



## Organisation structure - UNISON

UNISON is the UK's biggest public service trade union. UNISON represents and supports its members in issues at work. It looks after their welfare and campaigns for changes on their behalf. UNISON's organisational structure is designed to allow it to make decisions and respond to changes quickly in order to help its members. Organisational structure refers to how the workers within a business are organised and how they relate to each other. Businesses may be organised by:

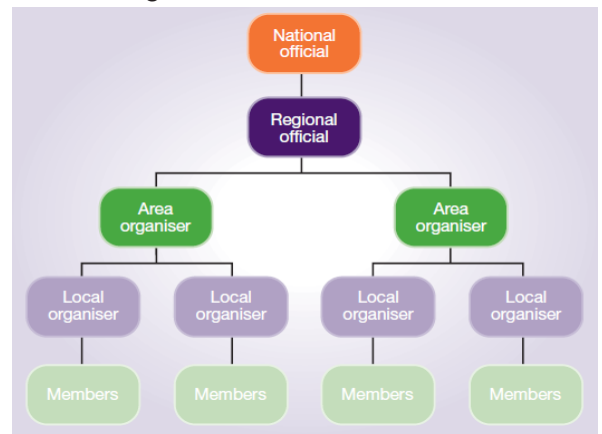
- product - for instance, a chemical company could be split into paints and plastics
- function - for instance, departments of finance, marketing, human resources and operations
- geography - this could be by UK region or even internationally e.g. Europe, Asia, America.

The structure should help to achieve the organisation's aims and objectives and make best use of people and resources. The main types of business structure are:

- **Hierarchical (tall) structure.** The business is organised in layers, with the higher layers having more authority than those below them. Decisions can be made quickly by those at the top of the organisation but communication may be slower as the message has to pass through all the layers.
- **Horizontal or flat structures.** Here there are fewer layers and more people in each layer. Decision making may need to take account of several groups within a layer. Flat structures often work well with skilled and motivated workers.
- **Matrix structures.** Sometimes the business needs to use people with a variety of skills who are drawn from many parts or functional areas of the business such as marketing, operations, finance and human resources. These can be organised into teams to complete projects.

UNISON has a complex structure that reflects the complex nature of the work that it carries out. Its structure is split by function and by region. UNISON's 1,100 staff work in either its new centre on Euston Road in London or in one of the 12 UK regions. Within each region there are employees responsible for different areas of the union's work. These areas include health, learning and development, and local government and education. The members are organised into branches throughout Britain and Northern Ireland. This tall structure helps it to act quickly and respond to changes:

- The National Executive Council, which is elected by members, can focus on policy and providing leadership.
- The UNISON Centre concentrates on providing a range of services to members and the regions such as legal, financial and personnel services.
- Regional employees can deal with issues particular to their geographical area e.g. when a local employer announces redundancies.



A highly centralised, hierarchical structure means an organisation is run from the top. It may have a well-known person at its head who makes most of the decisions. A decentralised structure is likely to create a much more democratic culture, where everyone's opinion is valued. Decisions will often be made by groups of people or in consultation with different layers. The national structure of UNISON is centralised with many decisions affecting the whole union made by the senior members and workers in the UNISON centre. However, some power is given to the regions so that they can make decisions. Quite often the people in the regions will have a better idea of local needs. This decentralisation helps UNISON to be responsive at all levels.

Whatever the structure, there are certain key features that are common:

- **Span of control** – the people for whom a manager is directly responsible. A narrow span means tight control; a wide span can provide more opportunity for employees to contribute.. There are narrow spans of control in tall structures and wide spans of control in flatter organisations.
- **Chain of command** – how authority passes down the organisation. It also shows who has power delegated (or passed down) to them.
- **Accountability** – who makes decisions and takes responsibility for outcomes.
- **Communication channels** – the way in which messages are passed up, down and across an organisation. It is also vital that the message is spread outside the organisation. For this, UNISON uses cutting-edge communication techniques. At the UNISON Centre for example, there is a media centre, plus television and radio recording facilities.

## Questions

1. Define organisation structure.

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2. Describe the purpose of a matrix structure.

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3. Explain what is meant by 'centralisation' and give examples of the services provided centrally by the UNISON Centre in London.

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4. Analyse whether a tall organisational structure is better than a flat structure for organisations like UNISON.

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## Task

Draw up an organisation chart for a small to medium sized organisation of your choice. When it is completed, answer the following questions:

1. Does the organisation have a tall or flat structure?
2. How many layers are in the hierarchy?
3. Who has the largest span of control, and how big is it?

## What have you learned?

*Deliberate mistake* – write a paragraph about organisational structures. Include several 'deliberate mistakes' in your paragraph. Now swap with someone and try to identify the mistakes in each other's work.