

# Does Modernizing Union Administrative Practices Promote or Hinder Union Revitalization? A Comparative Study of US, UK and Australian Unions

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## Abstract

*Can a union be both democratic and administratively efficient, or are these goals always at odds? Building on the Webbs' focus on this critical question, this article analyses and compares the changing administrative policies and practices of US, UK and Australian trade unions over a 25-year period. We conducted surveys of unions in all three countries to gather information on union policies and practices involving the unions' human resources, hiring, budgeting and strategic planning. Using these novel longitudinal data, we contribute to industrial relations scholarship by showing that unions have increasingly adopted formal, systematic practices in these areas. The article is grounded in theory and also has practical relevance given the important implications that our findings may have for the revitalization of unions in the three countries and beyond.*

## 1. Introduction

Can a union be both democratic and administratively efficient, or are these goals always at odds? Beatrice and Sidney Webb identified this critical issue facing unions a century ago in their classic books *Industrial Democracy* (1918)

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and *History of Trade Unionism* (1920) when they asked whether unions could unite ‘efficient administration with popular control’. Since then, this dualism has been revisited by many other observers of unions, including Bach and Givan (2008), Barbash (1968), Child *et al.* (1973), Muste (1928), Willman and Cave (1994) as well as Bourguignon and Yon (2018).

The hostile environment and the aggressive attacks from political and economic adversaries that unions have faced over several decades have precipitated major declines in union membership and in the role unions play in many advanced industrial countries. This has sparked much discussion about new strategies for revitalizing, and even transforming, the labour movement. Union leaders, and those who study unions, have identified a range of revitalization strategies, many of which involve ‘directly or indirectly, ... a new emphasis on rank and file participation or mobilization ...’ (Turner and Hurd 2001:10). These include greater membership involvement at the grassroots level in organizing, bargaining and political action. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the key role that a union’s internal administrative practices might play in the revitalization process.

Against this background, we address three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the patterns and trends in union administrative practices?

RQ2: What has caused these patterns and trends?

RQ3: Are such patterns and trends likely to contribute to, or detract from, union efforts at revitalization?

These questions are important because unions are still significant institutions in key labour markets in many countries, including the three countries on which this article focuses: the USA, UK and Australia. As suggested by the varieties of capitalism literature (Bamber *et al.* 2016; Frege and Kelly 2004; Hall and Soskice 2001), the three countries might appear to be similar as English-speaking liberal-market economies which have adopted neoliberal economic policies and have adversarial traditions of industrial relations. However, on closer inspection, there are important differences between the three countries’ labour markets, including the structure of unions.

The USA has a legacy of industry-based ‘business unionism’, while unions in the UK and Australia are more explicitly involved in politics to the extent that they each created a Labour or Labor Party to represent their interests in the political process. Nonetheless, the density and role of unions has generally declined in recent decades in all three countries. One of a number of factors that has contributed to union decline is the increasing opposition to unions by right-leaning governments. An example of their opposition has been their increasing demands that unions disclose information about their operations and finances.

This article reports the results of a unique longitudinal study of the administrative policies and practices of US, UK and Australian unions over a 25-year period beginning in 1990. The authors conducted surveys of national unions in the three countries that gathered information on individual union

policies and practices involving human resources (HR) management, hiring, budgeting and strategic planning.

The findings from the most recent surveys, compared with the results of earlier surveys and other sources, indicate that unions in all three countries have increasingly adopted modern, formal and systematic management practices. In addition, we find evidence that these changes are likely to result in greater organizational efficiency and effectiveness in the unions that implement them, while also helping unions to be more strategic, and less reactive, while addressing the challenges they face. Importantly, we find no evidence to suggest that modernizing administrative practices reduces the effectiveness of unions in representing the interests of their members.

After summarizing our findings in more detail, the article considers implications for membership engagement and union revitalization.

## **2. Changing administrative practices in US, UK and Australian unions**

Unions in the three countries grew rapidly in the early to mid-twentieth century. In each country, this growth arose against the background of the tumultuous events of the 1930s and 1940s, including the great depression, war-time mobilization and the expansion of public-sector employment. In Australia, union growth was also facilitated by the development of federal and state arbitration systems. Before the mid-twentieth century, the larger unions in each country employed only a few professionals (e.g. lawyers, economists, communications specialists and accountants). However, most unions employed staff who tended to be generalists, and managed them in an *ad hoc*, informal manner (Wilensky 1956).

By the 1960s and 1970s, major unions in all three countries had grown into organizations with large payrolls, diverse expenditures and a greater need for specialist staff. In an article, 'American Unions: From Protest to Going Concern,' Barbash (1968) noted the growing number of professional staff in US unions. Willman *et al.* (1993) documented the same phenomenon in British unions. Similarly, in Australia, Matthews (1968) found that the larger unions had begun to appoint research and other specialist staff, a move attributed to the increased volume and sophistication of work needed to advocate successfully at arbitration tribunals. Nevertheless, despite the growth of their staff, most unions did little to professionalize their internal management processes. For instance, unions generally did not adopt written HR policies, systematic cost-control, budgeting practices, strategic planning or the evaluation of programs and activities.

In the 1970s and 1980s, observers criticized unions with regard to their failure to adopt modern management practices. Such observers characterized union leaders, in general, as being ineffective administrators who focused primarily on political and industrial goals. Many unions tended to hire staff from within, generally requiring applicants for employment, even for specialist positions, to be current members of the union. Formal HR policies were rare and political patronage was common in hiring (Bok and Dunlop 1970).

TABLE 1  
 Union Membership and Union Density USA, UK and Australia, 1980, 2018

	USA		UK		Australia	
	1990	2018	1990	2018	1990	2018
Total union membership (millions)	20.1	14.7	12.6	6.3	2.5	1.5
Union density (% workforce who are union members)	23.3	10.5	50	23	50	15

Source: US: Hirsch and Macpherson (2020); UK: Gov.UK (2018); AUS: Gilfillan and McGann (2018).

The *ad hoc* employment practices of unions sometimes included favouritism and discrimination. These were among the factors that prompted some unions' employees to unionize (Clark 1989). Financial practices in many unions were little more than post-expenditure review, a practice later termed the 'credit card syndrome' (Weil 1994). As late as the 1970s, union budgeting and strategic planning were the exception, not the rule, in most US-based unions (Dunlop 1990). A similar situation prevailed in the UK and Australia.

The 1980s marked a turning point for US, UK and Australian unions. The decade saw the deregulation of major industries, increases in globalization that included more imports and 'offshoring' and more hostile attitudes towards unions on the part of employers and right-wing politicians. Unions experienced significant membership losses and related declines in revenue. This was particularly the case in the USA and UK as unions were confronted by the anti-union policies of Reaganism and Thatcherism (Willman *et al.* 1993). Such unfavourable conditions for unions continued into the twenty-first century. Australian unions endured similar losses and declines since the 1990s, as they also faced increasingly aggressive employer actions, as well as several anti-union, right-wing coalition governments after 1996 (Bowden 2011).

