

Organisers' Roles Transformed

David Peetz
Griffith University

Chris Houghton
Griffith University

Barbara Pocock
University of Adelaide

A survey of organisers in thirteen Australian unions indicates that, while progress appears to have been made towards more 'organising' approaches to their work, much remains to be done. Few resources are devoted to 'growth' and organisers still spend a relatively high amount of time on grievance resolution and relatively low time on developing delegate infrastructure. They encounter a variety of obstacles, though there are some advantages in recruiting former community or student activists. A key role is shown for union leadership.

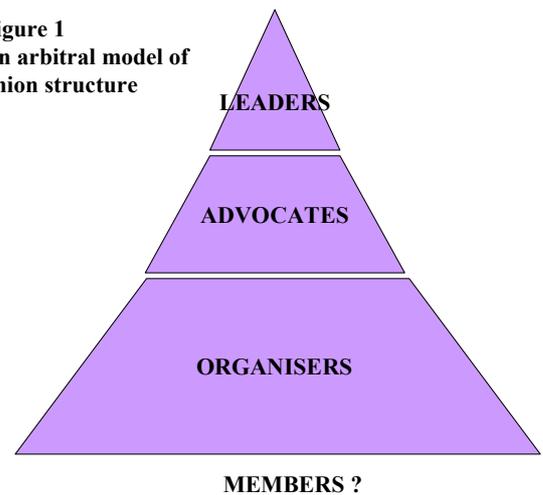
Introduction

The union renewal strategy being pursued by an increasing number of Australian union branches focuses around an Australian variant of the 'organising' approach. Although this differs in many respects from the 'organising' approach being pursued in some US and Canadian unions (Walsh 2002), it has at its core the revitalisation of unionism at the workplace through the activism of delegates and the empowerment of members. Central to this approach is a transformation in the work of paid full-time officials of unions, in particular of organisers.

Under the old arbitral-based model of trade unionism that operated in Australia (eg Howard 1975), and is illustrated in Figure 1, organisers played a lesser place in the union hierarchy to advocates (known as industrial officers) and, of course, union leaders. Industrial officers secured the majority of the gains accruing to union members, through skilful argument in industrial tribunals. These triumphs in the tribunals frequently took place after some strategic victories by members in the relatively small number of well-organised 'hot shops' that could establish a precedent wage increase or benefit; this was then flowed on to the remaining members. The role of members in these unions outside the hot shops was somewhat ambiguous, especially as in many unions a majority of their members were covered by compulsory unionism anyway. Organisers acted as the go-between for members and

the union, helping to organise members in the hot shops while responding to workplace grievances of members from other areas, usually either by some smart negotiation with the boss or, if this failed, through some smart advocacy in the tribunal. This was the Australian variant of the 'servicing' model of unionism.

Figure 1
An arbitral model of
union structure

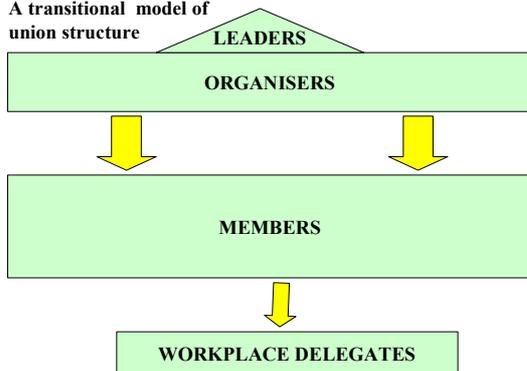


During the 1990s, as unions faced a deepening membership crisis, unions began to focus on the workplace as their source of weakness and as a source of revival. Some unions in Canada, where density had been falling slowly, and the US, where it had been falling disastrously, had experimented with something new called the 'organising model'. In the US probably the most famous of these was the 'Justice for Janitors' campaign, run by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in California, and brought to cinematic life in the film *Bread and Roses* (Erickson et al 2002). In New Zealand the Service Workers Union, which had seen its

membership collapse, began to adopt organising principles in its quest for survival (Oxenbridge 1998).

