

Introduction

Imagine starting a new job in an office. You go in the first day, and are introduced to the manager. After a friendly chat of welcome, you are shown to your desk. The manager asks about the comfort of the desk and chair. Are they in proportion with your body? Is there any strain? It is fine and you begin to work on the computer. You are clicking away happily when a little message pops up automatically on the screen. It asks if you have taken a stretch break yet. Leaning over to a neighbor, you ask what the message means. Your neighbor explains that there is a stretch program at work. If you stretch five times a day for a month, a masseuse, paid for by the company, comes into the office and will give you a free massage. You are a bit impressed with the idea, and decide to take some time to stretch. After working there a few weeks, the manager comes by a bit later to talk about your future in the company. You like the job and would like to stay on. In order to do that, you must become a part owner in the company. You will get to vote on deciding where the company is going, voice what you want to see happening at work, and be informed on current company issues. At the end of the fiscal year, you will also get a check for your part of the profit of the business.

The Problem and Its Setting

The first cooperative I ever heard of was one in Guatemala. Indigenous women had collectively pooled their resources and opened a small store to sell their goods. I was struck by the alliance these women had formed. By working together, they were combining their strengths to open a business. They choose to do this instead of competing independently and making small individual profits. Together they made a large profit and divided their earnings in an equal and equitable way. In theory, the idea

sounded wonderful: working together to achieve a more beneficial goal. I wondered however, how close the reality of the situation was to the ideology.

This study focuses on looking at worker-owned cooperatives from the member’s point of view. What were the perceived social and economic conditions of cooperative work? I conducted my research at a worker-owned cooperative in the San Francisco Bay Area. This company will be referred to as “Working It and Owning It” in this paper. I first looked at the worker-owner role by studying the relationship linking the workers’ goals to the owners’ goals. I questioned owners how much they identified themselves as owners and how they felt working for a cooperative as opposed to a traditional job. The transition from beginning at a cooperative after having a traditional boss was very interesting as well.

The second aspect I was interested in was the organization of power. I studied the structure of the cooperative, the membership procedures, and what it meant to be a worker-owner when ownership was shared with other coworkers. I focused on issues such as health, communication, and managers to get a better idea of people’s ideas and opinions about their cooperative lifestyle. The economic effects of working in a cooperative, my third topic, also illuminated realities of cooperatives. I looked at wages, raises, growth, and profit distribution. I was interested to learn if members make less money overall in exchange for ownership and job satisfaction.

For the purposes of this study, the terms “worker” or “employee” refer to anyone employed by the company. “Worker-owners” or “owners” refer to those in the company that have completed the training, the assessment test, and made the initial investment

required of owners (Bylaws 2000). Employees on the “worker-owner track” refer to those who are in the process of becoming owners.

Background

Since the days of Aristotle, the conflict of owners and workers has been an important issue. Usually both sides seek to maximize their profit and have difficulty understanding the other’s point of view (Russell 1985). Within the last fifty years, two new plans of redistributing ownership have been tried in order for workers and owners to come to a mutual understanding. The first plan deals with profit sharing through stock options: workers receive company stock in addition to their salary as a way of redistributing profits back to the workers. With workers holding stock in the company, a feeling of belonging, ownership, and company loyalty may arise. Because of their new added interest in company stock, workers may become more efficient and productive in their work. Companies are hoping to inspire this heightened productivity when they offer stock dividends. Stock dividends, however, are a more symbolic than an actual change in the structure of ownership (Russell 1985).

The second plan, an idea that originates with Marx, promotes mutual owner and worker understanding thorough the union of the two roles (Schuller 1985). This union is the fundamental idea behind cooperatives. They are based on a degree of collectivism and a breaking of the link between external ownership and control. Like stock holding dividends, this plan uses the idea of redistributing profits in a more egalitarian way. It differs by redefining the basic structure of the business and changing the roles and interests of the worker-owners. In the United States, we can see cooperatives occurring as early as the 1912 San Francisco Scavenger Companies (a name given to refuse

collectors that would “scavenge” their load and resell recyclable items), and Boston’s Independent Taxi Operators Association in 1924 (Russell 1985). These first few have inspired the start-up of many other cooperatives throughout the nation. Within the last 20 years, there has been a rise in small cooperatives with community roots that are connected to a larger cooperative network. An emerging chain of cooperatives in California, Working It and Owing It being one example, thrive in part because the worker-owners care about the quality of their goods and service. They also emphasize a connection with their communities more than the poorly paid staff of capitalist chains.

