

White Paper

# The Digital Transformation of Membership Organisations

## Providing you with:

- ✓ Insight into the challenges member organisations face
- ✓ Greater understanding of the changing digital landscape
- ✓ Reasons to take a strategic approach to digital

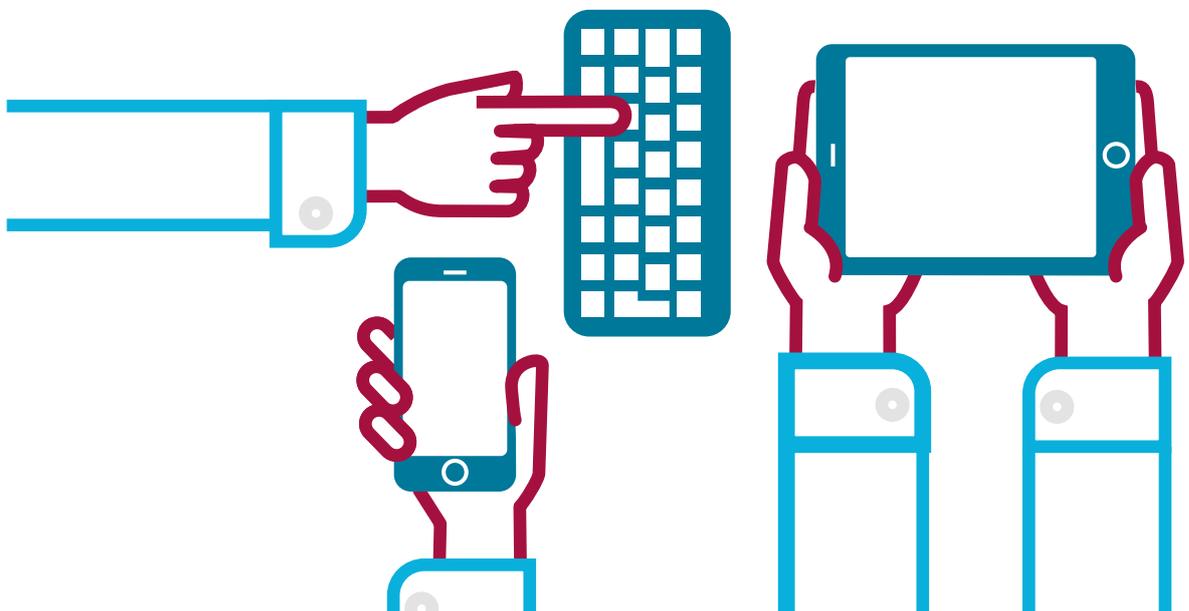


# Introduction

Many UK membership organisations have seen vast technology changes over the years. Not only must they keep members engaged through online platforms, but the rise of mobile technology has also transformed the way we access and digest information.

The success of membership organisations relies on community engagement. To keep pace with the ever changing customer and technology landscape, they've had to introduce digital into the very heart of their operations. In some cases, the digital journey has led to content being placed in disparate, inaccessible places that do not benefit current and prospective members.

In this paper we explore the challenges faced by membership organisations in today's digital world; investigate the changing nature of the membership industry and why the approach needs to change; how data and insights can inform a strategic approach to digital, and the importance of an agile approach to delivering and integrating digital effectively.



# 2

## The challenges plaguing membership organisations

Membership organisations have been around officially since the 1800s, first taking the form of trade unions in 1867. The definition of membership organisation or a professional association is:

“...usually a non-profit organisation seeking to further a particular profession, the interests of individuals engaged in that profession and the public interest.”

(Source: Lee Harvey)

Originally set up to reform socio-economic conditions for working men in British industries, trade unions have developed and grown over time to approximately 6.5 million UK members in 2013 (source: ONS). Similarly, professional membership organisations have evolved as business has developed and now there are more than 218 UK membership organisations (source: Wikipedia) supporting the interests and professional development of their members.



While the structure and purpose of membership organisations varies according to when they were set up and the sectors in which they operate, many face similar issues which digital transformation can help alleviate.