The ACTU picked up on these developments and established its own program, Organising Works. At first, the primary recognition by Australian unions was of the need to recruit, a somewhat self-evident need when membership was collapsing, and the popular characterisation of the organising model appeared to provide some basis for a recruitment approach. But it was, at best, a transitional model of union structure. As illustrated in Figure 2, resources were redirected towards recruitment, and organisers were given the task of recruiting new members and had some of their servicing

Figure 2
A transitional model of union structure



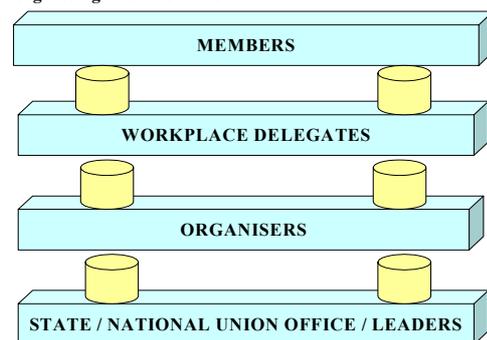
responsibilities taken away from them, or at least the lucky ones did. From these newly recruited members it was hoped that workplace delegates would emerge to represent them. Recruitment became the stock in trade of what paid union officials were meant to do, albeit under the banner of 'organising'.

The shortcomings of this transitional model became quickly apparent, however. Most obviously, the numbers just did not add up. The number of people that could be directly recruited by organisers was not enough to cover the salaries and administrative costs involved. Moreover, the devotion of organisers' time to recruitment was not, in itself, generating the activist workplace structures that were necessary to ensure ongoing, viable

unionism. Meanwhile, existing members were unhappy about reductions in the quality of servicing provided by the union organisers, who still ended up having to devote considerable time to servicing existing members.

The solution was to move to a proper structure of organising unionism, in which 'organising' approaches were taken to both brownfield and greenfield sites, that is to both existing and new members. The major impetus for this came from the publication in 1999 of *Unions@Work* (ACTU 1999), the report of an overseas mission led by Greg Combet, then secretary-designate of the ACTU. The focus shifted to developing activist workplace delegate structures. In the purest model of an organising union structure, illustrated in figure 3, the organiser's role transformed into one of supporting workplace delegate structures. Workplace delegates in turn would support their members, while the rest of the union structure would provide support for the work done by the organisers. The structure shown in figure 3 was derived from a description given to us by one of the organisers we interviewed. Organisers' role in recruitment is transformed from

Figure 3
An organising model of union structure



recruiting members to, fundamentally, recruiting workplace delegates and activists – and then providing them with the support and tools necessary to enable them to effectively perform their role at the workplace. This support would take the form of such things as training, information, guidance, providing access to

union resources, and facilitating communication and networking between delegates.

The central idea, then, is that the organising model is based on developing workplace activism, through developing and providing support for workplace delegates. Organisers' roles are transformed, from solving problems for members (making the union appear as an external entity rather than as simply the collective expression of the membership), to providing members with the capacity to enable them to solve problems themselves. Rather than members calling on the union to provide services in return for their membership fees, the members *are* the union. Instead of organisers seeking to 'hard sell' union membership 'cold' to potential joiners, the first recruiting steps of the organiser are to establish contacts, find natural leaders, and uncover issues (TUTA 1996). Unions still need to undertake a servicing function, but some of it may now be undertaken by properly trained and resourced workplace delegates, and most of the rest of it perhaps by a dedicated servicing function within the union office.

This all raises a number of important research questions. To what extent and in what ways have the roles of organisers actually changed? To what extent is this consistent with the needs of the organising approach? What are the main difficulties that organisers now face in their work? What are the main problems they face? How much support are they receiving from the rest of the union in undertaking their work? These questions form the basis for this paper.