Although total union density had been declining in the USA since the late 1950s, the drop accelerated in recent decades, falling from 23.3 per cent in 1980 to 10.5 per cent in 2018 (Hirsch and Macpherson 2020). UK density peaked at approximately 50 per cent in 1980 and fell to 23 per cent in 2018 (Gov.UK 2019). In Australia, union density fell even more, from approximately 50 per cent in 1980 to only 15 per cent in 2018 (ABS 2018).

Union membership also fell dramatically during this period in Australia, the UK and the USA (see Table 1). This resulted in declining dues revenue that caused unions in all three countries to experience major financial challenges. These challenges were a major factor in a wave of mergers and consolidations across all three labour movements as smaller unions, in particular, found it increasingly difficult to survive.

In the USA, for example, between 1995 and 2007, the Communications Workers merged with or absorbed two unions, the Teamsters merged with three unions and the United Steelworkers with four (Ashack 2008; United Steelworkers 2005). The major unions in the textile and apparel industries, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) and

the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) merged in 1995 to form the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE). In 2004, UNITE merged with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) to form UNITE HERE. In 2009, a large number of local unions broke away from UNITE HERE to form a new SEIU affiliate Workers United.

The two largest unions in the UK, UNISON and Unite the Union, were also formed by mergers. Three public sector unions, the National and Local Government Officers Association, National Union of Public Employees and Confederation of Health Service Employees, merged in 1993 to form UNISON (Terry 1996). Unite was born from a merger of Amicus with the Transport and General Workers' Union. These two unions were themselves formed by earlier union mergers (Unite 2019).

Between 1987 and 1996, the Australian labour movement underwent 'a structural reorganization on a scale unparalleled in its history' (Hose and Rimmer 2002). In 2018, two of Australia's most militant unions, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Maritime Union merged with the Textile, Clothing, and Footwear Union to form the second biggest union in Australia — the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union of Australia (CFMMEU). It has been called a militant super union (Marin-Guzman 2018).

Most unions facing economic challenges have also cut costs to deal with financial shortfalls. These have ranged from minimizing travel costs to reducing the number of offices and the frequency of conventions and other large meetings. But the greatest opportunities for savings involve 'people costs', that is, the salaries and other employment costs of union employees. One expert has estimated that such costs account for 50 per cent of a union's total costs (Rau 2012); another scholar has put that figure at as high as 70 per cent. (Weil 1994). Not surprisingly, labour organizations have cut back on services to their members as they reduced their staff. Many individual unions in the USA, UK and Australia have downsized their staff through layoffs or early retirement programs (e.g. Bamber 2017–2019; Bamber and Cockfield 2017; Clark *et al.* 2009–2011; MacGillis 2009; Mufson 2017).

In this article, we analyse the extent to which unions have adopted an additional strategy to deal with the challenges they have faced since the 1990s. That strategy involves becoming more effective and efficient as organizations by using more sophisticated and systematic hiring, HR, budgeting and planning practices to ensure that their declining financial resources are used as effectively as possible.

### **3. Literature on the dual challenges of union governance**

The Webbs characterized the earliest UK unions as 'primitive' democracies, member-driven organizations premised on 'the most childlike faith... that "what concerns all should be decided by all"' (Webb and Webb 1918: 8).

Starting out as clubs ‘of the most rudimentary type’, these early unions soon encountered forces that demanded they depart from their democratic practices to be effective. In an early recognition of two crucial aspects of union governance — representativeness and effectiveness — Webb and Webb (1918) wrote that, an ‘examination of [the unions]’ evolutionary process’ could “... give us valuable hints towards the solution ... of the problem of uniting efficient administration with popular control” (1918: 15).

These early observers of unions went on to identify as a first formative pressure on unions ‘the exigencies of their warfare with the employers’, conflict demanding that unions begin delegating power, adopting rules of secrecy and making and executing rapid decisions. Thus, the tailors’ union in England developed ‘two constitutions, one for peace, and one for war’ (1918: 8–9). With these comments, the Webbs acknowledged the need for unions to be simultaneously concerned with representativeness and effectiveness, not only in their internal union governance, but also in the external life of the union as it confronted employers on behalf of its members.

Since the pioneering work of the Webbs, others have also affirmed the dual needs still inherent in the much larger unions of later years. Echoing the Webbs, Muste observed that,

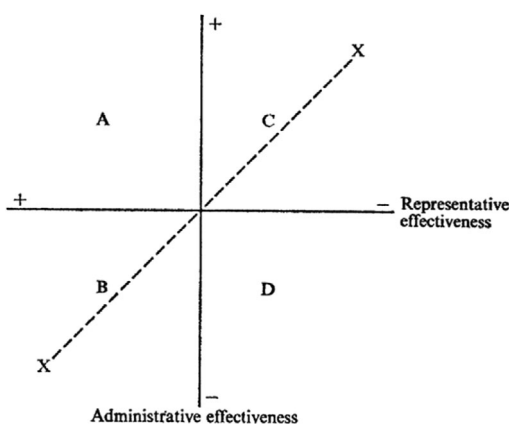
[T]he trade union seeks to combine within itself two extremely divergent types of social structure, that of an army, and that of a democratic town meeting ... But the trade union army elects its own generals ... [and] votes on the declaration of war and on the terms of armistice and peace ... Imagine the conflict in the soul of a union official who must have the attitude and discharge the functions at one and the same time of both a general and a chairman of a debating society. (Muste 1928: 332–333)

Subsequently, UK scholars Child *et al.* presented a ‘framework for union effectiveness’ that identified two facets of union performance: administrative effectiveness and representative effectiveness (1973). This framework takes the form of a graph and is shown in Figure 1. Its x-axis portrays a union’s degree of representative effectiveness (points on the left of the x-axis represent high effectiveness, to the right, low); the y-axis depicts a union’s administrative effectiveness.

Referring to the diagonal line, and adapting Michels’ ‘iron law of oligarchy’, Child *et al.* observed, ‘[t]he classical Michelsian argument suggests that unions would be found at some point along the single dimension X — X in Figure 1; as their administrative apparatus becomes more effective so their degree of effective representation declines’ (1973: 80). Pointing to experiences of various UK unions in the mid-twentieth century, Child *et al.* gave examples of how external changes had encouraged those organizations to adopt changes altering their mix of representativeness and administrative effectiveness.

