

## CASE STUDY: **Unisys** – European Works Council

A consultation conducted by the Department of Trade and Industry revealed a lukewarm reception to European Works Councils since their instigation in 1999. Some companies said the EWC offered no substantial use to the communication strategy of the organisation; that its presence is tokenistic. Others said that there was little or no employee demand for European information and consultation bodies. How can this piece of legislation, complicated as it is, be put to good use for organisations and their employees? **Unisys** strove for a solution. This is how they found it:

Combined with their regular European Works Council (EWC) meetings **Unisys**, in conjunction with FutureToBe, held a series of workshops in 2004 to improve the effectiveness of the council and make the most of future meetings. Under the title Working Effectively In Europe, the core aims of the event were to increase the cultural understanding between the participating representatives and look to a future for the EWC to be an asset to the company beyond its role fulfilling a procedural obligation.

The **Unisys** EWC brings together 19 employee delegates representing 14 countries to meet and exchange with a panel of **Unisys** managers (themselves from various countries). The employee delegates felt that it was important for them to learn to work more effectively together as a multi-cultural team, in order that they might first increase the effectiveness of their preparation meetings together and second, the effectiveness of their representation to management. Another issue they wanted to address was how to anticipate cultural differences in communication and negotiation, especially when sub-teams of the EWC have to intervene in a country (which may not be their own) and handle sensitive people issues. Their experiences in that respect had occasionally been marred with misunderstandings.

The first intercultural workshop, focused on cross-cultural communication, incorporated exercises in recognising cultural dimensions, and the principles of cross-cultural negotiations. A subsequent one-on-one process of personal development using the Spony Profiling Model (SPM) proved extremely valuable. Using SPM each delegate examined the cultural implications of their individual work values and communication style, with a view to seeking ways forward for the EWC.

At the next stage, key differences in work values and communication style were identified between the dominant culture within the EWC delegates and the dominant managerial culture within **Unisys**. These were explored and specific action points were identified to lessen the cultural gap. A way forward was planned in which the team would improve to the benefit of both **Unisys** and “its people” to understand, bridge and manage the cultural differences. An increased partnership approach was recommended in which more opportunities could be developed for thinking through and productively debating given problems or situations. A final workshop culminated in the direct addressing of how the members viewed the way the EWC worked as a team; whether they thought it was getting better, worse or intransigent, why and what they could do about it.

The process as a whole revealed some fundamental hindrances to the way the EWC had functioned as a multicultural team. This was, in itself, a massive step forward in terms of building a better cross-cultural body. Based on these findings and the new skills the team had developed in recognising the spectrum of European work attitudes they were able to have more open and comfortable debates and thus to build solid foundations for future meetings.

**Unisys** and *FutureToBe* can be contacted via: Jenny Avon 0870 900 7486; [jenny.avon@futuretobe.net](mailto:jenny.avon@futuretobe.net)