Background and characteristics

Our data come from a survey of union organisers undertaken in late 2002 and early 2003. Some 13 unions participated in the project, which also involved surveys of state managers and national managers. Of the 13 unions that took part, ten were national unions while three were state

branches of national unions. Responses were received from 379 organisers, representing a response rate of approximately 42 per cent. We also obtained data from 31 state branch secretaries and 10 national secretaries. The project was funded by the ARC and the ACTU.

Our unions covered a cross-section of industry, sector and gender coverage. However, coverage by the survey obviously depended on union cooperation, and it is fair to say that those unions that remain resolutely opposed to organising approaches tend to be unreceptive to researchers and are by self-selection excluded from the survey. While such unions might represent only a minority of Australian unions, it is probably fair to characterise our sample as representing unions that are engaged in what is now the mainstream agenda in Australia, albeit with wide variation within and between unions in terms of the rate of acceptance or adoption of organising approaches.

Amongst organisers who participated in the survey, 57 per cent were male and 43 per cent female. Some 37 per cent worked in New South Wales or the ACT, 21 per cent in Victoria, 15 per cent in Queensland, 12 per cent in South Australia or the Northern Territory, 11 per cent in Western Australia and 4 per cent in Tasmania. Just 5 per cent worked in a national office and 95 per cent in a state branch, division or regional office. Many worked in multiple locations, with 80 per cent working in a state capital city, 57 per cent in large provincial cities such as Townsville or Geelong, and 63 per cent in smaller regional areas or rural areas. Three per cent were simultaneously the state secretary of their union.

The median duration of employment with their union was approximately 4½ years. Their median income was approximately \$54,000 per annum. In terms of their employment status, 84 per cent were permanent employees, 12 per cent were on

fixed term contracts, 4 per cent were on secondment from their normal employer, and 1 per cent were casuals. They worked a median of 48 hours per week, with 5 per cent working part-time, 19 per cent working 35 to 40 hours per week, and 22 per cent reporting working 55 hours or more per week.

Their age profile was older than that of the workforce as a whole. Their median age was 43 years, with 29 per cent under 35 years of age (well under their 44 per cent of the workforce), 26 per cent aged 35-44 (similar to a 24 workforce share), 33 per cent aged 45-54 (well above their 22 per cent workforce share) and 12 per cent aged 55 and over (slightly above the 10 per cent workforce share). Eighty per cent were born in Australia, and just 3 per cent were born overseas and had a language other than English as their parent tongue.

They had a variety of backgrounds, though mainly in their own industry, with only a minority having outside experience: 76 per cent had been a workplace delegate for a union; 73 per cent had worked as an employee in an industry covered by this union; 36 per cent had experience campaigning for a political party; 26 per cent had been an activist or employee in a women's, community or environmental pressure group; 21 per cent had been a student activist; 3 per cent had worked as an adviser to a politician; and 11 per cent had other relevant experience, including 5 per cent who volunteered they had worked as an organiser for another union.

They were well educated: 52 per cent had a degree or post-graduate qualifications. The Organising Works program had established a beachhead within the unions, with 16 per cent of respondents being graduates of the program, another 4 per cent current trainees, 14 per cent having done part of an Organising Works program, and the remaining 67 per cent not having been through Organising Works. This in turn was perceived by a minority as having had some influence: 32 per cent of

respondents agreed that 'the strategies used by this branch have been influenced by trainees and graduates of Organising Works', while 41 per cent disagreed. Notably, 80 per cent of state secretaries agreed with this statement.

What do organisers do?

While the emphasis in much of the discussion of the organising model is on unions appointing people to do 'organising' work full-time, only 28 per cent said they solely do 'organising work'. Most said they also do industrial work. Amongst those who did industrial work as well, the median estimated proportion of the time they spend on what they considered to be 'organising' was 60 per cent, though a fifth spend less than 30 per cent of their time on organising.