Willman and Cave (1994) used a version of the Child *et al.* framework to analyse UK unions during the 1980s, a period that saw assaults on labour on many fronts. They found that ‘... union strategy involves, within the idiosyncratic circumstance of each union, the reconciliation of the two

FIGURE 1  
A Framework for Union Effectiveness



Source: Child *et al.* 1970.

rationalities [administrative and representative]' (1994: 398). The choices confronting unions, they wrote, involve 'trade-offs between representative and administrative rationality' (1994: 398).

To illustrate, they speculated about the type of union that might occupy each quadrant in Figure 1. Quadrant A, characterized by high effectiveness in both dimensions, would be where unions with 'effective management' would be situated. Quadrant B represents the highly democratic, but administratively unsophisticated, union. In their view, this is where the 'expanding' (i.e. growing) version of the Webbs' primitive union would fall. These authors posited that 'business unions' represented the kinds that would fall into the C quadrant, where administrative rationality would dominate, and representative rationality would be ignored. In Quadrant D, the worst of all worlds for a union, they placed 'the union in crisis' and described it as a likely target for merger or absorption (Willman and Cave 1994: 398).

In 2000, Voss and Sherman published a study of the process of union revitalization at an inflection point in the recent life of the US labour movement. Five years earlier, John Sweeney had ascended to the presidency of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), with his administration strongly and repeatedly urging affiliates to move away from their history of 'business' or 'servicing' unionism to an 'organizing' model of unionism. In the years that followed, Voss and Sherman examined a sample of local unions to determine what caused some, but not others, to transform themselves from conservative, servicing organizations into more strategic, militant, tactically innovative, organizing unions. Focusing on 'what differentiates more and less transformed locals', they found that the most fully transformed locals experienced a combination of the same three influences: (a) an internal political crisis that produced

new leadership, (b) ‘an influx of outsiders’ with a record of activism in other social movements and (c) affiliation with international unions that encouraged transformation by providing helpful training, funds and other resources. They also found that the first of the three factors — the arrival of new leadership — sometimes resulted from an imposed trusteeship, as distinguished from a groundswell of membership demand for reform (2000: 333–35). Similarly, the second and third factors — the arrival of outsiders and the provision of international resources — brought to bear factors from outside and above the local union, not ‘from the bottom up’ (2000: 337).

As mentioned, in recent decades, some industrial relations scholars have focused on what unions can do to develop and implement more effective representation strategies as a key to revitalizing themselves and addressing the challenges they face (McAlevey 2016). But, as suggested in our literature review, union leaders also face the challenge of effectively and efficiently administering the complex organizations that they head.

In the extensive literature on unions, internal management practices have generally been seen as less important than bargaining, representational and campaigning work. In their formative years, unions tended to see recruiting and representing members as the priorities. At that stage in the union’s life, structure and administration tended to be simple and reactive to ensure the union was not impeded in its primary goal of recruiting members and effectively representing them (Dunlop 1990: xi).

Observations and reports also suggest that, in the past, unions that developed into more mature organizations with adequate resources continued to see internal management practices as a low priority (Gray 1981). Clark *et al.* (1998) found that many unions during the high-growth era of the 1950s through the 1980s operated with relatively unsophisticated HR management and budgeting practices. This was also generally the case in UK and Australian unions (Bamber 2017–2019; Bamber and Cockfield 2017).

#### **4. Research methods: data collection and analysis**

In 1990, we asked 110 US-based national and international unions to complete a questionnaire about their internal management policies and practices.<sup>1</sup> Forty-eight unions returned completed questionnaires for a response rate of 44 per cent. In 1993, we adapted this instrument for a British context and sent it to 86 unions in the UK. Sixty-one completed a questionnaire — a 71 per cent response rate.

In 2010, we again asked 60 US-based unions to complete a questionnaire about their internal management policies and practices.<sup>2</sup> Thirty-five of the 60 unions completed and returned surveys (a response rate of 58 per cent). In 2011, we also sent questionnaires to 56 Trade Union Congress (TUC)-affiliated, and 40 non-affiliated, unions in the UK. Forty-six unions returned questionnaires — a 48 per cent response rate. In 2015, we surveyed Australian unions to gather information about their management practices. On our



behalf, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) sent an online survey, again adapted from the US instrument, to the 47 ACTU-affiliated unions. Thirty-one unions answered the survey (a response rate of 66 per cent). Each version of the survey included questions on HR management, budgeting and strategic planning. In each country, the union respondents were asked to answer questions in reference to head office professional staff.<sup>3,4</sup>

While our surveys were very helpful in mapping trends, and in providing answers to ‘what’ and ‘when’ questions about policies and procedures, they do not fully answer ‘why’ questions. For this reason, we supplemented our quantitative surveys with interviews of high-level administrative staff (including union human resource directors and executive assistants to top union officers). These interviews helped us to interpret many of the survey findings. Interviews were conducted with a small number of union officials in each country.

In the USA, we interviewed staff from 10 national and international unions. In the UK and Australia, we interviewed a smaller number of officials. In each case, the interviewees were high ranking, very knowledgeable and had long experience in unions. They were able to share well-informed insights into administrative practices in other unions as well as in their own union. The officials interviewed represented a diversity of sectors and membership (industrial, craft, professional, public sector, etc.) and included several of the largest unions in each country, as well as a few smaller unions. These very valuable interviews have helped the authors to better understand and triangulate the empirical results of the surveys.

## **5. Findings**

Our findings suggest that, since the 1990s, most unions in the USA and the UK have systematically adopted more formal and modern administrative practices. After considering earlier studies of Australian unions, we infer from our Australian survey and other evidence that there has also been an increased formalization, similar to the trends in US and UK unions.

### *Written HR Policies*

Table 2 presents the findings from the 1990/1993 and 2010/ 2011/2015 surveys regarding the percentage of the larger US, UK and Australian unions that indicated they have formal, written HR policies for their headquarters staff. The findings show that in 1990, a majority of US unions had written policies in only one of seven HR areas (discipline and discharge); by 2010, a majority of US unions had written policies in five of 10 areas. The data also show that between 1990 and 2010, there was an increase in the percentage of US unions with formal policies in all seven areas.

For UK unions, Table 2 shows that in 1993 a majority of UK unions completing the survey had formal written policies for head office professional staff in four of seven HR areas (equal opportunity/affirmative action,

TABLE 2  
Written HR Policies for Head Office Staff, US, UK and Australian Unions with 50,000+ Members (Percentages)

	<i>USA</i>		<i>UK</i>		<i>Australia</i>
	<i>1990</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2015</i>
Equal opportunity/affirmative action	46	58	86	75	69
Discipline and discharge	54	73	86	88	77
Hiring	44	58	64	75	54
Performance appraisal	34	39	14	50	46
Promotion	32	42	50	50	62
Salary review	37	39	79	75	62
Training	29	46	50	75	69
Ethics	n.a.	73	n.a.	38	38
Sexual harassment	n.a.	77	n.a.	75	85
Workplace privacy	n.a.	46	n.a.	75	69
	<i>n = 27</i>	<i>n = 26</i>	<i>n = 14</i>	<i>n = 8</i>	<i>n = 13</i>

discipline, discharge, hiring and salary review); in addition, half of the unions had formal policies in two other areas (training and promotion). Between 1993 and 2011, the percentage of unions with formal written policies for headquarters professional staff increased in four of seven HR areas. Further, the 2011 survey found that a majority of UK unions had written policies in seven of 10 areas, and 50 per cent had written policies in two additional areas.

