



# How can trade unions use Artificial Intelligence to build power?

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It is hardly news that most applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace increase employer power. As technology that is overwhelmingly applied by employers rather than employees in workplaces, the capacity for AI to erode worker power through surveillance, algorithmic management, deskilling and displacement has been widely observed. But is AI a technology that is all about dissolving the link between human judgement and analytic processes – inherently incompatible with the project of building worker power? Could AI technologies developed in the context of customer service be re-imagined and re-tooled as instruments of solidarity and activism?

[Our article](#) sought to answer these questions by examining how two labour organisations, the US-based [Organization United for Respect](#) (OUR) and the Australia-based [United Workers Union](#) (UWU) used an AI-enabled chatbot in their organising. The app, [Workit](#), had been initially developed by OUR to organise a workforce of more than one million workers without the institutional backing of a formal trade union or any rights to enter the workplace. It was subsequently developed by UWU in Australia in casinos, home care and hospitality. The chatbot provided automated responses to workers' text-based questions about their rights via their handheld devices, using natural language recognition capabilities. Questions that could not be answered by the chatbot within an acceptable range of certainty were diverted to a human responder, whose answers were fed back into the chatbot's 'brain' to increase its capacity to answer similar questions automatically in the future.

Three key issues stood out as things to consider for trade unions thinking about using AI to build power:

## 1. It is essential that the technology be re-designed to reflect an organising, rather than servicing ethos

Off-the-shelf versions of IBM Watson were designed for commercial purposes, on the assumption that organisations would use it to 'streamline' and reduce human-to-human interaction in service transactions as much as possible. Under the organising model, though, unions have a different kind of relationship with their members. They wish to engage and support them in exercising power collectively in their workplaces, which means using technology to start and enrich conversations with members, not end them as quickly as possible. To ensure that the app supported that philosophy, UWU fundamentally reconfigured the chatbot. In place of an initial 'information delivery' approach, it changed the chatbot's

programming. Information was still provided to members in a useful way, but it was framed to reflect the fact that the rules of work, and the way they are applied, are always bound up in questions of power in the workplace. This approach set the scene for future organising.

## **2. Get workers involved in the process of design**

The process of building the chatbot's 'brain' so that it can provide empowering responses to questions requires a lot of backend labour. Initially, the union conceptualised this work as a single job, but later realised that it was far better to split the work into two roles: 'experts' who were workplace delegates and substantively answered questions; and 'admins' who were union officials who undertook the technical work of preparing the information for the chatbot. This division of backend labour had an empowering impact on workers at both ends of the chatbot, and saw new leaders emerge and develop who felt comfortable engaging in activism in a digital environment.

## **3. AI can help unions map workplaces, especially in hard-to-organise industries**

The value of the chatbot was not simply as a question-answering tool, but rather a mechanism that helped organisers better understand who was asking questions in workplaces, and what the key issues were for workers. Being able to map issues in this way helped organisers to prepare for workplace visits. They were also very valuable in industries where workers did not share a physical workplace, such as home care, allowing the union to pick up on and organise around issues that might have otherwise been elusive. As one UWU official reflected

*It changes the capacity to have online organising conversations through the app and web portal.  
It's the capacity to identify issues and activists and potential leaders online through the kind of questions that are coming in, in a really streamlined way*

Overall, there appear to be potential benefits to unions engaging with AI, but only if they do so with a preparedness to consciously redesign it around an organising philosophy and see it as an additional tool in human organising, rather than view it as a cost- or labour-saving measure.