

Most Co-operative Societies work through their Member Relations Departments in establishing firm community links. The all-important factor is whether such activities are fully marketed and publicised, and whether the public perception of the Society as an employer is matched by the services it provides to the community.

Establishing the Links

Societies must establish and maintain close links with schools/colleges etc. and keep in touch with young people, as this is the first and most positive contact for gaining an appreciation of Co-operative principles and why we are different. They should have a well publicised training and development policy, and be seen to be involved at careers conventions, both in conjunction with local authorities, and separately at schools. Societies should perhaps take the initiative and contact individual careers officers at local schools, or groups of career officers and invite them to the Society, pulling on effectively a Sales Campaign of Society employment benefits, together with basic principles of Co-operation.

Other suggestions may include an 'Open Day' at the Co-op, which on face value may appear to be a problem we could all do without but would be an example of the Society taking the initiative to make contact with prospective employees rather than hoping they will get in touch with us, as previously.

In the immediate past simply getting a job was often the important initial criterion which the individual applied; now and even more so in the future it will be whether it is the right job for the individual who will have a choice. Part of that process of choice ideally should include an appreciation of the Co-operative Movement, its ideas, and principles and though it will be no easy task, ideas and initiatives must be found and explored to present our case as a prospective employer with a special background.

Views from the Bridge: 2

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Yes - basic Co-operative principles do have implications for societies' employment policies and practices in at least the following major areas:

Rewards - we understand and have sympathy with the concerns and aspirations of our employees with regard to matters such as security of employment, remuneration, and benefits and do not regard our employees as mere units of production.

Participation - our Co-operative ideals lead us to encourage employees particularly to become members of the society, and to participate actively in the democratic control of the society.

Involvement - we aim to create an open, consultative style of management in which the views of shopfloor staff are sought and valued, albeit that this must not degenerate to an abdication of management responsibility for decision making and central control.

Rewards in Co-operative Employment?

Unfortunately, principles cost and the generally low level of societies' profitability in recent years has led to a position where it is now difficult for us to argue truly that the rewards and benefits of employment with a Co-operative society are the best available in the retail sector.

Even those long-cherished advantages of the employees' pension scheme and a commitment to training and development are areas where other retailers have overtaken Co-operatives and established leading positions for themselves. We are deluding ourselves if we believe that we are still in the vanguard. Many competitors have overtaken us in terms of the commitment and resources devoted to staff training and development. How many Societies' pension schemes match the provisions of those offered by Tesco or Sainsbury's?

We are also obliged to acknowledge that our primary remuneration packages do not enable us to claim industry leadership - a source of genuine and deserved pride in pre-war years. Frankly, our performance does not permit us to pay higher wages than everyone else in the retail sector and yet most active members and directors and many officials would admit that retail and service wages are low in relation to industry in general.

Perhaps acceptance of this point will provide reinforcement to officials and directors in their efforts to improve societies' performance- if we really want to be in a position to put our money where our mouth is (or certainly where our heart is), we must generate the money in the first place.

Conversely, however, there are Co-operative policies and practices in which we can take pride. Some retailers recognise trade union membership as a convenience in industrial relations. Co-operative societies promote trade union membership out of a conviction and commitment that the interests of individual employees are best served by membership of trade unions. Further, the Co-operative movement has a proud record providing educational facilities for colleagues from the Third World through Stanford Hall.

Involvement in Contributing to Policies

We aim to be a caring employer, not cynically because this is good industrial relations as many employers have come to realise, but because this comes from our Co-operative creed. Caring means more than ensuring that the staff canteen is painted and clean. In my book it also means being prepared to listen and take seriously the views of employees, of being prepared to accept that local knowledge is sometimes right, and provision should be made for it to be grafted on to centrally determined policies.

Participation In Membership

Involving employees within the Society leads naturally to their participation in stimulating membership and as active members themselves. This is the continuing Co-operative difference in employment. Some of our retail competitors devote considerable resources to securing the commitment of their employees to their cause through communications activities, profit sharing and share distributions. Not even the John Lewis Partnership, however, comes close to the Co-operative model where employees can participate directly and meaningfully in the democratic control of their society.

We have a duty to educate and encourage staff to play their democratic role within the society. This does not mean just to be wheeled out as an occasional block vote to protect the society from the activities of some single-issue pressure group or other. It means more than just token references on induction courses. If we can convince staff that they have a real stake in the business and can influence its direction then we are doing something distinctively Co-operative.

Most large employers now devote substantial resources to staff communications; everything from newsletters to videos. Which of our competitors is able realistically to encourage large numbers of staff to attend a shareholders' meeting where they can question the Board and senior management about real policy issues and expect an answer?

If we are to pay more than lip service to the Rochdale principles, we have a duty not only to provide vocational training for staff, but also to educate them for their role as Co-operators.