the Swiss online trade union, //syndikat, the IT Professionals Forums in India and various organisations in the United States, many of which are based in the high-tech centre Silicon Valley. Interestingly, many of these organisations explicitly present themselves as *not* being trade unions – so great is the fear that being regarded as a trade union might deter IT professionals.

In order to approach technical professionals in a competent way and to offer a space they can identify with, separate internal structures or even the establishment of independent professionals′ trade unions appears to be sensible in the IT sector – like a "guild of IT experts". Only with real specialisation can trade unions "more effectively address the needs of their members and send well-informed people to workplaces, with whom IT people can identify," says a works councillor, who advocates a stronger IT focus by trade unions. That also larger organisations can successfully address professionals is shown by the example of the Austrian private-sector salaried employees union GPA. With the introduction of decentralised structures – namely, the work@it forum- it has created a specific platform for IT employees, which to a large extent operates independently.

However, big trade unions trying out new ways of focusing on highly qualified target groups are often confronted by considerable tensions between the autonomy of the newly created structure and the requirements of the organisation as a whole. Besides disputes over usually scarce resources, often "a danger of separationist tendencies within the trade union organisation is perceived, which could ultimately call into question the iron principles of industry-based and unified trade unionism" (Menez / Töpsch 2003, p. 51). For example, the Connexx.av project, which acts for media-sector workers under the umbrella of the German trade union ver.di, is seen in a rather ambivalent light within the parent organisation. "We don′t want to build up parallel structures, but rather make our existing structures more relevant to our members," says a trade union representative. The construction of specific structures for the IT sector within existing organisations requires considerable adaptation and integration efforts (see Pernicka et al. 2005, p. 156) and also often faces tough resistance tendencies within the organisation.

Of ever greater importance: individual services

Trade unions that organise managerial and professional workers or IT professionals are increasingly opting for a strategy of offering personal services, which are aimed at addressing the heterogeneous needs of potential members in a differentiated manner. A central concern is to give professionals the capacity to successfully navigate turbulent markets. An important starting point therein is the *employability* of IT professionals – in other words, strengthening their individual capacity on job markets. Among the services being offered are training opportunities, individual career counselling and job search services.

A key service offered by trade unions to their members is information on current market and technological developments. Especially in the IT sector, there is a great need for a continual updating of knowledge. That is also demonstrated by a series of organisations that have been created in Silicon Valley – often on the professionals' own initiative. Associations like SAGE (System Administrators Guild), HTML Writers Guild or "webgrrls" put a lot of emphasis on supporting their members to always stay up to scratch in a rapidly changing market. Serving that purpose are, for example, web site information services, online discussion forums, and events that focus on new technologies. Most of these organisations were founded inn the 90s and now have many members, whereas traditional trade-union organising strategies have been less successful in Silicon Valley (Benner 2002, p.138 ff).

Various organisations make pay and benefits comparisons available to their members, thereby improving market transparency. That also gives employees who are not covered by a collective agreement a better basis for their personal negotiations with employers. In a field of work that is characterised by a high degree of self-responsibility, tight schedules and often pronounced employee mobility, work-life balance and stress management services play a role too, though still a secondary one.

Many trade unions use their collective market power, in order to offer their members, for example, cheap tours, insurance policies or credit cards. Such perks are, however, of somewhat limited usefulness; only an indirect reason to join a union. Directly work-related services have a stronger impact: "Considerably better results have been obtained from the implementation of individual services that directly concern work" according to the results of a study on incentives to join a union (Waddington / Hoffman 2000, p. 67; Waddington 2005).

those usually found on the market. A few years ago, the Information Professionals Association was set up within APESMA. Its aim is to offer IT experts specialised advice, information and support. APESMA attaches great importance to its professional image, and as one of the first trade unions worldwide it has obtained ISO standard 9000 certification.

About 35% of APESMA members are not covered by a collective agreement, and therefore benefit primarily from the trade union's personal services. The other 65% of the membership work in workplaces that are bound by collective agreements. The trade union therefore presses ahead with workplace organising, in order to increase member density and enhance bargaining power. "We are two trade unions in one," says APESMA President John Vines in explaining the combination between individual and collective activities.

Collective agreements: „flexicurity"

In parallel with a growing services orientation, collective bargaining still remains an important area of trade union work in the IT sector. "We lock in certain standards and ensure that working conditions are better than in an exclusive interplay of supply and demand," explains Lothar Schröder of the German services union ver.di. The proportion of trade union members that benefit from collective agreements varies substantially from one country to another.

While some to the collective agreements concluded in the IT sector show hardly any differences from those in other sectors, in many other cases classical regulatory contents are combined with sector-specific elements – for example, framework conditions for objectives agreements, variable pay rates or flexible working hours (EIRO 2001). The regulations provide "the individual employee with a high degree of personal decision-making autonomy while at the same time securing collective rights" (Wagner / Schild 1999, p. 98). "We seek to reconcile protection and flexibility," says Lothar Schröder in describing this rather pragmatic approach, which takes the changed parameters within companies as the starting point for new regulatory methods.