One of the main challenges is growing and maintaining a steady membership base and there are many factors that can affect this; such as the pool of prospective members (job creation levels), the benefits of membership or perceived value versus cost, as well as any political changes. A prime example of this was the huge drop in trade union membership in 1980 due to the change in government. Membership numbers reduced from 13 million to a staggering 7.3 million, demonstrating how quickly numbers can fluctuate.

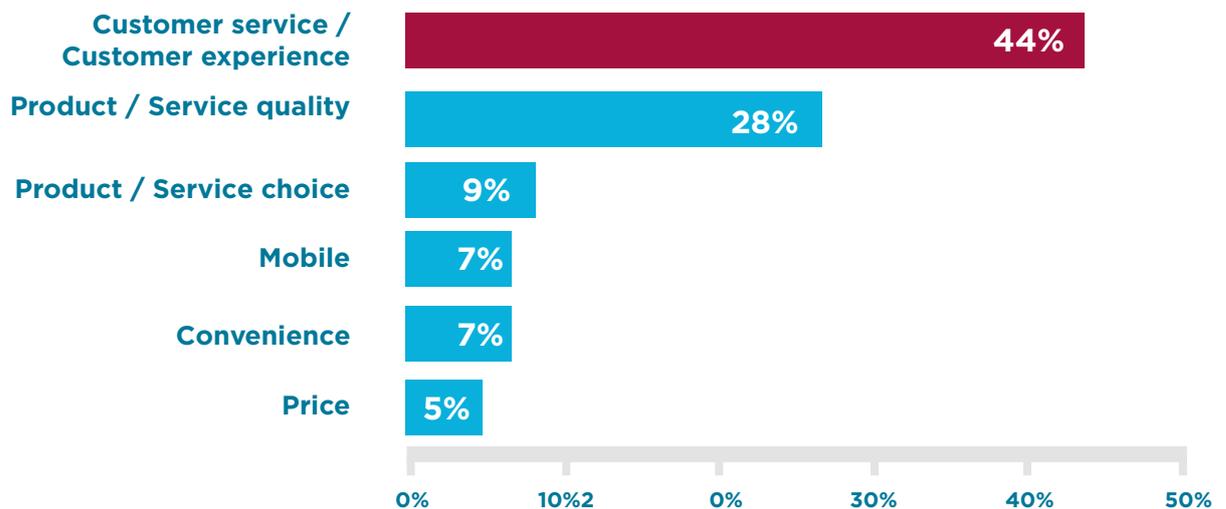
In recent times the economic climate has been a key factor, with many individuals keeping a close eye on the purse strings and the emergence of new competing organisations. As a result, membership organisations work harder than ever to maintain and grow membership revenue. Understandably, there is an awareness that these organisations need to modernise in order to remain relevant in the digital age and look at new ways to demonstrate value to their members. To do so, it is important they have a solid strategy in place that not only ensures existing needs are met but helps attract new members too.

# 2

## Understanding the changing nature of the membership landscape

Without their members, membership organisations would not exist. Therefore, they must understand the market they are operating in, keep on top of key trends that could affect them, and respond to the changing behaviours and expectations of their target audiences.

A recent key digital trend and an area of focus for digital strategy development is Customer Experience (CX), and the translation of this into competitive advantage. Adobe's trends report highlighted that 44 per cent of companies see customer service/experience as the primary way to differentiate themselves from the competition (source: Econsultancy). However, prior to developing any sort of strategy, it is vital to have an understanding of customer behaviour.



Obtaining an in-depth view of the make-up and characteristics of current and future members allows organisations to inform the strategy development process in order to stay relevant and operate a sustainable

business model. Digital tools help segment these audiences, adding a vital strategic layer to activity.

One key area on which membership organisations need to focus is the changing nature of their audiences. With the advent of the internet, the requirements and expectations of Generation Y are very different to that of the baby boomers, upon which membership organisations rely heavily at the moment. Generation Y (those born before 1964) are often more aligned with the organisation and feel they benefit not only from its services but from being associated with it. However, those born after 1964 tend to be more demanding of their membership, more social media savvy and expect greater online accessibility and interaction. Therefore, whether it is offering forms of online training, webinars, regular social updates or an easy to navigate website, membership organisations need to utilise digital to effectively support their existing systems, processes and communications.

A well informed digital strategy is one of the prime ways to ensure member organisations can support this generation effectively and gain a vital competitive edge.