We collected data on written HR policies for union staff in Australian unions in 2015. Results were generally comparable with the data collected for US unions in 2010 and UK unions in 2011. Notably, a majority of Australian unions had written HR policies for head office staff in eight of 10 areas, more than either US or UK unions.

In sum, the data indicate that unions in all three countries have moved towards more formal, systematic HR policies for head office staff. The reasons seem readily apparent. More formal, written HR policies may result in less job dissatisfaction and lower turnover; that in turn helps the union retain its best and most experienced staff. They also commit the union to meeting consistent standards that unions themselves demand of employers.

### *Hiring Practices and Policies*

The surveys included questions about union hiring practices. As indicated in Table 3, we found that only a small percentage of respondent unions in the USA, the UK and Australia still impose the once common requirement that applicants for headquarters staff jobs belong to, or hold office in, the union. The most recent survey results also indicated that, in contrast to their traditional 'hire-from-within' policy, a very high percentage of unions in all three countries (86–88 per cent) may hire people for headquarters jobs who have no previous experience working for a union.

TABLE 3  
 Union Hiring Practices: Qualifications and Recruiting Sources for Head Office Professional Staff, US, UK and Australian Unions with +50,000 Members

Percent of unions that:	USA 2010	UK 2011	Australia 2015
Require current membership as a qualification for appointment	27	0	13
Require prior election or appointment to union office at some level as a qualification	8	13	7
Hire staff who have no previous experience working for a union	88	88	86
Hire staff who have worked for other unions	92	88	93
Require specific degrees or training	60	63	80
A degree is an important consideration in hiring	85	63	100
	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 8	<i>n</i> = 10–15

Table 3 indicates that most of the unions in the three countries responding to the survey hire head office staff who have previously worked for other unions. A high percentage of unions in each country hire such people for their head office (92 per cent in the USA, 88 per cent in the UK, and 93 per cent in Australia).

Certainly, staff need to be knowledgeable about the issues specific to the sectors or occupations in which the members of the union work. But that knowledge can be readily acquired if the person has the technical skills and background required of professional staff. It is, therefore, not surprising that a union might hire a legal, political or communications professional who has worked in another union.

Table 3 also indicates that substantial majorities of the respondent unions from the USA (60 per cent), the UK (63 per cent) and Australia (80 per cent) require specific degrees or training as a qualification for appointment to the head office. However, US and Australian unions appear to place a greater value on degrees than UK unions when making hiring decisions. Eighty-five per cent of US respondents and 100 per cent of Australian respondents indicated that a degree is an important consideration in hiring such professional staff, while a smaller percentage of UK unions (63 per cent) placed similar value on degrees in the staff-hiring process.

In recent years, as unions have faced more complex challenges across all of their operations — economic, financial, political, legal and organizational — the types of skills, knowledge and experience union staff need to address these challenges have also changed. Specifically, the traditional promoted-from-the-ranks approach to developing staff has been less and less able to meet the needs of modern unions. They have increasingly had to look outside their own membership to find professionals to conduct the union’s work. An occupational group of ‘union professionals’ has emerged; this group comprises people who spend much of their careers in professional jobs with unions. Many have completed degrees. These people may be hired from

TABLE 4  
HR Manager and/or Department, US, UK and Australian Unions (Percentages)

	<i>USA</i>		<i>UK</i>		<i>Australia</i>
	<i>1990</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2015</i>
Percentage of unions with an HR director/department	42	56	28	24	21
	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 36	<i>n</i> = 61	<i>n</i> = 42	<i>n</i> = 28

TABLE 5  
HR Manager and/or Department, US, UK and Australian Unions by Membership Size (Percentages)

	<i>USA</i>		<i>UK</i>		<i>Australia</i>	
	<i>2010</i>		<i>2011</i>		<i>2015</i>	
	<50,000	>+50,000	<50,000	>+50,000	<50,000	>+50,000
Percentage of unions with an HR director or department	10	73	12	75	15	29
	<i>n</i> = 10	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 34	<i>n</i> = 8	<i>n</i> = 13	<i>n</i> = 14

outside the labour movement, but in many cases, they move between unions during their careers.

A leader of a major UK union explained that the old rules that specified only members could be considered for union jobs started to change when unions began to adopt information technology (IT). He went on to say:

We couldn't get IT specialists from within, so we had to re-think that all staff had to be members. Until 2004, we used to pay external lawyers to represent members in legal cases. We were spending £5 million on this every year. Then we appointed our own lawyers which saved us a huge amount of money. We couldn't have done so if we still had the old rules. The then General Secretary said we needed to professionalize everything that we do. (Bamber 2017–2019)

### *HR Director and/or Department*

The surveys asked if the union had an HR director and/or department. Tables 4 and 5 present the results from those questions. Table 4 compares the findings for US and the UK unions over time. In the two decades between the 1990 and 2010 surveys, the percentage of US unions that had an HR director and/or department increased from 42 per cent to 56 per cent. In the UK, the percentage decreased slightly, from 28 to 24 per cent. Australian unions reported the lowest percentage of unions employing a HR director and/or department in 2015, with 21 per cent of unions respondents reporting they had one or the other.

The increase in the employment of HR directors and/or departments by American unions is consistent with their increasing use of formal, written

TABLE 6  
Use of Consultants in US, UK and Australian Unions with 50,000+ Members

<i>Percent of unions that use external consultants to assist with:</i>	<i>USA 2010</i>	<i>UK 2011</i>	<i>Australia 2015</i>
Computer services and IT	80	88	80
Economic analysis	36	0	53
Financial planning	26	13	33
Containment of union's benefit costs	48	50	–
Organizational analysis	20	0	33
Personnel recruitment	19	13	47
Public relations/communications	52	25	73
Training	32	75	67
Political work	36	0	27
Lobbying	36	0	20
Travel	46	13	27
Legal	84	75	80
Corporate campaigns	28	0	27
Organizing techniques and strategies	16	0	33
Leadership development	60	50	60
Occupational health and safety	8	38	0
	<i>n = 25</i>	<i>n = 8</i>	<i>n = 15</i>

HR policies and the finding that they are broadening their criteria for hiring professional staff. Similar policies have been adopted by UK and Australian unions; hence the lower percentages of those unions with an HR director/department seems surprising.