All cooperatives are based on the same original Rochedale “Principles of Cooperation” that were established in 1844. They have been revised and interpreted many times, but they basically are as follows:

1. The establishment is autonomous.
2. Employees are able to become members of the enterprise by nominal holdings of share capital.
3. The principle of “one-member-one-vote” prevails.
4. Formal provision exists for direct employee participation at all levels.
5. Employees share in the profits (Schuller 1985).

These principals of cooperatives can be found at Working It and Owing It. This worker-owned cooperative combines resources to own their business and democratically share in the responsibilities and profits. The rights to profits are based on worker-owners’ positions and the total hours worked (Adams 1992).

Logistics

Finding a cooperative that would allow me to conduct my research with them was much more difficult than I had imagined. I had been originally planning to research a food cooperative in the San Francisco Bay Area. I submitted my proposal to three possible cooperatives and was turned down at every one. The reason was the same every time; they supported my research, but November was a particularly busy holiday month for them and they could not afford to have me taking up time there. Working It and Owing It was the only place that agreed to let me conduct my research there. Because of the sexual nature of the products distributed by the cooperative, I was a bit concerned about sexuality issues overwhelming the focus of my research. I found that although they were intertwined, I could separate the two topics by emphasizing clarity. I was careful to distinguish what ideas I was addressing in my interviews, and encouraged the interviewee to do the same.

During my fieldwork, I volunteered at the main office for 10 hours a week. When I first began to work, my sponsor, Mary¹, was constantly supportive and helpful. She gave me information packets, an interview, introduced me to contacts, and checked up on me. When I submitted my questionnaire to the board of directors for approval, she posted a notice offering \$5 store credit to anyone that filled one out. I was grateful for all her help, but I was concerned that her work might unintentionally bias the study. I accepted her help, and concentrated on making contacts outside of the ones that I had met through her.

Meeting people at the office proved to be a bit difficult. I was often assigned to

¹ This name and all others in this paper are pseudonyms.

jobs where I would work independently. Because of this isolation and because I was an outsider, I found it a bit difficult to initiate conversations with people. This feeling began to change after I had been going there a few weeks. Things felt less strained and people began to understand the reason I was there. Workers thanked me and complimented me on my work, and I began to meet important contacts. I was even invited to the company holiday party.

During my research, there were major factors that affected my work. The first was the time constraints of the project. The allocated three weeks of fieldwork were not enough time to do a thorough and comprehensive study of the whole company. Working It and Owning It had two retail stores and one mail office. Over one hundred employees worked at the three sites. I collected limited data from the workers at the retail stores, and focused my study mainly on the mail order and shipping departments. Because these departments were located in the main office building, I believe my data were biased toward views held by these workers. These views are not invalid by any means, but I would not claim that they are representative of the entire company.

By narrowing my scope to those main office departments, I was working with approximately 65 people. The ones that I worked with in shipping and mail order I came to know well. Others I knew by sight and smiles. Again because of the time constraints, I did not have a lot of time for people to get to know me and approach me themselves. When I was working on collecting interviews, I usually approached someone I felt familiar with and asked them for an interview. This methodology of eliciting interviews is inherently biased by the interviewer, and must be noted. I tried to minimize this bias by making an effort to meet new people every day and let people come to me.

I attempted to ensure the validity and reliability of my study many ways. I spent approximately 40 hours on site during the course of my research. During this time, I observed and absorbed the environment and culture around me. I saw how people interacted on a daily level, and interacted with them in their natural setting. Because this time was spread out over several weeks, I could review my findings and compare them to what I saw going on around me. Formal interviews also helped to get concrete answers from workers about things I saw and believed were occurring. I used the triangulation technique during interviews to compare what one informant was saying to what another believed to be true.

The Study Design

Pre-fieldwork research

When I began this project, I had a general knowledge of cooperatives and how they functioned from my experiences in Guatemala. Before beginning my fieldwork, however, I expanded my knowledge independently through library research, concentrating on worker-owned cooperatives. I found many sources that analyzed the power hierarchy, the effectiveness, and the social environment of these cooperatives. I did not find any published ethnographies pertaining to my specific problem. Websites offered valuable information and overviews of cooperatives in the area. I believe this work helped prepare me for my fieldwork.