However, many IT workers are not covered by a collective agreement: they are outside the collectively agreed rates, work in other industries or on a self-employed basis. "To be two trade unions in one," as APESMA's President puts it, therefore seems to be one of the major challenges facing organisations that strive to be relevant to all aspects of the professional lives of employees.

Trade unions: commercial operators or professional associations?

Trade unions with a strong focus on services are often in competition with commercial suppliers such as coaches, training institutes or job placement agencies. In order to gain attractiveness in a hotly disputed "market for members", marketing methods and company management tools are increasingly coming into play. The aim is to boost the efficiency and sensitivity of trade unions to the needs and interests of members, since: "The union has to compete for members with other unions, with other types of service providers and with the tendency of employees not to join a union at all" (Björkman 2005, p.10). Concepts from the world of business, such as "customer orientation", "services packages" and "added value", point to a changed self-perception.

Do workers' organisations have any specific competitive advantages over private service suppliers? Apparently yes: for one thing, trade unions, on the basis of their broad membership, know the interests and problems of their constituency exactly: "unions have a bricks and mortar reality". They possess more credibility than commercial suppliers and, owing to their tradition and size, they enjoy high visibility on the market (Freeman 2002, p. 15).

With a stronger focus on the *occupational* concerns of their members, trade unions are also increasingly penetrating into the traditional domains of professional associations. In doing so, they are meeting the need of highly qualified knowledge workers for organisations that respond to their professional competence, their career development goals and their acute sense of self-responsibility. A significant feature that distinguishes trade unions from professional associations lies in their attitude towards workplace problems – a dispute-laden area that professional associations prefer to avoid (Hurd / Bunge 2003).

Some organisations – which in any case shy away from the term "trade union" – also admit employers to their ranks, thereby showing that the boundaries between different forms of organisation cannot always be clearly drawn.

to achieve an individual settlement through dialogue with a contract-breaching employer. An important benefit provided by the IT Professionals Forums is networking and personal exchanges between IT experts.

e-unions: trade unions on the internet

The internet plays an ever more important role in trade union work. That is particularly true for the IT sector. On the one hand, technical specialists have an exceptionally strong affinity for electronic communications media. On the other hand, many of them work in spatially extended relationships, in which the workplace plays only a secondary role as a common meeting point. Especially in software companies, many IT specialists work mainly on customer projects, on the contractors' work sites. "Colleagues from our company meet just once every quarter," says an IT expert. "There is hardly any sense of community in the workplace." There are therefore high hurdles to communicating over notice boards, leaflets or face-to-face talks with trade union representatives.

//syndikat: the online trade union

The Swiss trade union founded in 2002 organises web professionals, computer specialists and marketing people – employees as well as freelancers. The idea behind //syndikat "is based on a combination of a net-based community and new trade unionism," the trade union states on its web site (www.syndikat.ch).

Admittance is possible only online, and //syndikat's services, such as its pay checker and a discussion forum, are for the most part net-based. Legal advice is through electronic channels. "Members may at any time unbureaucratically pose legal information questions through a web form. Our small team of legal advisors normally replies within two working days."

As well as digital communication, //syndikat also arranges personal meetings, for example "after-work" events for freelancers, which address specific subjects. In the course of waves of dismissals in certain large companies, various works groups were set up.

The internet gives trade unions numerous opportunities that could fundamentally change their methods and reach. The keyword "open source unionism" (Freeman 2002) describes the possibility of extending the boundaries of trade union action into hitherto inaccessible areas. "The Internet makes it cost-effective for unions to deliver union services to minorities of workers across workplaces, and for individual workers or groups of workers to co-ordinate with each other regardless of the collective bargaining status of their workplace" (Freeman 2002, p. 4). The digital net makes it possible to offer new types of services that can be used by members (or potential members) at any time of the day or night – from high-value information via e-learning to personal counselling via e-mail. Increasingly, people can join a trade union over the internet.

An important potential for electronic trade union work lies in the formation of communities and discussion forums. Self-managed communication between members meets the need of IT specialists for professional exchanges and offers a way to develop a common identity outside formal structures.

That the internet can also be a basis for collective action is illustrated by the example of the web site www.greedyassociates.com. In response to the unfair practices of some larger law firms in the

United States, this site made information on the salaries and working conditions at employers available to potential job applicants. As a result, a number of law firms improved their conditions substantially – out of fear that a negative image might reduce the number of qualified applicants (Freeman 2002, p. 8). The "exemplary open source trade union" alliance@ibm has won improvements for IBM employees through web-based protest actions; for example, in a dispute with the management over the mileage allowance for customer service employees (Freeman 2002, p. 10).

While electronic discussion forums and internet-accessible services play an ever-greater role, face-to-face interaction is still considered to be irreplaceable. Consequently, even "online trade unions" usually combine their digital services with traditional forms of communication, such as information events or network meetings.

