Changing Language Practice in the Workforce

Identifying workforce language practice in order to encourage the use of Welsh

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Bangor University has established the ARFer project aimed at ensuring a better understanding of language use amongst co-workers in order to introduce tailor-made interventions and support to encourage the use of Welsh in a bilingual workplace.

STATUTORY DUTIES

The Welsh language standards require organisations to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh internally. The standards also require public bodies to gather data on the language ability of their staff. The ARFer project grew from the University's desire to see 'beyond the data'.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

According to surveys held internally, 45% of the University's workforce stated that they 'Speak Welsh' and 26% stated that they 'Speak a little Welsh'. This scheme was intended to see beyond this data and understand when staff spoke Welsh, with whom and why (or why not). There was a desire to:

- understand more about how the Welsh language is used by staff on a daily basis;
- learn more about linguistic behaviour;
- create an evidence base for this behaviour in order to tailor interventions and support effectively.

Bangor University is home to Canolfan Bedwyr (Centre for Welsh Language Services, Research and Technology) where expertise is combined across language policy

planning, translation, training, technology and terminology. The University is also home to a team of psychologists that specialise in behavioural change psychology and who have established the Wales Centre for Behaviour Change. Behaviour change psychology has been used extensively within public policy including health and the environment, but very little use has been made of it in terms of language. This, therefore, was an opportunity to combine the expertise of Canolfan Bedwyr in language planning with the University's behaviour change psychology experts in order to develop new methods of addressing opportunities, questions and challenges in terms of the Welsh language. The work was planned through a Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol funded PhD scheme. ARFer is one of the PhD's projects.

ARFer

The ARFer programme is a methodology inspired by the Aldahitz project designed by Soziolinguistika Klusterra in the Basque Country. The project is based on two principles that are rooted in the behavioural sciences:

- making **a commitment** to behaving in a certain way;
- capitalising on the significant influence that **defaults** can have on people's behaviour.

Essentially, ARFer is a programme that asks individuals to make a commitment to using Welsh as the default language with the aim of establishing the Welsh language as the the norm.

ARFer was trialled in one of the University's departments with 22 members of staff. The staff had a diverse language profile with around 64% fluent speakers, 22% who spoke a little Welsh and 14% with no Welsh language skills. As part of the programme, five staff members (~20%) were asked to commit to using the Welsh language as the default with colleagues who were able to understand them. These five individuals were the 'ARFer Enablers'. The other 17 members of staff had 'language freedom' - in other words, they were free to use Welsh or English with the ARFer Enablers and other colleagues.

BILINGUAL DYNAMIC OBSERVATIONAL TOOL

In order to evaluate whether the ARFer programme had a real effect on language behaviour within the department, they had to establish how often Welsh was used **before** the programme was introduced. In other words, they needed to gather baseline data on the department's language use. In order to gather this data, they developed the Bilingual Dynamic Observation Tool. This is a table that allows them to record in detail what language is used in an exchange between two colleagues and which other members of staff are present. In order to establish baseline data, 128 hours of discussions were observed in the department over a period of eight weeks. The baseline data showed that Welsh was used a little over 25% of the time in this department.

IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

During the implementation of the ARFer programme in the department, they began gathering data on language behaviour in the exact same way by recording it on the Bilingual Dynamic Observation Tool. The ARFer programme was conducted over a 13 week period and 214 hours of discussions were observed.

The data gathered whilst the ARFer programme was in place shows that the use of Welsh within the department had more than doubled during the intervention period compared with the use of Welsh during the baseline period. During the baseline period, Welsh was used in the department a little over 25% of the time. During the intervention period, Welsh was used a little under 60% of the time. The University's tests (using the chi-square test) found that this was a significant change in staff behaviour and also in their use of Welsh.

The ARFer programme has been successfully piloted in one University department. Looking to the future, the aim is to learn from the experiences of those who took part in the pilot and improve the programme so it can be conducted in other contexts and to learn how it may be adapted effectively. The University also aims to create an 'ARFer Pack' that will enable other organisations to implement the programme effectively.

TRANSFERABLE ASPECTS

The following factors were key to the scheme's success:

- investment in a programme that supports the wish of staff to use the Welsh language;
- the importance of creating a context that enables staff to use Welsh;
- the importance of supporting Welsh speakers (as well as learners) to use Welsh at work;
- the importance of understanding patterns of language use before any attempt at influencing them.

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THE COMMISSIONER'S VIEW

In order to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh in the workplace, it is vital that organisations have an understanding of language use within the workforce. I believe that the ARFer project offers an effective methodology to change staff behaviour by tailoring interventions and support in a simple and cost-effective way.