Entry Techniques

During my internet research, I saw Working It and Owing It listed as a worker owned cooperative in the area. I looked at their website and sent an e-mail to the name listed there as a contact. I did not hear back from them until a few weeks later. From that

initial correspondence, the contact showed support and enthusiasm for my research. This contact referred me to Mary and we scheduled an appointment. During that first meeting, I felt Mary supported my research. I spent some time explaining what I was planning to research and how I was going to approach it. She was excited about my project and was kind enough to sit and talk to me for two hours about her experiences with cooperatives. She also made it a point to introduce me to people and to check up on me when I had begun volunteering. She made sure that I knew the situation was flexible and that I could change jobs if I was not getting the information I needed. Mary’s support and introductions made entry into the field smooth.

Initial and Exploratory Fieldwork

My first week volunteering was spent observing. I was assigned tasks and completed them while noticing and listening to what was occurring around me. Initially I was interested in observing the way in which coworkers communicated worked, and interacted with each other. I made casual acquaintances, some through Mary’s introductions and some on my own, that served to familiarize myself with the workers. These acquaintances were some of the people I asked to interview formally later.

Structure of Role

Within the first week of fieldwork, Mary sent out a memo describing me and what my role was at Working It and Owning It. This memo circulated to all employees, regardless of ownership status. Some people made the connection of who I was from the memo while others did not until I told them directly. Those that did not assumed I was a new employee, so I made an effort to make my role clear and not misguide them. I also tried to clarify that I was studying the cooperative aspect of the job, and not so much the

sexuality aspect. I do not think the fact that I was conducting research as opposed to being a new employee changed people’s openness with me, but I do believe that it changed their perceptions and relationships with me.

My role as a volunteer was very flexible. I had set aside Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to be at the office, but these days were not strictly enforced. I would be at the site approximately 10 hours a week. I would come in and work as long as I could, take breaks when I needed to, and the company was accepting. I would arrive at the office with my backpack containing my tape recorder, extra batteries, tapes, notebooks, and pens. I only used these things with the permission of my interviewees and on the ride home to record field notes.

Research Methods and Techniques

While conducting my research, I used the following four methods for collecting my data. While conducting this research, I worked under the semiotic paradigm, specifically “new ethnography” that emphasizes culture existing in the minds of members of a culture. I tried to emphasize understanding issues from the “native’s point of view” (Ogbu 2000).

Formal and Informal Ethnographic Interviews

The formal interviews I conducted were the most valuable source of data for me. I tape recorded them with permission from the interviewee, and transcribed them verbatim. They were all individual interviews that lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were done at the main office, except for one that was done in a café a few blocks away. Some of the places I conducted the interviews were more private than others, but people did not seem to mind speaking about the topics I proposed

in front of their coworkers. To be sure, however, I always asked them before the interview started if they felt comfortable in the setting. In every interview, I recorded the name, gender, contact information of the interviewer, how long they had been working at Working It and Owing It, and what stage of ownership they were in. I also explained the structure and reason for the interview, had them sign the consent form, and gave them information on how to reach me if the need arose. I did not ask their ages because I believe that would have offended a few of them, but I would estimate they were anywhere between early twenties to late forties.

Informal interviews occurred casually within the office. Due to the fact that the month of November is especially busy, these interviews were not very frequent or extensive. I tried to keep them to a minimum out of respect for the workers’ schedules.

Participant Observation

While I was volunteering my time working at Working It and Owing It, I had a unique chance to observe how workers interacted with each other. In the shipping and mail order departments, I observed egalitarian music selection, managers’ automatic concern for the safety of their coworkers, effective communication skills, and the overall positive work atmosphere.

Document Research

The library research I had conducted on worker owner cooperatives before my fieldwork began was a very helpful guide. Mary also gave me copies of company documents (the bylaws and the communication guidelines). These documents laid out the rules and regulations concerning the company and communication that all employees followed.

Questionnaire

Within the first week of fieldwork, I submitted a questionnaire to the board of directors to approve and distribute to the workers. Twenty-four questions offered answers that the worker could mark. Thirty-seven workers filled out and turned in these questionnaires. One interesting note is that on many of the questions, workers not only checked an answer, but they wrote a comment expanding on what they thought. I interpreted this act as a reflection of critical thinking and questioning of procedures that is supported by cooperatives.