Webgrrls: network for web women

The network, which is more like a professional association than a trade union, has chapters in various countries, with the emphasis on the United States. Webgrrls sees itself as a forum "to network, exchange job and business leads, form strategic alliances, mentor and teach, intern and learn the skills to help women succeed in an increasingly technical workplace and world" (www.webgrrls.com).

On the web site, there are, besides technical themes and career tips, a job data bank for members. Electronic exchanges between members on professional issues contribute to the creation of a "community of practice", which offers individual support where problems occur and supports a common professional identity. In addition, there are meetings for the local chapters. Companies can join Webgrrls too (Benner 2002, p. 152 ff.).

Attracting new target groups - organising freelancers

Many IT experts work as freelancers – either depending on a single contractor or as a small enterprise with several customers. In Germany, some 10% of IT professionals work as independents (Dostal 2002, p. 3); in the UK, the share of independents in the areas of design, fashion, media and internet is estimated at 10% (ILO 2001). They therefore represent a substantial member potential for trade unions.

Traditionally, trade unions have organised only employees and have offered no place for independents. "Atypical employment relationships" met with rejection, as it was feared that they would lead to an erosion of protection rights and social security systems (Pernicka et al 2005 p. 151). But now many trade unions have re-oriented themselves, given the increasing frequency of these forms of occupational activity. Since the 1990s, a number of organisations offer support to independents too – in application of the principle that one of the duties of trade unions is to organise workers irrespective of their formal status. Most trade unions admit only those independents who do not have employees.

Own-account workers have relatively little need for collective regulation, but they do need personal services. The panoply of services that are of potential interest to independents is broad (Bibby 2005, p. 15): contract negotiation and formulation, finding customers and tax counselling, handling overdue payments, professional development, tax questions or copyright law. Trade unions that have developed services for independents put the emphasis mostly on legal aid, training and

insurance policies. Given their great variety of individual counselling needs, services for freelancers are associated with a considerable expenditure of trade union resources: "self-employed members may increase significantly the individual case-work which union officials have to deal with" (Bibby 2005, p. 21).

FNV Zelfstandige Bondgenoten: support for independents

The Netherlands' FNV Zelfstandige Bondgenoten was established in 1999 as a subsidiary organisation of the FNV Bondgenoten and organises independents in various industries – from teachers or taxi chauffeurs to HR consultants. The trade union is aware that its members, for all sorts of different reasons, may opt for an independent status: while for some it is the only way to stay in work, others voluntarily choose this form of employment, as it offers a high degree of autonomy and freer time management.

The personal services of FNV Zelfstandige Bondgenoten encompass training, legal aid, fees collection support and appropriate insurance packages. Besides personal counselling services, the trade union also has an eye on collective regulation. The trade union, for example, aims to improve the statutory framework conditions for freelancers.

Also in its marketing, the trade union is resorting to new methods: an initially very contentious action to recruit new members via e-mails and call centres attained a 7.5% success rate.

The German services union ver.di has been able to achieve some success with Mediafon, a counselling service for independents. The counselling services, available over the phone or in writing, are provided to trade union members and – for a fee – to non-members. About 15% of those advised over Mediafon later became members. The discussions also help the trade union to keep abreast of developments. Thus, the accumulation of questions on a certain issue, such as old-age pensions, may lead to its inclusion on the trade-union agenda (Pernicka et al 2005, p. 113).

5. Summary: Trade Unions on New Ground

The IT professional, an unknown quantity? Even more than workers in general, technical specialists keep themselves at a distance from trade unions. Only a few seek the backing of a strong organisation in order to assert their interests in relation to their employers. While unionisation rates are declining worldwide, in the IT sector they are still far below the general level. But now that it has become clear that IT jobs can come under pressure too, doubts about trade unions have decreased.

Trade unions have the ability to offer attractive services to IT professionals, thereby winning their support for collective organisation. With badly designed "mass products", which don't take account of their pride in their work or their specific situation, it is difficult to inspire professionals. It is therefore important to create appropriate internal structures, making it possible to develop focused services.

Around the world, trade unions are pursuing different approaches – within their existing structures or through the establishment of new entities – to reach these highly qualified potential members. Of growing importance in those approaches are personal services that support members in their working lives. As collective regulations cover only a small part of the issues that are relevant to these employees, safeguarding the employability of each individual plays an important role. Members should get support to hold their ground on a rapidly changing market – trade unions thereby extend "help for self-help". Especially freelancers, an increasing focus of trade unions, benefit primarily from personal services.

Some newly created organisations for IT professionals are more like professional associations than trade unions – especially where employers are admitted as members. The future development of such organisations, many of which are still young and do not engage in collective bargaining, is still open.

In their forms of engagement and communication, too, trade unions are pursuing new methods. The internet, for example, has acquired an important function not only in image enhancement, but also in the provision of online services – an approach that corresponds to the habits of a technically refined constituency.

Trade union campaigns aimed at IT professionals are also more focused on the positive self-perception of experts, instead of addressing them as problem-afflicted objects. With such strategies trade unions may, also among other employee groups, succeed in attracting hitherto reticent potential members.

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