Table 5 analyses the most recent surveys to determine whether larger unions are more likely to have an HR department and/or director. The data show that 10 per cent of the smaller US unions who responded to the 2010 survey had an HR director and/or department. By contrast, 73 per cent of larger US unions had an HR director and/or department. Similarly, among smaller UK unions who responded in 2011, 12 per cent had an HR director and/or department. The use of HR specialists rose to 75 per cent for larger UK unions. These data suggest substantial similarity in the use of HR expertise by US and UK unions, something obscured in the Table 4 data by the substantially larger proportion of smaller unions among the UK respondents, compared to US respondents. While the analysis of unions by membership size shows that larger Australian unions are also more likely than smaller ones to employ an HR director or have an HR department, it also reiterates the earlier finding that this practice is much less common among larger Australian unions than it is among larger unions in the USA and UK.

### *Use of Consultants*

Our most recent surveys asked unions in all three countries about their use of external consultants to supplement the expertise of in-house staff. Table 6 indicates the percentage of unions that employed consultants to provide various services. The results suggest that while unions in the USA, UK and

TABLE 7  
 Budgeting and Strategic Planning Practices in US, UK and Australian Unions by Membership Size

<i>Percent of unions that:</i>	<i>USA 2010</i>		<i>UK 2011</i>		<i>Australia 2015</i>	
	<i>&lt;50,000</i>	<i>≥50,000</i>	<i>&lt;50,000</i>	<i>≥50,000</i>	<i>&lt;50,000</i>	<i>≥50,000</i>
Develop an annual budget with planned expenditure by function and department	89	72	100	100	77	93
	<i>n = 9</i>	<i>n = 25</i>	<i>n = 36</i>	<i>n = 8</i>	<i>n = 13</i>	<i>n = 15</i>
Employ a formal strategic planning process	75	64	94	89	69	93
	<i>n = 8</i>	<i>n = 25</i>	<i>n = 36</i>	<i>n = 8</i>	<i>n = 13</i>	<i>n = 15</i>

Australia used consultants in many areas, US and Australian unions employed external consultants to a much greater degree than UK unions. A higher percentage of US and Australian unions used consultants in 12 of the 16 areas than UK unions, respectively, included in the 2010/2011/2015 surveys. The two areas in which unions most often used consultants were identical for unions from the three countries — legal work and IT.

None of the UK unions surveyed reported using consultants in economic analysis, organizational analysis, political work, lobbying, organizing techniques and strategies and corporate campaigns. Interviews with UK union officials suggest that this reflected a generally negative view of consultants in these unions. In part, this was because of their impression that when management consultants were engaged by employers, redundancies among union members were a typical consequence. Therefore, union leaders tend to see consultants as inimical, at least in many areas, to their members' interests so it might seem hypocritical for unions themselves to use consultants (Bamber 2017–2019).

### *Budgeting and Strategic Planning*

The survey also included items focusing on the budgeting and strategic planning activities of unions. It asked unions if they developed an annual budget with planned expenditures. As Table 7 illustrates, in 2010, 72 per cent of larger US unions engaged in this practice, while an even greater percentage of the smaller unions (89 per cent) did. All of the UK unions (100 per cent), big and small, reported in 2011 that they developed a formal budget each year. In 2015, 93 per cent of larger Australian unions, and 77 per cent of smaller ones, had a formal budget.

The survey data regarding the use of a formal strategic planning process are also included in Table 7. The results indicate that strategic planning is relatively common in unions of all sizes in all three countries. It is particularly common among larger UK unions (89 per cent) and smaller ones (94 per cent). A smaller percentage of US unions engage in strategic planning than in the

TABLE 8  
Budgeting and Strategic Planning Practices in US, UK and Australian Unions

<i>Percent of unions that:</i>	<i>USA</i>		<i>UK</i>		<i>Australia</i>
	<i>1990</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2015</i>
Develop an annual budget with planned expenditure by function and department	66 <i>n</i> = 46	78 <i>n</i> = 34	56 <i>n</i> = 55	100 <i>n</i> = 44	86 <i>n</i> = 28
Employ a formal strategic planning process	40 <i>n</i> = 46	70 <i>n</i> = 33	36 <i>n</i> = 55	94 <i>n</i> = 44	82 <i>n</i> = 28

UK (64 per cent of larger US unions and 75 per cent of smaller ones). The size of membership appeared to make a much bigger difference in the area of strategic planning in Australian unions. Ninety-three per cent of larger unions engaged in this process, while only 69 per cent of smaller ones did so.

How do the results regarding budgeting and strategic planning compare longitudinally? As Table 8 indicates, the percentage of US unions using a formal budget increased slightly between 1990 and 2010. The percentage of UK unions using a formal budgeting approach increased substantially between 1993 and 2011. Only a slight majority of UK unions responding to the 1993 survey (56 per cent) used a formal budgeting process; by 2011, almost all respondent unions (97 per cent) were using such an approach. This is a substantial change in less than two decades.

The results concerning the use of formal strategic planning are similar to those for budgeting. There was a major increase in the use of strategic planning among US unions responding to the survey from 40 per cent in 1990 to 70 per cent in 2010, while the increase for UK union respondents was even bigger: from 36 per cent in 1993 to 94 per cent in 2011.

## 6. Discussion

The first question this study sought to answer was ‘What are the patterns and trends in union administrative practices?’ Our findings above are clear. Between 1990 and the 2010s, most unions in the USA, the UK and Australia adopted more formal, systematic, efficient and modern administrative practices.

The answer to our second RQ — What has caused these patterns and trends? — is less clear because these patterns and trends seem to reflect a convergence of several factors. The first factor is necessity: all three countries have introduced legal requirements that unions meet increasingly demanding financial reporting rules. The level of detail and specificity of the reporting required swings back and forth over time, depending on the political party in power. Right-leaning governments are typically more demanding in what they require unions to disclose than more union-friendly left-leaning governments. For example, in the USA, the reporting requirements when Republicans

were in power may have forced unions to adopt more systematic budget and financial processes (Forsyth 2000, 2017; Lund 2009; Lund and McLuckie 2007; Penn 2017; Punch 2016; Towers 1989).

The second factor is the passage of laws and the handing down of court decisions that place greater scrutiny on employers and their workplaces in areas such as discrimination and sexual harassment. The increasingly greater expectations placed on employers over the last several decades in each of the countries include requiring unions, when acting as employers, to create more formal HR policies in these areas (ACAS 2014; Fenton 2018; HREOC 2008).

