



A Union Guide for Evaluating Workplace Change

This fact sheet is designed to help your union evaluate the changes, including new technologies and new forms of work organization, that are, or may be, coming into your workplace. It can also help identify issues to consider in developing proposals for technology contract language.

Workplace changes are introduced for many reasons, some obvious and some hidden. The first step in evaluating a workplace change is to look at why it was developed in the first place, and why your management is considering it or has chosen it. Labor cost saving, quality improvement, increased control, service expansion, and health and safety are only some of the goals management may be trying to reach through workplace changes. Remember that the impact of a change depends a great deal on how it is implemented in your particular shop.

Understanding management's goals will help you in developing alternative proposals, in educating the membership, and in negotiating with management. It will also help you understand what the points of leverage are that you may be able to use to support bargaining over the change.

Changes in the workplace can affect many different issues and conditions. You need to look at all the potential impacts of the change, whether intended or not. The impacts of workplace change can be divided into two basic categories:

What will the effect be on working conditions, that is, on the day-to-day lives of the members?

What will the effect be on the strength of the union in its dealings with management?

It is also important to look not only at the short term impacts of a workplace change, but also at how it will impact the union and the members over the long term. For example, monitoring systems may have important short term impacts on discipline, but even more important are the way they facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills from the workforce to management (undercutting union strength) and how they allow management to take increased control over the work process and, in many cases, intensify work and eliminate jobs.

Finding answers to the following questions will help you figure out the overall impact of the change and help you decide where and how to focus the union's efforts. If you can't answer any of these questions, it probably means that you need to do more research and to get more information from management.

Working Conditions

Will there be more or less jobs?

Will new jobs that are created be in the bargaining unit?

Will new duties be added to existing jobs?

Will the pace of work change?

What will be the effect on wages and pay scales?

How will advancement opportunities (career paths) be affected?

Will jobs have increased or decreased skills and decision-making responsibility?

Will performance evaluation criteria (how your work is judged) change?

Will the new technology be used to monitor work performance?

Will current skills and abilities still be needed?

What will be the effect on entry-level requirements and the number of entry-level jobs?

What will be the effect on the quality of products or services provided?

Will seniority for any employees be affected?

What kind of training will be provided?

Who will decide what training is necessary?

How will training providers be chosen?

Who will have access to the training?

Will the variety of tasks performed by particular workers be affected?

Will social interaction (the ability of people to see and talk with each other in the normal course of work) be affected?

What will the health and safety impacts be (repetitive motions, stress, hazardous chemicals, awkward postures, electro-magnetic fields, etc.)?

Will there be subcontracting of work for any reason and will the technology make subcontracting more efficient or convenient?

Union Strength

How will the number of members be affected? Will it go up or down as a percentage of the total workforce?

Will the change make it easier to move work outside your workplace?

Will the change make it easier for management to keep the operation going without you?

Will it increase the proportion of critical skills that are outside the bargaining unit?

Will it create new skills inside the bargaining unit?

Will training for new skills impact the application of the seniority system?

Will control over how work is done be taken off the shop floor and out of the bargaining unit?

Will social interaction, an important factor in implementing union strategies and in building solidarity, be affected? Will your members be more isolated from each other during the workday?

How will jurisdiction, either between departments or between bargaining units, be affected?

Will other employees or other bargaining units be affected by the change?

Sources of Information

Where do you get the information you need to answer the above questions? Information about changes in the workplace is more available than it may seem. A critical source is an information request to management. Because changes generally impact mandatory subjects of bargaining such as training, seniority, or health and safety, the union has a right to information in order to bargain over the impacts of the change. But an information request should generally be as specific as possible and therefore needs to be based on your own independent research. Other sources of information include:

The Members

Engineers/Technicians

Vendors

Trade Journals

Other Local Unions in the same company or same industry

The International
The Internet
University-based Labor Education Programs

Involving the members in answering these questions and doing the research is critical for several reasons:

- They know a lot of the answers, or know where to find them;
- Having the members help ask the questions is an involving and educating process;
- You need the help - gathering this information is a lot of work; and
- If they are involved in the information gathering and evaluating, they will be more ready to be involved in implementing a union strategy.

This fact sheet was prepared by the Labor Extension Program, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA 01854. The Extension Program provides unions with training, technical assistance and strategic planning support on evaluating and bargaining over technological change. For more information, call 978-934-3266.