Data Reduction and Analysis

Analyzing the data I generated was a two-part process. After the first two weeks of fieldwork, I reviewed my data and found common themes in my field notes and recorded interviews. I checked for gaps and refined my points to reflect the problem I was analyzing. I also allowed new categories to emerge from the data. At the end of my fieldwork, I analyzed my research by developing a code inductively through the data (Boyatzis 1998). I used the archaic method of printing out my interviews, cutting them up, and organizing them into subjects. I am a visual learner, so I found this method most beneficial to me. I categorized the data into two major topics, and several sub-topics that best organize my findings.

Principal Findings

My data is organized into two overarching subjects: perceived social aspects and perceived economic aspects of worker-owner cooperatives. The previously mentioned sub-problems are intertwined within these subjects. Under the social aspect topic, common issues are:

1. The transition of cooperative work compared to “traditional” jobs
2. New worker orientation
3. Identity as owners
4. The Coworker/Co-owner Relationship
5. Personal Voice
6. Personal Satisfaction and Ideology

The economic aspects of the cooperation are covered in the following issues:

1. Wages and raises
2. Higher profits vs. higher wages
3. Growth issues
4. Workers’ health

Social Aspects of Worker Owner Cooperatives

Knowing the background of the sample one is studying is important. I began most of my interviews by discussing how the interviewee had come to work at Working It and Owing It. Everyone had had at least one “traditional” job with a boss-employee relationship before coming to the cooperative. Several of the workers had been involved in non-profit, personal businesses, or other cooperative work before. Of the people polled, 24% of them had previous experience with cooperatives. The initial transition of switching from a traditional job to a cooperative was described in many ways. Joyce, Ali, Mary, and Johnny all described the situation as a positive and easy experience. They describe a liberating experience and a sense of their voice immediately being heard. They enjoyed the empowering feeling that what they put into their work was what they were going to get out of it and that they were working as a group. Others, while

supportive of cooperatives, did not have such a smooth transition. Some workers joined Working It and Owing It for the sole reason they wanted to work in a cooperative.

These people tended to have a more difficult time adjusting, due to the intense sexual content of the work. Cindy identified this situation as happening to her. While drawn to the worker-owner part of the job, she was uncomfortable in the beginning with the subject matter. Another worker-owner expressed a different problem:

“I was so used to walking into an us-and-them situation...I was in a coop on owner track, and there *isn't* an us-and-them. I was on my way to being “them”. There was so much baggage...it was much easier to put stuff on others like “those fuckers, they did this to me” then to realize “oh well, I guess that we are all going to have to work a little harder today.”

When people are socialized by society to take instructions from others, it can be hard to adjust when presented with the opportunity of freedom. What this worker-owner was expressing was a changing of thought processes that came with being able to voice personal opinions and having an active part in decision making. While these are not undesirable things by far, they can need some getting used to.

Working It and Owing It realizes this transition can be a difficult one. In order to help new members understand their new work environment, classes are offered on a variety of topics that pertain to worker owner cooperatives. Topics included finances (to explain how the profits of the company are paid back to the owners), ownership (to explain what it means to be a worker owner), and a history of worker owner cooperatives. These classes are two hours each and are offered on a quarterly cycle. After worker owner status is achieved, continuing education classes are offered monthly that help to educate the workers about products, healthy sexuality, and other related topics.

An important rule at Working It and Owning It is that in order to remain a full time employee for more than a year workers are required to become owners in the company. If a worker chooses not to be an owner, they are only allowed to work 24 hours a week or less (Bylaws 2000). In most cases, workers decided to become owners.

Workers describe their reactions to this rule in a variety of ways. Rachel reports, “I was way gung ho. As soon as I found out I could be one, I was signed up.” While this excitement about worker ownership is one of the main reasons that people come to work at cooperatives, there are those that feel reluctant in the beginning.

“Monica: Did you know that when you first started to work here that you wanted to become a worker-owner?”

Emily: No. I was not sure at all because I had never worked for a coop before. I did not really know anyone that worked here either so I was not sure what the policies were or what it meant to be a worker-owner. It took me quite some time to decide. I am still struggling over it.

Monica: How did you decide?

