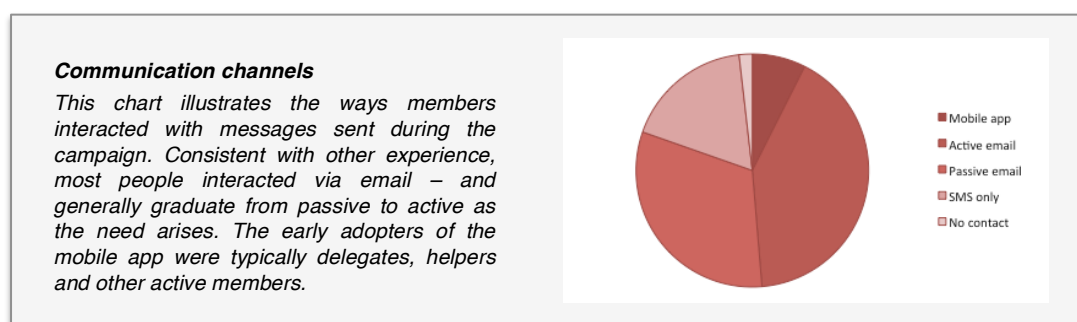


Wage bargaining rises to the digital challenge

Too often technology is equated with workers losing jobs and bargaining power. It doesn't have to be. Against economy wide trends, National Union of Workers members at three Woolworths Distribution Centres have secured annual wage increases of 4% - that's double the national average – in addition to much improved redundancy and working conditions. The following story is about a new organising technology (Geddup) that the NUW used as part of its bargaining strategy, and its contribution to tilting the negotiation in favour of workers.

Cutting through the noise – The immediate value of Geddup is that it can capture member's attention. Unlike social networks and email marketing tools, it is designed to enable organising. As a result, members tend to place a higher value on messages they receive via the platform; they know the messages they receive are specifically for them and are important.

Additionally, Geddup lowers the barriers to member participation. As it delivers messages via multiple channels - as email, as sms, or via a mobile app - members are not required to get an app to interact. It also means that if one channel fails, then there is another to follow-up with. In the Woolworths campaign, this light touch approach allowed for incremental adoption by members as they became familiar with the way it works.

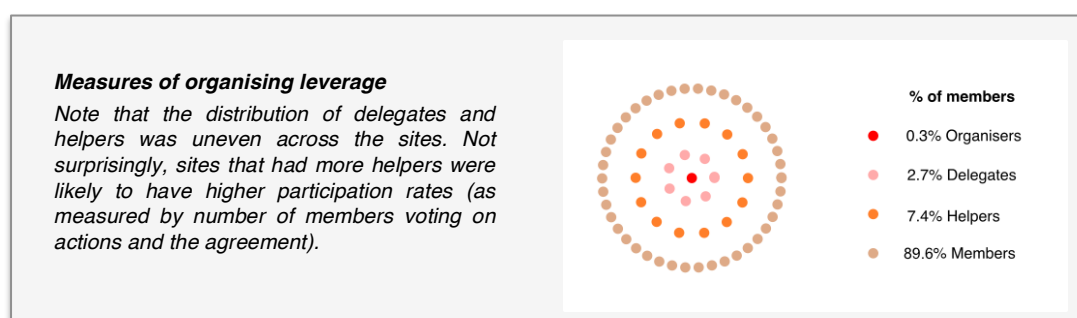


Building campaign pressure – One of the challenges of digital organising is translating virtual interaction to real world action. Creating the momentum to rally members and build solidarity requires more than messages it requires member participation.

This is where distributed organising comes in. It is about centralised sharing of information and strategy while at the same time enabling members to self-organise around their particular circumstances. Importantly, Geddup enables this self-organising without members needing to share contact details.