Only 21 per cent said that they were part of a specialist organising unit. Just 15 per cent supervised other organisers.

Some 71 per cent of organisers reported they had targets to meet. Mostly these were multiple targets, with approximately two fifths of organisers reporting targets regarding net change in member numbers (growth minus losses) and similar proportions reporting targets in terms of number of workplace delegates recruited, number of workplace delegates trained and/or and number of workplaces visited.

Most organisers worked mainly in already unionised workplaces sites. Just 2 per cent worked always with greenfield areas (ie in workplaces where less than 10 per cent of potential members were unionised and the workplace as a whole was also mainly non-union) and another 7 per cent worked mostly in greenfield areas. By contrast, 20 per cent always worked in existing unionised workplaces and 53 per cent worked mainly in existing unionised workplaces. About 16 per cent were split fairly evenly between the two. Few union resources, in other words, were directed towards 'growth'.

While the organising model emphasises delegate-based recruitment rather than organiser-based recruitment, the reality for the majority of organisers was distant from this. We offered two competing statements to organisers and asked them to choose between them. In relation to who does recruiting, 43 per cent preferred the statement 'most of the recruiting of members in my area of coverage is done by organisers like me', while only 31 per cent preferred 'most of the recruiting of members in my area of coverage is done by workplace delegates', and 27 per cent were neutral between the two.

A similar dissonance between ideal and practice was evident in how organisers

spent their time, although it was also clear that progress had been achieved. We asked respondents to identify the proportions of time spent on various activities organisers may do. After deleting responses that were not codable or credible, the preliminary results are shown in Table 1. We can see some change in the way that organisers spend their time, with the proportion of time spent on core organising activities – finding workplace delegates, building delegate structures and training and developing delegates – increasing by a third, or three percentage points, over the two years leading up to the survey. But it was still only 12 per cent of their time.

Table 1: How organisers spend their time

Activity	<i>proportion of time</i>		
	<i>that was spent 2 years ago</i>	<i>that is spent now</i>	<i>that you personally believe should be spent</i>
Handling individual grievances of members	34	30	17
Visiting unionised workplaces for other purposes, talking to members	16	14	16
Negotiation with management	13	12	10
Finding workplace delegates, building workplace delegate structures and training and developing delegates	9	12	26
Directly recruiting members	11	10	13
Undertaking administrative work	8	10	5
Writing communication material	7	8	8
Other	3	4	4

Similarly, time spend on the core servicing activity of handling member's grievance had fallen by about four percentage points. But they clearly still had a long way to go. Grievance handling still took up more than twice as much time as core organising work at the time of the survey. Organisers were aware of this problem – they thought that they should be spending much more time on delegates than on grievances. To put it another way, they thought that, in the preceding two years, that had progressed only one fifth of the way to achieving an

appropriate mix of core servicing and core organising work.

The impracticality of the transitional model is also illustrated in these data. Although organisers are reporting that, on average, they - rather than delegates - are doing the majority of recruiting, they still only manage to spend 10 per cent of their time on recruitment, and there has been a small decline in the time they spend on it.

Interestingly, although the data for table 1 come from all organisers whose responses

we could code, the story was not all that different when restricted to those who said they solely did organising work (ie they did no industrial work). Even amongst the 'non-industrial organisers' twice as much time was spent on handling grievances than on delegate work, though at least they reported greater progress towards their 'ideal' allocation of time – they thought they were between a third and a quarter of the way there. They were spending just 13 per cent of their time on delegate development, and 13 per cent on recruitment.

While the organising model would appear to imply some specialisation of organisers' roles, organisers do not see this as occurring: 71 per cent said that the number of different roles they performed in their job had gone up (including 59 per cent of those who solely did organising work), just 4 per cent said it had gone down.

