

Worker co-ops in the economy

Democratic workplaces exist across the country, with the greatest concentrations in the Northeast, the West Coast and the Upper Midwest. The majority of worker cooperatives in the United States are small businesses, with a few notable larger enterprises. There isn't a lot of data on worker cooperatives yet, but we estimate that there are over 300 democratic workplaces in the US, employing over 3,500 people and generating over \$400 million in annual revenues. The number of workers cooperatives has grown steadily over the past 20 years, and is made up of both well-established businesses and new, growing ones. Recently there has been tremendous growth recently in the fields of technology and health care in particular.

How are worker co-ops different from "regular" businesses?

In many ways, worker co-ops operate just like conventional businesses: they develop a product or service and offer it for sale to the public, with the goal of making enough money to support the business and its owners. They incorporate with the state, get a business license, pay state and federal taxes, have payroll and benefits, and do all the things that businesses do.

But there are some very important differences in how they do all this. Worker cooperatives tend to create long-term stable jobs, have sustainable business practices, and be connected and accountable to their community. In a worker cooperative, workers own their jobs and thus have not only a direct stake in the local environment but the power to decide to do business in a way that creates community benefit rather than destroying it. Not everyone who works in a worker cooperative is an experienced businessperson, but not everyone needs to be; the power of the group comes from each individual's contribution, skills, passions, and expertise.

Some worker cooperatives have what's called a "multiple bottom line" - that is, they evaluate their success by looking not just at the money they make, but at things like their sustainability as a business, their contribution to the community, and the happiness and longevity of their workers.

Walk into any worker co-op and you'll immediately sense the difference: the workers look happy to be working there, they are committed to the business as owners, and the business itself is often connected to the local community in a significant way.

How can you start or join a worker cooperative?

If you're reading this, you must be interested in workplace democracy. To find out more about existing co-ops, or to get resources on how to start a co-op or convert an existing conventional business to a worker-owned or democratic workplace, contact the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives, a national grassroots membership group of and for democratic workplaces. We have resources and information available for the public. Another great way to get information is to contact co-op businesses in your area and talk to them about how they work.

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United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives

The United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives envisions a democratic society in which workers are in control of the management, governance and ownership of their places of work. The mission of the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives is to create stable and empowering jobs and worker-ownership through the development of a thriving cooperative movement. We advance worker-owned, -managed, and -governed workplaces through cooperative education, advocacy and development.

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