Third, Weber's classic work on bureaucracy posits that organizations develop from 'traditional, informal bureaucracies' to 'modern, formal bureaucracies' because the latter approach is superior to the former approach. And, as organizations try to survive, or even advance, over time they recognize the advantages and efficiencies of modern bureaucratic practices over the *ad hoc* approach of traditional bureaucracies (Weber 1958; Constat 1958). Given that many unions in the three countries included in this study have been struggling to survive for the last 30 years, it makes sense that unions would implement changes in their administrative practices to try to increase, or at least maintain, their viability. This suggests the changes are part of a larger effort to revitalize unions as organizations.

A fourth related factor that may help explain the changes in union administrative practices in the USA, the UK and Australia is the higher education levels of top union leaders and staff in all three countries. A case can be made that these leaders' increasing levels of higher education have made them more familiar, and more comfortable, with modern administrative practices than their predecessors. Thus, as these leaders think about how to revitalize their unions, modernizing administrative practices appears to be one of a number of strategies adopted.

National unions largely formed in the mid- to late-nineteenth century in the USA, UK, and Australia. For most of their history, the labour movements of these countries were dominated by blue-collar construction or industrial unions. This was the case until the latter decades of the twentieth century when service, government and professional unions became more prominent. The leadership of the blue-collar unions generally reflected the background of the union's membership, with most national leaders rising from the occupations they represented. This 'up from the ranks' tradition meant that most leaders had little formal education beyond high school (other than perhaps apprenticeships). While they acquired 'on-the-job' training in union administration, they received little exposure to the kind of critical thinking and analytic skills gained through a university education. Nor would they have had even the most basic exposure to organizational design, accounting and budgeting practices and other modern management methods (Margolis 2011).

The most recent generation of national union leaders and top staff in all three countries are much more likely to have had at least some higher education than their predecessors. An analysis of the educational backgrounds



of the presidents of the 20 largest American unions in 1980 and in 2010 (when the first and the most recent surveys of US administrative practices were undertaken) reveals that in 1980 only three of the national presidents in office had earned college degrees (and two of those leaders were from teachers' unions where degrees were a requirement for entry into the profession).

In 2010, 12 of the 20 presidents of these unions held bachelor's degrees, a 400 per cent increase in just 30 years. Three of the top leaders' degrees were from elite Ivy League institutions (Yale, Penn and Cornell), while two had earned law degrees. Rich Trumka, President of the AFL-CIO, and former Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO and President of the United Mine Workers (UMW), has both an undergraduate degree in accounting and a law degree. His efforts to professionalize the administration of the labour organizations he led were undoubtedly influenced by his educational background.

A similar, but less comprehensive, analysis of the educational backgrounds of the current top leaders of the 10 largest unions in the UK and Australia reveals that bachelor's degrees are now more common among this group. Six of the 10 current general secretaries or equivalent of the largest UK unions hold a degree and three have earned a post-graduate degree. Among the 10 largest unions in Australia, seven of the 10 general secretaries or equivalent have earned a bachelor's degree, and two hold a postgraduate degree (Clark 2019).

Our third RQ was 'Are such patterns and trends likely to contribute to, or detract from, union efforts at revitalization?' Our evidence shows that the adoption of more formal, systematic, efficient and modern administrative practices, in general, has a positive impact on union revitalization efforts. We find no evidence that the formalization and modernization of these practices lead to less effective representation on the part of unions. Furthermore, several union leaders told us that improving their management had helped to arrest their decline in union density. For example, an Australian union leader said:

If we had not modernised our administrative practices, we would have lost even more members than we have lost. Our old practices were so amateurish that they could overstate our membership; they did not always link our stated membership numbers accurately with the dues that members had actually paid. We still included in our so-called membership, people who were no longer paying dues for instance if they had moved to a different industry, retired or even died. Our stated membership numbers are now much more accurate. (Bamber and Cockfield 2017)

One critical point in this regard is that 'people costs' account for at least half, or as much as 70 per cent, of a union's total expenditures. Like any service organization, a union's effectiveness is largely influenced by the efforts of its people. By formalizing HR practices, hiring more on merit than patronage and hiring more talent from outside the labour movement, unions may help to revitalize themselves in the ways indicated below.

Extrapolating from literature on HR practices in other types of organization (e.g. Huselid 1995), it is reasonable to expect that the formalization of HR policies in unions in the three countries may enhance organizational efficiency

and effectiveness. This may contribute to union revitalization through the development of a more skilled and focused union workforce (Rau 2012). We infer from our interviews that unions may benefit from higher employee morale and greater commitment as a result of the diminished favouritism and more consistent treatment that staff receive in unions that have sophisticated HR policies (Bamber 2017–2019; Bamber and Cockfield 2017; Clark *et al.* 2009–2011; Latif *et al.* 2015).

The advent of formal, systematic HR policies in areas such as discrimination, equal opportunity, sexual harassment, salary review, performance appraisal and workplace privacy has the potential to increase employee satisfaction. This may also decrease turnover of staff and the significant costs associated with losing and replacing employees.

Moreover, systematic hiring procedures that open the applicant pool to candidates outside the organization (another trend in union practice reported by respondents) can have two revitalizing effects. First, it increases the likelihood of finding the most qualified individuals who match the skills and knowledge unions require to achieve their planned outcomes. Second, the recruitment of talented ‘outsiders’ can produce a staff that is more diverse and more likely to be oriented to social justice objectives.

Our data suggest that in recent years unions in all three countries are recruiting more candidates for their professional staff from outside their own membership. While there is not yet much definitive work on the relative effectiveness of insiders versus external recruits, studies in the UK (Kelly and Heery 1994), the USA (Ganz *et al.* 2004) and Australia (Callus 1986) suggest the two types of candidates for union jobs may have contrasting characteristics and motivations, each of which benefit unions in different ways.

Evidence indicates that external recruitment results in a higher representation of women in staff positions in UK unions (Kelly and Heery 1994), a result the authors attribute to the shift from political considerations in hiring, to a focus on finding the best qualified candidate. Studies in the USA also show that women find greater opportunities for staff jobs when they bring special talents from the outside, as compared with their chances of being selected from inside (Gray 2001). In each country, outsiders were reported to have higher levels of education than insiders (Callus 1986; Ganz *et al.* 2004; Kelly and Heery 1994).

The motivation and attitudes of union staff may play an important role in the revitalization of unions. We infer from other research, and from our interviews with unions, that staff hired from outside the membership (often with a background of activism as students or working in social-movement organizations) were more likely than insiders to see the union as an instrument for attaining broad social goals. Outsiders may also tend to identify more with left-of-centre political causes (Kelly and Heery 1994). These findings are consistent with an earlier study of Australian union officials (Callus 1986) that found staff appointed from outside the union movement, while still committed to the values of the labour movement, also supported broader social issues and were more likely to be active in other interest groups concerned with

social or community interests. Outsiders tend to be more interested in wider social and economic issues than the more specific workplace issues that tend to motivate insiders. An experienced UK union leader mentioned ‘when we appointed full-time union tutors, they have often had academic backgrounds and had been left-wing student activists. They were generally more idealistic than those who have worked their way up from the shop floor’ (Bamber 2017–2019).