Emily: I ended up deciding because I wasn’t going to go anywhere anytime soon, and I really liked working here and the people I worked with. There are a lot of aspects about the company that I do like, so I decided to go for it. It’s not something that can’t be terminated.”

While the ultimate decision to become a worker-owner is in the hands of the individual, there are those like Emily that have initial misgivings.

Once a worker decides to become an owner, other issues arise. Mary identifies one of these issues as the perceived role of owners.

“[T]here are a lot of people that think that ownership just means buying your initial share of the company, and then you have your right to vote, and you shouldn’t need to do anything else.”

Johnny reflects this problem, but sees another side of the issue

“[T]here are days like when I am down there and ask myself why I am here. I do not use any part of my brain to do this job. I think I could be making a little bit more money somewhere else, but then I also take pride in this work and I know that whatever I put into this company I am going to get back at some point. I do view myself as an owner, although there are some days that I question what I am doing here...I think the fact that I see myself as an owner is a big reason that I am still on the committee...[it is not] dedication, but commitment to the company.”

He touches here on the key that links workers to ownership; involvement and interaction in company processes beyond the minimum requirements of ownership serve to get workers directly connected with the company. The different committees, task forces, and other various positions offer many opportunities to involve a variety of workers’ interests. While it could be argued that a feeling of obligation stimulates some to join committees, it is important to remember that workers voluntarily chose to work at a worker owned cooperative in the first place. This fact seems to imply that these workers desire to be more directly involved in governance, management, and production issues of the company.

Direct interaction with management and workers is a major factor when trying to understand the coworker/co-owner relationship. In my research, I observed a close, family-like atmosphere between the managers and the workers. This family feeling was stronger in some departments compared to others, but there was definitely a common overall closeness. Joyce felt that although she did not know everybody, “...there is a common cooperative spirit.” This relationship is supported by an emphasis on effective communication. Each department publishes its own communication guidelines that commonly emphasize respect, open minds, and direct communication. A diversity task force was recently formed to help people communicate. People that attend the training

sessions are encouraged to figure out clearly other people’s point of views to facilitate communication.

In the event that communication breaks down between coworkers to an unbearable point, Working It and Owning It offers mediation as a solution. Of the workers polled, 40% of them had engaged in mediation. Of those that had, half of them thought it was effective in resolving the problem and 80% of them would use it again for work related problems. Rachel said that sometimes when mediation could be a helpful action to take, people avoid it.

“[P]eople have really bought into the idea that you resolve your conflicts because you have to work closely with people as owners. Everybody is kind of different on that, and there are some people who do it more than others. Conflict resolution and dealing with conflict is not everyone’s strong suit.”

For mediation to take place, both people have to be willing and open to accept help. In extreme cases, people will move to different departments or quit. These situations, however, did not seem to occur very frequently.

Traditional power relationships of bosses and employees are not present at Working It and Owning It. There are, however, definite levels of varying leadership.

One board member comments:

“It’s hard to be a leader in a coop because power is supposed to be shared so much, it can be hard to take a leadership role. It’s a strange dynamic... how do you hold power, and still share it among everybody? You have 50 owners and you are a representative, and yet you have all sorts of power over making major decisions in the company. Ultimately the owners can always still veto, but it is still a lot of weight to be a responsible leader and be responsible about how you exercise your power. I think that sometimes when I feel a mistrust, it’s like “How are you wielding that power?” and “What is the stuff that’s confidential?” because in coops all the information is supposed to be open, but some things you have to keep confidential. There is always a sort of a struggle.”

This power relationship and a prevailing egalitarian ideology could cause conflict. However, the potential for conflict is diffused in part by the fact that all the managerial positions are elected. Candidates for a position run on their merits and give speeches explaining why they want to be in a leadership role. Because of the size of the company, it is important to have faith in the managers and the board of directors. The owners collectively hold an ultimate veto power over any decisions made by governance, management or the board.

This check and balance of power serves to support people’s feeling that they have an active role in the company. Voting is a requirement that comes with ownership and working in a worker-owner environment. Most workers acknowledge this right and feel as if their voice is heard. Currently, however, the growth of the company has effected people’s ease of expressing their opinions. Johnny reflected this idea:

“You can voice your opinion, you can react. There are so many ways you can go through to make decisions. It is a little bit harder because we are a little bit larger now. You have to go through more official channels...I think your voice definitely gets heard.”