## Case study

For the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), nearly a century of membership involvement resulted in a disparate system. Paul Newman, head of IT at the RCN, says, “We are responsible for representing the nursing sector while promoting best practice and shaping health polices and it is therefore crucial our online platform reflects this.

“Our current portal is built on old, fragmented legacy systems. Over time, the site has become cluttered and difficult to navigate. We want our members and other visitors to be able to find content easily and to be offered news, policies and clinical information that

match their interests. Box UK has already carried out a 'quick start' process to determine performance and prioritise the digital transformation."

Utilising an agile approach, Box UK was able to understand motivations, helping to ensure the membership portal is more user aligned. Due to the amount of content on the system, Box UK and the RCN agreed on a 'define and refine' approach to create an interesting, accessible and informative platform, resulting in a better online journey.

Working on such an influential, digital transformation project to create a cutting edge platform has been an exciting prospect for Box UK. It continues to seek input and feedback from users to ensure the site encourages a vibrant and active community before the official launch at the end of 2015.

Paul explains, "Our plans for digital transformation are ambitious, but after 18 months of hard work and a significant amount of investment, we are pleased to say the prototype will be ready for members to review later this year, highlighting how we have delivered on our promise for a platform that fully supports our online community.

"I believe we are setting the benchmark in the industry and when the site goes live, we will be taking an important step forward ahead of our centenary year in 2016."



## Taking a strategic approach to digital

Technology is driving huge changes in consumer behaviour, prompting all types of businesses and organisations to rethink how they reach, engage and retain customers. Consumers are increasingly expecting more from membership organisations, expecting to get what they want, when they want, in the format they want it and the pressure is on to deliver. This is why CX has topped the list of digital trends for 2015 as a priority area for organisations to focus on.

Digital transformation is no longer a nice to have, it is a must have. No matter what sector or organisation, modern technology and the 'Internet of Things' have turned everything and everyone into transmitters and receivers of information to support better, more informed decisions - often in real time. As such, there is no option but to transform, making it a question of when, not if, for membership organisations.

Culturally, membership organisations have only recently (within the last five to ten years) accepted the need for transformation and the requirement that digital should be at the heart of everything they do. However, there has been a temptation to err on the side of caution and take a piecemeal/ad-hoc approach to digital, implementing only certain elements for a 'quick fix'. Often this has resulted in despondency, with activity not having the right impact or achieving key business objectives. Whether driven by lack of budget, resource or understanding, membership organisations that continue to operate in this way risk becoming redundant and irrelevant in the future.

As such, these organisations need to start thinking more strategically across the business and look to take a similar approach to digital. Digital by its very nature is measurable and can be linked to business objectives, allowing membership organisations to track success rates fairly easily.

# 4

## Agile delivery to integrate digital effectively

Agile delivery for digital strategies means a flexible framework can be implemented to help streamline processes, improve communication, keep costs down and reduce risks associated with implementing new systems. In the last few years there has been a growing shift towards agile development and project management in both the private and public sectors. For example, the Government Digital Service (GDS) has taken huge steps in leading the digital transformation of government.

As with public sector systems, the digital systems of many member organisations were put in place decades ago. Legacy systems

bring with them a specific set of challenges. These include large pockets of content that have often been curated by many different authors; challenges often compounded by a lack of knowledge and understanding as to the amount of time required to change the current system. Taking an agile approach to delivering digital means systems and processes can be reviewed in smaller chunks and development controlled and updated on an ongoing basis, to flex with the business and with any digital advancements.

### Case study

Box UK worked closely with UNISON to identify and target several specific areas for improvement. The membership organisation had several campaign micro sites, as well as wanting to send newsletters to more than a million members, keeping them

informed of developments in the sector. The resulting layout, navigation and design recommendations were implemented on to the site.



# Transforming the membership organisation

By their very nature (whether they are linked with a union or not), membership organisations ensure voices are heard locally, nationally and internationally. Collating and organising vast swathes of data and useful information that could be over a century old is no easy task, but imperative in today's digital environment.

Fortunately, these challenges can be overcome. The expertise, tools and skills are available to help organisations take a strategic approach to digital and transform themselves for the next century and beyond.



# References

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