US experience suggests a similar outcome regarding open recruitment. One study found that outside recruits identify themselves as ‘social reformers’ drawn to union work as a means of attaining social justice, with a strong belief that ‘political work is the best way to make the world a better place’ (Ganz *et al.* 2004: 10). By contrast, insiders seem more likely to be motivated by a commitment to making life better for fellow workers and/or their own ethnic group or to achieve upward mobility for themselves. Such reports suggest that adding idealistic outsiders to staff may make a positive contribution to union revitalization by broadening union objectives and strengthening alliances with other social movements, something that has been a priority in the US labour movement in recent years. As mentioned, in a study of US local unions, Voss and Sherman identified the arrival of leaders with experience outside the labour movement as being associated with the revitalization of US unions at the local level (Voss and Sherman 2000).

On the other hand, there may be a downside to open recruitment in those unions which have traditionally filled all or most staff positions from within. Unions in all three countries depend heavily on volunteers, particularly at the local level where many members serve as unpaid officers, stewards, negotiators and political activists. To be sure, other local officials may receive pay for their local union work. But in either case, in the past, the work of these individuals held out a possible reward in the form of escape from one’s regular job and promotion to paid employment with the union. The reduction of such opportunities when there is more open staff recruitment may have a negative impact on the motivation of members to participate and volunteer. This could detract from revitalization.

Open recruitment also raises questions about the representativeness of union leaders. Bramble (2000) is critical of the increased significance of outsiders in staff roles and, increasingly, in leadership positions. He argues that their lack of experience in the industry/sector and their higher level of education make them less representative of the membership. He contends this reflects, and reinforces, declining member involvement.

Unions representing relatively high-paid occupations (airline pilots, medical doctors, professors, engineers, professional athletes, etc.) appear to use an alternate model of staff recruitment. In such occupations, union staff positions are often filled with external ‘experts’ as members usually prefer to stay with the careers for which they were trained, not least because they would likely suffer a pay cut if they were to work for the union. One large UK union reported ‘our more professional and higher-skilled members generally don’t seek to become officials since our officials are paid less than our more

professional and higher-skilled members are already paid!' (Bamber 2017–2019).

The practice of recruiting university graduates (as the AFL-CIO, TUC and ACTU organizing initiatives do) can precipitate tensions within unions (Rooks 2004). One study of the management practices of a large service union reported that hiring outside lawyers to negotiate contracts resulted in a legalistic approach not appropriate to the culture of some bargaining units. The study also criticized the use of consultants in corporate campaigns and in political action when activist members could be trained for these positions (Piore 1992).

Further research is needed to assess the organizational impact of open recruitment and the advantages and disadvantages of recruiting non-members to achieve the dual goals of organizational effectiveness and membership commitment. However, we infer that, on balance, open recruitment may be a positive development for unions.

In most organizations, it is necessary to budget scarce resources in relation to their goals and to engage in strategic planning to assess planned activity in light of opportunities and threats. Therefore, the widespread adoption of these practices by unions in all three countries, as reported in our surveys, may represent a step towards revitalization. Savings generated from improving financial management, budgeting and targeting of resources can be used for new initiatives and other union priorities. These 'freed resources' can also be used to support complementary organizations (e.g. student organizations, worker centres, ethnic coalitions, cross-border initiatives) that may promote innovation and revitalization among unions.

For example, the United Steelworkers, a large US industrial union, has faced steady membership decline since 1980. At first, the decline put significant pressure on the union's finances, resulting in significant layoffs in union staff and cutbacks in programs. Over the last two decades, the union has taken significant steps to improve its financial management practices. These practices have helped put the union on solid financial ground and enabled it to use its financial resources more efficiently. A result is that the union has freed up resources to pursue a number of innovations, including an alliance with collegiate athletes; a partnership with the Sierra Club and other organizations known as the Blue Green Alliance; organizing initiatives among university employees, including the growing complement of adjunct professors; and cross-border solidarity actions with such partner organizations as Los Mineros of Mexico, the Firestone Agricultural Workers of Liberia and Unite the Union of the UK (United Steelworkers 2005, 2008, 2008, 2014, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

As discussed earlier, governments in all three countries have introduced and enforced extensive legal regulation of unions record keeping and reporting. This fact alone makes systematic management practices and good governance in general, essential for unions. In addition, if unions are to retain the confidence of members, potential members and the wider public, they need to demonstrate to those members that they use union funds appropriately

and wisely by developing formal plans with budget allocations that can be monitored and evaluated. In an interview, a UK union leader opined that, 'like Caesar's wife, union leaders need to be beyond suspicion of malpractice or mismanagement regarding union funds' (Bamber 2017–2019).

In addition to their informal approaches to managing themselves in the past, unions were often more reactive than strategic in their approach to the challenges facing them. 'Putting out fires' or responding to urgent crises had become an implicit part of the job description for union officers and staff. Being focused on the immediate problems of the present does not leave much time for reflection and thinking strategically about the future. This can result in such organizations being buffeted by external events and the current context, rather than the controlling of their own destiny.

Strategic planning involves the setting of organization goals and the development of a plan of action to achieve those goals. The significant increase in strategic planning in US and UK unions between 1990 and 2010, and the reports that when the most recent surveys were conducted almost 70 per cent or more of unions in the USA, UK and Australia engaged in strategic planning, is a positive development. With fewer resources at their disposal, it is imperative that unions use the resources they have effectively if they are to survive. The results of the surveys in the three countries suggest they are doing this to a greater degree than in the past.

Whether modern management practices contribute to greater membership involvement and commitment is probably linked to the ways in which they are deployed. To the extent that members are consulted, or at least informed, about plans for the expenditure of their funds (the budget) and the rationale for the union's planned activities (strategic planning), membership commitment should be enhanced. Our survey did not focus on the *process* of adoption and implementation, but we infer from our interviews that at least some unions in the three countries are involving their members in developing their strategic plans. The extent of involvement and its impact is worth further research. Case studies of the administrative practices of major unions would be particularly helpful.

We have discussed how the modernization of particular administrative practices can help unions increase member engagement. We now return to the literature on the dual challenges of union governance, and more particularly, theoretical explanations of the relationship between the administrative and representational effectiveness of unions.

Much of this literature posits that there is a trade-off between these two functions. As pointed out earlier, Child *et al.* (1973) contend that as unions become more effective administratively, they become less effective in the area of representation (cf. Willman and Cave 1994). We do not, however, find support for this conflict in the introduction of more modern, more effective administrative practices in the three countries studied. Rather, we infer that the modernization of administrative practices in the US, UK and Australian unions is more likely to have a positive impact on unions' capacities to provide effective representation.

