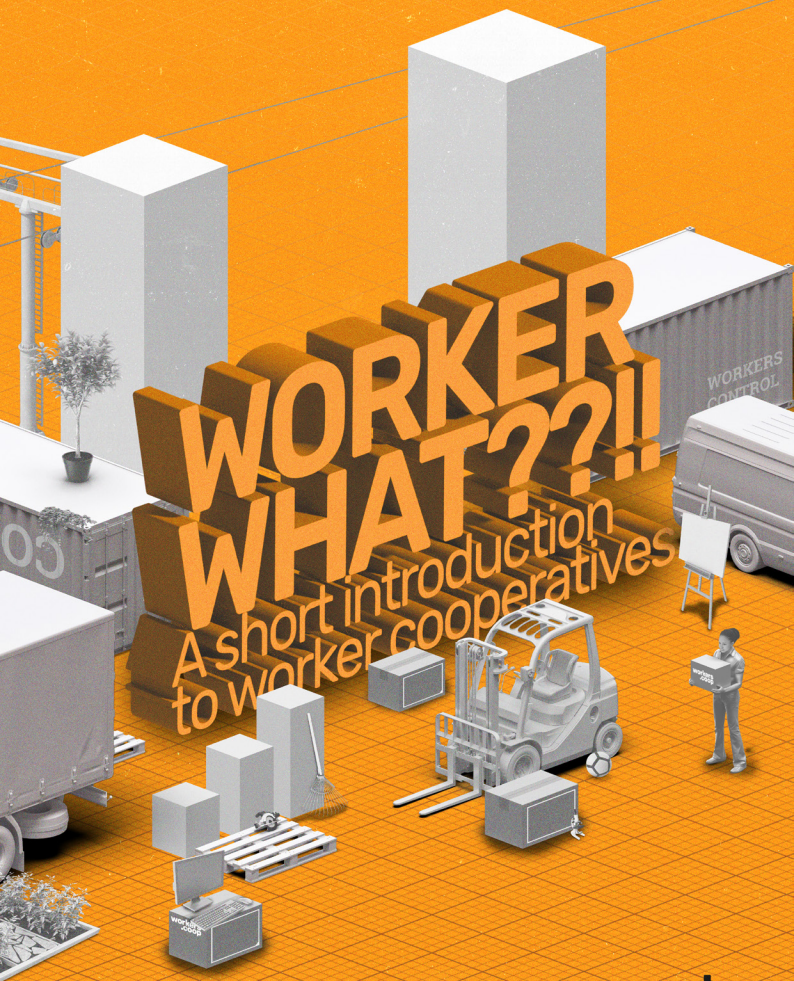


WORKER WHAT??!

A short introduction
to worker cooperatives



“From the age of 22 I was encouraged to participate fully, and over the next 14 years came to appreciate the value of being trusted, having freedom to speak and being involved in every aspect of the business. We are open to inventive ideas, which helped us survive some tough times and made us stronger. In other companies there is often an undercurrent of fear and competition, but here I’ve had opportunities for professional and personal development I would never have had in a private company. My sense of security comes from knowing we are in it for the right reasons, doing what we love creatively while using our skills and capacity to try and make the world better.”

Vilte Vaitkute, media co-op

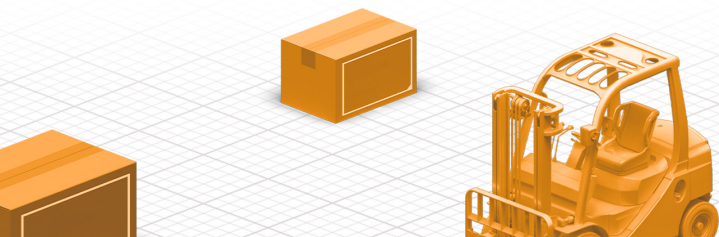
A different way to work

What is a worker cooperative? It's an organisation of workers who democratically control and collectively own a trading business - the one they work in.

There are more than 600 worker and self-employed co-ops in the UK. Across Europe there are 43,000 worker and social co-ops, employing 1.3 million people and turning over £63 billion between them.

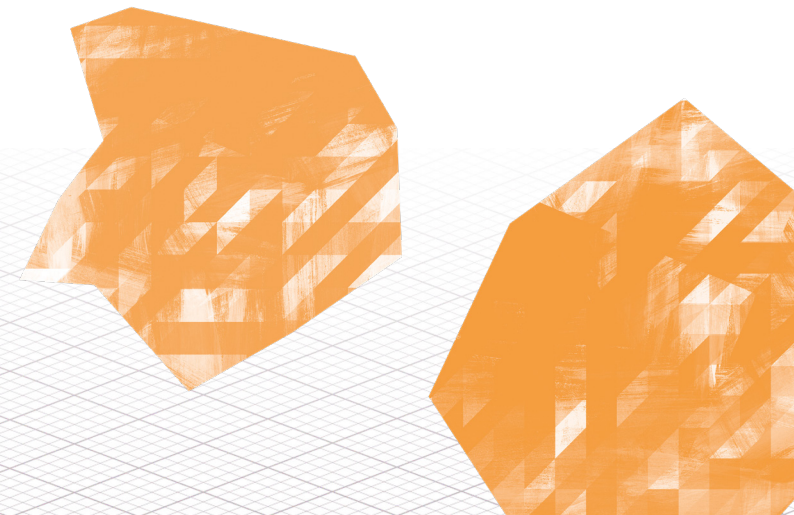
Their shared purpose is to provide decent work. In other words, to create sustainable jobs that improve workers' quality of life and provide dignity at work, allow for democratic self management, and promote equitable social and economic development in their communities.