Just on half of organisers considered that there were some things that they did in their jobs that would be better done by somebody else. The most common activities they wanted transferred to other people were related to: membership records and administration (eg clerical duties), which 17 per cent of organisers wanted shifted as their first priority; servicing (grievances and inquiries) (11 per cent); and industrial issues or negotiation (7 per cent). Only 1 per cent referred to recruitment. They suggested that these tasks be undertaken by other people in the union office.

Problems and assistance for organisers in their work

We asked organisers about the level of support they received from their union. Overall, organisers appeared generally satisfied: 76 per cent indicated that the support was 'mostly' or 'very effective' (though only 18 per cent gave the latter response), while 19 per cent said it was not very effective and 5 per cent that it was not at all effective. The quality of management and leadership was a key

element in the support organisers received. When asked an open-ended question as to what type of support the union was best at providing, 42 per cent gave answers relating to collaboration and assistance, 41 per cent relating to leadership and management, while 20 per cent referred to technology or IT, just 7 per cent to communications and 7 per cent to working conditions (multiple responses were permitted). Organisers were less likely to nominate a form of support that the union was *worst* at providing, but on this question 23 per cent referred to leadership and management, 6 per cent to information technology, 6 per cent to collaboration and assistance, and 2 per cent to each of communications and working conditions.

We asked organisers whether particular things were presently problem areas for their work as an organiser, or were actually areas that were presently going well and helping them in doing their job. In Table 2 we show, in order, the items that were most commonly helping a great deal, while in Table 3 we show in order those items that were most commonly a major problem. In the first data column of table 4 we show the average net help or difficulty for organisers in relation to that item, where 1 indicates the matter is a major problem area and 5 indicates it is helping a great deal. Overall, there were more items with a net negative score than with a net positive score. The items that organisers identify as being the greatest immediate assistance or problem to them need not be the factors that have the greatest influence on the difficulty or organisers' work, or on outcomes for the union. Consequently, we calculated an overall index of difficulty for organisers, which was simply a sum of responses for each of the component questions. In Table 4 then we show the correlations between each of the component factors and the overall index of difficulty. The higher the correlation, the greater the impact a particular factor has on the overall difficulty (or ease) of work for an

organiser. We also show correlations with the perceived change in the rate of union joining over the past two years where 1

indicates the rate at which employees are joining the union has gone up a lot, and 5 indicates it has gone down a lot.

Table 2: Things that may be going well: What helps organisers in their work?

	this is helping a great deal	total: this is helping	this is the biggest help
<i>how much experience you have had personally to date</i>	44	74	19
<i>how much support you currently get from other officials in your union</i>	28	55	14
<i>the union's information systems and information technology (eg. membership databases)*</i>	21	42	3
<i>how much access you currently have to targeted workplaces</i>	18	36	4
<i>the current priorities of the union leadership</i>	19	44	8
<i>how much in the way of resources are currently available for your use</i>	15	42	3
<i>the current level of commitment and experience of workplace activists *</i>	14	43	8
<i>how extensively you have personally been trained to date</i>	13	44	5
<i>how easy or difficult it currently is for you to access to good quality research *</i>	8	29	2
<i>the image the union currently has (with women, young workers, etc) *</i>	8	29	1
<i>how easy or difficult it currently is to identify workplace activists *</i>	7	26	3
<i>how much cooperation or rivalry there currently is within the union *</i>	6	17	2

* For these items, more respondents said this matter was a problem than said it was a help.

Table 3: Things that may not be going well: Problems facing organisers in their work

	this is a major problem area	total: this is a problem	this is the biggest problem
<i>the workload currently faced by actual and potential workplace delegates in their normal job</i>	34	84	9
<i>the economic and workplace changes in the industries in which your members work</i>	31	76	7
<i>how many demands are currently made on your time and energy (eg. responding to member grievances)</i>	28	75	15
<i>the expectations members currently have of what the union will do for them</i>	24	70	4
<i>the legislation under which you operate</i>	24	56	7
<i>the union's information systems and information technology (eg. membership databases)</i>	22	50	4
<i>employers offering individual contracts such as AWAs</i>	18	55	3
<i>how much cooperation or rivalry there currently is within the union</i>	18	40	3
<i>current employer opposition to or cooperation with the union</i>	15	55	3
<i>how much cooperation or rivalry there currently is from other unions</i>	15	49	2
<i>the size of workplaces in the industry</i>	15	45	1
<i>how easy or difficult it currently is for you to access to good quality research</i>	14	49	1
<i>how much support you currently get from other officials in your union *</i>	13	31	2
<i>the image the union currently has (with women, young workers, etc)</i>	12	46	1

