The purpose of this research has been to study the challenges and opportunities for the trade union movement and non-government organisations from the new communications technologies. There is a special focus on the readiness of the working population to use network communications and their potential to use it for networking, to acquire knowledge and support and to exert influence. The research analyses the existing experience and vision of the relationship between the Internet and NGOs to form a base for the work of those organisations planning or developing network based communications.

The research has been implemented multistrategically, by the study of research literature, especially the discussion of Robert D. Putnam, Manuel Castells and Howard Rheingold about the change of identities and community in the modern information and network society, and by interviews with trade unions and NGOs. These were compared with the expectations and the readiness of Finnish trade union members and their union representatives, obtained via questionnaire and interviews.

The networking of Finnish employees and union representatives has progressed rapidly during the past two years. Consequently the unions do not have a current picture of how ready their members and representatives are to use information and communication technology and the Internet and e-mail are still regarded as fairly marginal communication and service channels. The expectations of the members and their union representatives regarding the use of the Internet and e-mail are at the same time growing.

By using the Internet mainly as a one-way information channel the largest potential of the Net for the non-government organisations and trade unions has been overlooked. As an interactive space the Internet has potential to develop into a new Workers’ hall or Community Hall of the trade union movement – forum for social interaction, networking, influencing, activism and social capital. In the trade union movement and NGOs there has been, however, very little contemplation about how to use the new ICT to strengthen interaction, community spirit, participation and democracy.