Worker co-ops around the world run small and large enterprises. Some have two worker members, some thousands. They're in most



sectors of the economy, from creative industries, technology, manufacturing and logistics to care, education and environmental management. Whatever their size, trade or activity, all worker co-ops exist to provide the best possible conditions of work and standards of production, to improve the lives of workers and their communities.

Whatever their size they one thing in common: they apply the values of cooperation – autonomy, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.



“It’s a fun place to work, I learn about new stuff all the time. We act in line with the workers’ values, which enables us to support marginalised or oppressed groups, and that’s important for making everyone feel welcome. We also care about our own working conditions and how life is for us as workers. This focus is not something you’d get if we were not a cooperative. I have good job security, with a permanent contract and a living wage - and the flexibility is really good.”

Allama Munir, Birmingham Bike Foundry

“Working in a co-op gives me autonomy, allowing for the fact that I have to work with others, and with the added benefits that come with working in a collective. On the one hand every individual has a reasonable measure of control over their work patterns. On the other, everyone takes their share of responsibility for both client work and administrative tasks. The environment makes for healthy working relationships, which in turn means greater motivation and commitment to the co-op’s purposes.”

Phil Boast, Third Sector Accountancy

Disrupting business as usual

At first glance, a worker cooperative might look like any other company. Goods or services are produced and sold in exchange for payment, whether that's groceries or websites, bicycles or catering, social care or software. But for the workers, they're worlds apart.

The financial surplus generated in a worker co-op is collectively controlled by the members, and it's there to be used as they think best - whether that's investing it back into the co-op, giving it away, or taking a wage bonus. There are no outside owners or executives skimming off wealth. The workers have a direct say in things like strategy, pay and working conditions. They operate with less hierarchy than other businesses, and some have no formal hierarchy at all.

To be efficient, worker co-ops have to have a culture of respect and equality. They try to challenge and dismantle traditional divisions based on things like education, social background and personal identity. A worker co-op can be a place for people to develop their

confidence and skills, and even move between different jobs.

Worker cooperators take responsibility for the services and goods they provide, operating with integrity and aiming to meet genuine needs. They take responsibility for stewarding the business so they can keep it thriving for the next generation of cooperators.

Worker co-ops aim a for a world where:

- Everyone has access to rewarding, meaningful and sustainable work
- Workers aren't exploited
- Wealth is spread fairly
- They work towards equality, on the basis of solidarity
- People have real control over their working lives
- The production of goods and services is integrated with democratic community development
- Capital serves workers, not the other way round.



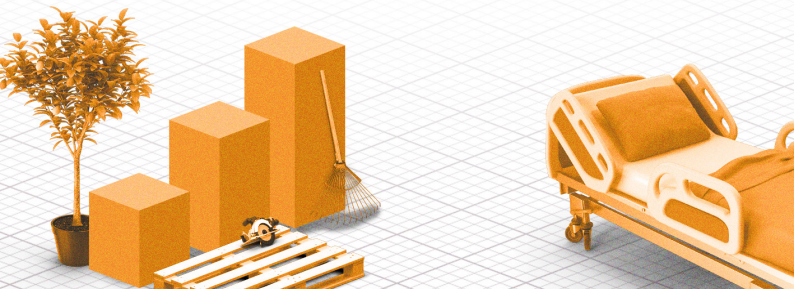
“Everyone can speak and there is healthy debate when we need to make decisions. In other places I’ve seen a culture of deference to managers and a lot of ‘smoke and mirrors’ - you don’t really know what’s going on with the company until you’re told there are going to be 50% redundancies. Here, you can see the waves coming from a long way off, which gives you time and space to plan and respond. I haven’t been here long, but I trust the collective judgement and experience of my colleagues.”

Katie Sheppard, Calverts design and print

How do worker cooperatives... work?

Every worker co-op is different. The co-op may have started from one person's idea; a shared project among friends; a conflict between private owners and their workers; a peaceful handover; or a workplace occupation. It may even begin informally inside another type of organisation.

Some worker co-ops have a 'flat' structure and equal hourly pay, but there is a range of models. Whatever management system is chosen, it's chosen democratically by the workers, who have the power to change and improve it. What they all have is a commitment to the co-op values and principles that have been worked out and agreed over many decades, applied in many countries, and interpreted across different cultures.



“When we decide on a course of action it is almost always the right one, with everyone on board. Our collective processes seem to have overcome the fragmentation and politicking that affects other organisations as they grow. It is rare that any decision is made without considering the common good of all the workers, the future of the business and our social and environmental principles. It means we have a more sustainable business, focussing on long-term stewardship rather than short-term growth or profit. This in turn leads to secure jobs with steady incremental pay rises, rather than big bonuses in good times and redundancies in bad times.”

Dan Holden, Unicorn Grocery

Liberating Work

We hope you've enjoyed this 'worker co-ops 101' guide. Maybe you'll want to take it further. It's written and produced by **workers.coop**, the federation of worker co-ops based in the UK. We were set up as a network and voice for worker cooperation, bringing co-ops and supporters together to advance our common interests and work towards shared goals.

The federation offers advice and information for the 'worker co-op curious', as well as training and support for existing co-ops. It brings cooperators together to learn, organise and gain strength.

Check out the *workers.coop* website, where you can find guides, resources and merchandise including the *Worker Cooperative Code*. You can book in a free chat, or sign up to receive news and information.

- > Support worker co-ops by joining the *Worker Cooperative Solidarity Fund* (www.solidfund.coop) for £1 a week
- > Become a *workers.coop* supporter by signing up to receive our news and information



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