* For this item, more respondents said this matter was a help than said it was a problem.

Table 2 shows that the factor most commonly cited by organisers as being a

great deal of help for them, and most commonly cited as being their biggest

help, was their own experience. Yet Table 4 shows that this was the fourth least important factor out of 25 in explaining the overall difficulty or ease of organisers' work, and was the least important of all (and non-significant) in explaining changes in membership joining. Conversely, Table 3 shows that the difficulty most commonly cited by organisers as being a great problem is the workload faced by delegates, but Table 4 shows that this item has the weakest correlation with the overall index of difficulty and the second weakest (and non-significant) in explaining union joining. That is, while these factors – organisers' own experience and delegates' workloads – were perceived as being the biggest help and problem respectively, in practice variation in them had relatively little impact on organisers' work and no significant impact on their success. For example, training was much more important than experience in explaining both the ease or difficulty of organisers work and membership joining outcomes.

Overall, the factors most influential in shaping the difficulty of organisers' jobs were the image and reputation of the union (one being a net positive, the other a net negative), how much resources are available to organisers (a net negative), members' expectations (a large net negative), the priorities of the union leadership (a positive), and the skills and confidence of delegates (a slight negative). Perceived union joining was shaped by image, reputation and expectations but more so by leadership priorities, the personal values of potential members (a slight negative), and the level of cooperation or rivalry within the union (a net negative). Two other influential factors were the ease or difficulty of identifying workplace activists (a slight negative) and the current level of commitment and experience of workplace activists (almost a net neutral).

Information systems and IT featured prominently as both a positive and as a negative, and also correlated significantly with overall difficulty and joining. The item that was most frequently mentioned as organisers' single greatest problem was 'how many demands are currently made on your time and energy (eg. responding to member grievances)', and this was fairly strongly related to both outcome measures in Table 4. This problem was much worse for organisers who also did industrial work (36 per cent said it was a major problem) than for those who only did organising work (17 per cent rated it a major problem). Organisers who were part of a specialist organising unit were more likely than those who were not to identify the current priorities of union leadership as a major help. Young organisers (aged under 30) were more likely to report the support they got from other officials in the union as a problem, and more likely to rank the effectiveness of support they received as not very effective.

Image problems were more common for organisers recruiting in greenfield sites than in unionised workplaces. To a lesser extent they were more common where the majority of recruiting was done by organisers than where delegates did half or more of the recruiting. Organisers who were former student activists reported fewer problems arising from the image of the union. Organisers who were former community or student activists found it much easier to identify workplace activists.

Organisers as employees

Generally speaking, organisers were satisfied with their job: 83 per cent agreed that they were satisfied with their job, just 9 per cent were dissatisfied. Notably, 79 per cent expected to be still working for the union in two years, just 10 per cent did not. However, 59 per cent agreed that their workload was too great, with only 12 per cent disagreeing.