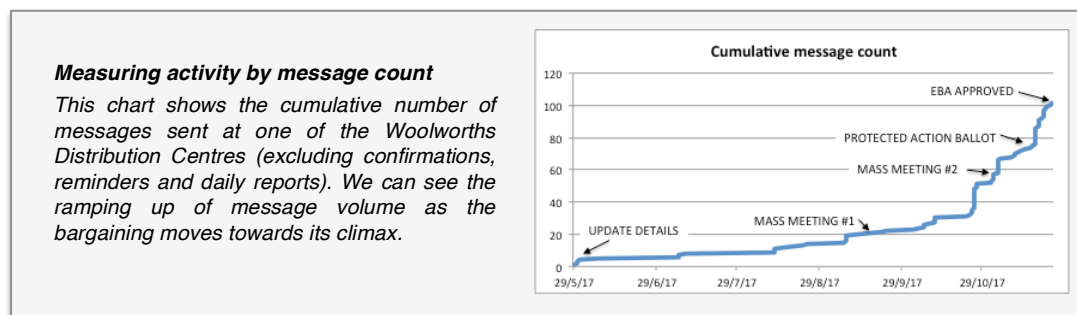
In the Woolworths campaign, the strategy was to use Geddup to gather low-hurdle commitments from members. The NUW was able to gather groups of volunteers that were willing to help get the message to their fellow workers. And in a self-reinforcing cycle, these volunteers were able to feel more ownership of what was happening – their active contribution was an integral step towards the final goal – thereby reinforcing solidarity and giving a sense of progress to their activities.

Similarly, at the top of the organising structure, Geddup was also able to help with the coordination of the campaign across sites. These Distribution Centres are on three different agreements, meaning that Woolworths had adopted an approach of 'divide and conquer'. To combat this, another group was created of 'delegates' that enabled quick communication across sites so that the leaders of each had visibility over what the others were doing. In this way, the walls separating the sites were broken.



Participating in the negotiations – By necessity, negotiations require members to rely on their delegates to represent their interests as not everyone can be in the room when the terms of the agreement are being worked through. This arrangement can lead to problems when there are members who feel that an agreement does not meet their objectives. For example, proposed agreements can be stalled or voted down at mass meetings, simply by a vocal few unsettling the majority.

In response to this problem, delegates used Geddup to enable greater transparency through the negotiations with Woolworth’s management. For example, as the negotiations stepped up in their intensity, the frequency of messages increased. The messages were like telegrams from the front-line where members could tangibly feel the pressure being applied to delegates and their resolute response. So that when the terms of the agreement were put to members for approval, they responded with resounding support. They had travelled the journey and could claim ownership of the result.



Changing workplace culture – Trade union membership has been declining for decades in a downward spiral of shifting workforce demographics, loss of bargaining power and member disenfranchisement. Even at relatively unionised workplaces like these sites, the enthusiasm of members has been undermined by the inability of members to effectively engage. One of the highlights of this campaign then was witnessing how bringing members more closely into the negotiations could reinvigorate the culture of a site.

This was evident in the way that different sites used the technology and the resulting impact on members. For example, the site that made the most use of the technology was the one that had a reputation as being disaffected and difficult to engage at the start of negotiations. Notably, it was this site that then had the highest engagement, for example, it had the highest turnout for the Protected Action Ballot and then the highest percentage of members voting for action. Members had a real sense of participation and empowerment as communication channels had been opened.

Building future capabilities - Like any new technology, the adoption rate was uneven across the NUW membership. And also, as is typical, the more people become familiar with how to use Geddup, the more they came to understand how they could leverage it to their advantage. Based on feedback from this negotiation, we are only just beginning to understand what the bigger opportunities may be.

FROM A DELEGATE’S PERSPECTIVE:

“Thank you very much for all the support over the few months. We are pretty happy with the result considering there was no cost to members in terms of action. We were all (delegates) a bit skeptical about how effective a system like Geddup was going to be or if our members would take to it, but it overwhelmed us the response we got about it. The more the boys got around and promoted it, and especially those tips you gave me with the buttons and questions, pictures, the members loved it. Also being able to communicate with members directly on the day of final negotiations was great. We have already talked about the future and ways we will use Geddup even more effectively with members on all kinds of issues. Thank you so much for everything, from all of us.”

- Delegate from Woolworths Distribution Centre