Regarding this point, a senior UK union staffer pointed out:

We have union officials who do not return calls when members phone for help with a dispute, even one that urgently needs sorting. But if we apply modern HRM practices with performance appraisal, we can try to improve the performance of such officials by giving them feedback as well as training or developing them. If that fails, we can discipline them and if necessary, move them on. But in the past, we never dismissed officials for incompetence! (Bamber 2017–2019)

The introduction of merit-based hiring practices, for example, allows unions to hire more technically skilled and highly educated staff, better equipping them with the capabilities they need to function in the increasingly challenging contexts they face. More formal HR policies may lead to higher satisfaction levels among staff and lower turnover, again something that could have a positive impact on representation. The increasing use of formal budgeting practices helps unions use the declining resources available to them more efficiently. Further, the adoption of strategic planning has significant potential for helping unions to improve their representation efforts. Strategic planning enables unions to align their human and financial resources with updated organizing, bargaining and political goals. These aspects of improved union administration suggest that more modern methods of administration may not only be compatible with union revitalization and representation in the long run, but may facilitate it.

To return to our RQs, this article has answered RQ1 by summarizing the patterns and trends in union administrative practices of unions in the three countries. It also provides evidence that sheds light on RQ2: what has caused these patterns and trends? In addition, our findings shed significant light on RQ3 (do such patterns and trends contribute to, or detract from, union efforts at revitalization). For example, having systematic administrative practices appears to help unions deploy their resources more effectively, as they may try to revitalize themselves. However, to be sustainable, such practices must also be well supported by rank-and-file unionists. More research in this area would be helpful, as would investigations that demonstrate whether these practices address such issues as favouritism, discrimination, overwork or other practices impeding union effectiveness.

Further, there are mixed signals about the relationship between revitalization efforts (new organizing and bargaining strategies, as well as the implementation of new administrative practices) and unions' membership density. In each country, certain unions have been trying to revitalize, while others have maintained the *status quo*. Some unions that have engaged in revitalization face much greater challenges than others. A nuanced assessment of the relationship between revitalization and membership density should distinguish between unions that are 'on the back foot' in occupations and sectors that have experienced long-term decline (e.g. in manufacturing) and unions in occupations and sectors that seem destined to grow (e.g. relatively skilled occupations in health services).

There are limitations to all research. The limitations of this study include that we conducted the survey only once in Australia. However, by drawing on earlier studies of unions there and on our interviews, we are confident that the Australian trends are broadly similar to those in the other two countries. A second limitation is that our surveys had relatively small numbers of respondents. Nevertheless, in each country, there is only a small population of national unions and our response rates were reasonable. When we discuss our findings with well-informed observers of unions in each country, they assure us that our findings broadly represent the trends. A third possible limitation is that not all of the unions that completed our surveys identified themselves, thus we cannot reliably track the results across given unions at each point in time. However, it would be difficult to make such a comparison even if we could identify all of the unions that completed the surveys. This is because of the many union mergers and consolidations in this period. Such mergers and consolidations have varied impacts on the unions as organizations, so comparing pre-merger with post-merger unions is problematic.

## **7. Conclusions**

Our research provides empirical evidence that national unions in the USA, UK and Australia have modernized their administrative practices, particularly in the areas of HR and financial management. These innovations are probably not unique to unions. Rather, management specialists have long recommended such changes on the basis of successful applications in a wide range of organizations (business, government and non-profit). Modern administrative practices should strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of any organization, including unions, as they confront declining membership and power.

Reported changes in union practices include: (a) the replacement of informal, *ad hoc* HR practices with formal, systematic HR policies and the hiring of HR managers to professionalize this area of administration; (b) a shift from largely, or exclusively, hiring union staff from within the membership, to open searches for the most qualified candidates, for instance, from other unions, social justice groups and university graduates; (c) improvements in financial practices that change unions from accounting for expenditures after the fact, to budgeting by function; (d) the introduction of strategic-planning processes that assess the challenges facing the union, and the context in which it operates, and systematically develop optimal responses and strategies to those challenges; and (e) the recruitment of expert consultants, not only for functions that are often outsourced (legal and IT), but also for a wider range of functions which overlay the work performed by union staff (organizational analysis, public relations, communications, corporate campaigns, organizing and leadership training).

Our empirical data also suggest certain insights. One is that union leaders can use contemporary management practices to facilitate the efficient

functioning of their organizations. However, because unions are membership organizations, leaders need to consider carefully how to involve staff and members in the adoption and implementation of such practices so that they cooperate, and are not alienated in the process.

Future research on the effectiveness of the changes we identify, particularly work that utilizes additional data and detailed case studies, would help to answer RQ3 more fully. Such research should further advance our understanding of the formalization of unions' practices and the extent to which this may facilitate or detract from revitalization. Nonetheless, future researchers should keep in mind that unions are not an end in themselves. They are rather a means to the main end of maintaining or improving the conditions of the lives of workers (Webb & Webb 1920). If unions are not able to revitalize themselves to be more effective in this regard, in due course, they may become redundant and be replaced by other actors.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

Each of the co-authors has had involvements with various unions. We assure the journal that such involvements do not constitute conflicts of interest that would influence our objectivity. The co-authors have no other conflicts of interest to declare.

### **Notes**

1. Unions with more than 1,000 members listed in Gifford's *The Directory of US Labor Organizations, 1988–1989*, were asked to complete the survey.
2. Unions with more than 1,000 members listed in Gifford's *The Directory of US Labor Organizations, 1999*, were asked to complete the survey.



3. Head office professional staff are usually specialists with training and/or experience in such areas as: law, politics, legislation, education, economics, communications and IT or generalists with experience in collective bargaining, contract administration and organizing. Field staff are generally involved in direct representation, including organizing, bargaining or settling grievances and disputes with employers on behalf of union members. Given limited space, this article focuses on the survey results involving headquarters staff, rather than field staff.
4. The US and UK unions, surveys were sent by post to national secretary-treasurers (US), general secretaries (UK) or the equivalent officer in each union. They were typically filled out by secretary-treasurers, general secretaries or another well-informed official(s). In cooperation with the ACTU, the authors adapted the above surveys to suit the Australian context and converted it to an online instrument. The ACTU sent an invitation and reminders by email to national and branch secretaries of all affiliated unions, asking them to complete the online survey. It was typically completed by an official(s) who had a good knowledge of the union's practices.
5. Between 2014 and 2018, the United Steelworkers made contributions of US\$638,000 to the Blue Green Alliance, a coalition of unions and environmental organizations and US\$515,000 to the National College Players Association, a group that advocates for workers' rights for US college athletes in revenue-producing sports (US Department of Labor 2020).

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