Table 4: Correlations of problems/assistance with overall difficulty or organiser work and perceived change in rate of member joining

	net ease (high) / difficulty (low) of this item*	correlation with overall index of difficulty	correlation with perceived change in rate of joining
the image the union currently has (with women, young workers, etc)	2.79	.60	.25
the union's current reputation and record among potential members	3.26	.59	.25
how much in the way of resources are currently available for your use	3.11	.56	.14
the expectations members currently have of what the union will do for them	2.19	.56	.24
the current priorities of the union leadership	3.21	.52	.29
how skilled and confident the workplace delegates currently are in your area	2.83	.52	.15
the personal values of members and potential members	2.79	.51	.31
the union's information systems and information technology (eg. membership databases)	2.91	.49	.17
how much cooperation or rivalry there currently is within the union .	2.70	.48	.30
how easy or difficult it currently is for you to access to good quality research	2.75	.48	.16
how much support you currently get from other officials in your union	3.42	.48	.18
current employer opposition to or cooperation with the union	2.49	.46	.19
the way this branch has traditionally done things such as recruiting members	2.89	.46	.12
how many demands are currently made on your time and energy (eg. responding to member grievances)	2.05	.46	.12
how extensively you have personally been trained to date	3.19	.44	.11
how much access you currently have to targeted workplaces	3.23	.41	.14
how easy or difficult it currently is to identify workplace activists	2.82	.41	.22
the current level of commitment and experience of workplace activists	2.98	.40	.20
how much cooperation or rivalry there currently is from other unions	2.47	.38	.12
the size of workplaces in the industry	2.53	.36	.13
the legislation under which you operate	2.35	.35	.13
how much experience you have had personally to date	4.00	.33	.01
the economic and workplace changes in the industries in which your members work	2.04	.32	.17
employers offering individual contracts such as AWAs	2.33	.29	.11
the workload currently faced by actual and potential workplace delegates in their normal job	1.86	.27	.02

* A score greater than 3 indicates this item is a net positive, a score less than 3 indicates it is a net negative. Correlations of .12 and above are significant at the 5 per cent level..

Interestingly, workload complaints in themselves did not significantly correlate with expectations respondents would leave in less than two years. What did strongly correlate with expected departure was the

index of difficulty referred to earlier. Of all the items in the index, the one that had the strongest relationship to expected departure was how much support they were getting from other officials in the

union. They were more likely to leave when they felt that the leadership vision of the union was not clear, leaders did not pay attention to what organisers say, there was insufficient emphasis on training and members did not have a strong influence on what the branch did. In short, where organisers expected to leave it was not because their workload was heavy but because they were frustrated with a difficult job that lacked effective support.

Conclusion

The data suggest some progress towards a reorientation of organisers' work towards patterns embodied in the organising 'model', but with many limitations on that progress. It is apparent that the redirection of resources to date to support an organising approach has been only partial, as might be expected during a period of major reform. Few resources are devoted to 'growth' in non-union areas, with unions instead focusing on developing delegates and workplace infrastructure in existing unionised workplaces. While there may be a logic to this in terms of building on their relative strengths, and halting the haemorrhaging of membership due to weak workplace structures, a return to long-forgotten rising density will require movement into 'growth' areas.

Notwithstanding this, there remain many problems. Most organisers are not dedicated exclusively to organising. There has been a noticeable but small increase in the proportion of time organisers devote to developing workplace delegate structures –

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but it is less than one fifth of the increase that they believe needs to be achieved. Similarly, the cutback in dealing with individual grievances is less than a quarter of what is needed in organisers' own assessment. Organisers are not specialising – instead their jobs are becoming more varied.

There are some hints about the types of people who should be recruited as organisers. Activists from other fields – former community or student activists – appear to do well in terms of fighting image problems and identifying workplace activists. But organisers under-represent young workers, an impediment to like-with-like strategies, and young organisers feel less support from the union and fellow officials. This, more than workload, is what induces organisers to quit, and so unions run the risk of losing a key group of organisers if they do not improve support for them.

Finally, the data suggest the importance of effective union leadership – leadership is a key area of support, both good and bad, it has a significant influence on the ease or difficulty of the organiser's job and the likelihood they will leave. Leaders provide vision and allocate resources, including into important areas such as information technology. On average, organisers see leaders as helping them in their work. Much more will be expected of them, however, if unions are to effectively revive in Australia.

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