Another worker-owner stated, “the only difficult part about making decisions is that everybody has something to say and everybody has to be heard...things of a philosophical nature [take time].” Stacy, a previous owner, stated:

“I wanted to vote on everything, but that also made the wheels turn slower... You can abstain, and that is your vote. I voted not to vote, but your voice counts...(When people voice their opinions, we) kept bringing the issues back and amending the issue and bringing it back and amending the issue and sometimes that just became frustrating. We’re still talking about things I thought we resolved it eons ago.”

While the size of the voting population is an undeniable factor in the voting process, it is important to remember that worker-owners do have the option of voting on issues.

Economic Aspects of Worker Owner Cooperatives

The financial and economic aspects of cooperative work are important in understanding the cooperative culture. While ideology and social conditions are factors in deciding where to work, the financial reality of living in the San Francisco Bay Area is a strong factor as well. It is common knowledge that this area of the country is one of the most expensive areas to live in. In this research, I explored how workers felt about their economic situation. I also asked about the economic factors of growth and health that affected the company.

At Working It and Owing It, there are three tiers of pay. The first tier is the front line staff and the lowest paid workers. The second and third tiers are more technical and skilled jobs that pay relatively higher wages. According to the cooperative laws, no worker can make three times as much as another worker. This law creates a discrepancy between the cooperative wages offered to workers in the higher tiers compared to the wages offered in a corporate setting. The questionnaire results showed the polled workers believing Working It and Owing It paid the lower tiers a more competitive wage than the higher tiers.

In an effort to compete with the rising cost of living in the Bay Area, Working It and Owing It offers several raises. One raise is an annual cost of living adjustment (COLA). This adjustment is a percentage increase in pay relative to inflation in the area. Three fourths of polled workers think this adjustment is reasonable. In addition to the COLA, the company also has an annual raise in the form of a yearly review. Mary said, “regardless of your position, you have yearly reviews. If you pass the review, you get a raise, and if you don’t then you don’t.” These raises are given as a percentage increase in

pay as well. A third adjustment is used every few years where the company takes a look at pay overall and gives a large percentage raise to help bring the company up to a competitive wage. These raises are used in an effort to help the workers be economically stable. Joyce said they “reflect the coop ideology and the voice of the owners.” Most workers acknowledge and appreciate the effort.

An interesting paradox presents itself for worker owner cooperatives when confronted with higher wage issues. Owners are forced to decide whether to support higher wages and pay everyone more, or to support higher profits and pay owners more. Mary saw wages and profits as separate issues.

“I’d say that recently there has been a higher emphasis on wages. We just raised the tier one wage, which is the starting wage, two dollars and reevaluated the other tiers. So I think that is what we have been concentrating on more than anything else. The emphasis is never really on matronge [the profits owners get at the end of the fiscal year], it’s never really on how much we get to split all between owners, it’s almost always on wages and retained earnings we would spend on expansion and stuff like that. Keeping the company alive, furthering our mission statement, and stuff like that. I’d definitely say wages is what we are concentrated on.”

Rachel also saw this issue as being able to provide for workers first and profits last, regardless of ownership.

“The problem is that you can’t pay people an unfair wage and hope it all turns out at the end of the year with matronge. One because they will not be able to live until the end of the year, and also because it is unethical. It is not right. The whole system is predicated around that fact that you are paying people a good wage. Also you have people on owner track and people becoming owners, and if you cannot pay them a livable wage until they become an owner, matronge does not mean shit to them. So it is really hard and a tricky balance.”

The trickiness is being able to pay a livable wage to workers, but also reward the owners with a fair portion of the profits.

The third economic issue involves expanding the company addresses a contrast between two ideologies. On one hand, expansion would help spread the message of healthy sexuality and sex. It would follow the guidelines set down by the company’s mission statement. A new store would mean interacting with the public in a person to person way, and effectively following this idea. On the other hand, the larger the company gets, the further it will move away from pure cooperativism. With many owners in many different locations, allowing everybody to express their opinions on every issue would be a monumental task. Currently, Working It and Owing It has approximately 60 worker-owners and over 100 employees. Growth plans of opening another store would add approximately 30 new workers. Assuming they want to become worker-owners would increase the number of owners by 50%. It is in this issue that the different reasons people came to work at Working It and Owing It are made apparent. Those who came to the company to work towards promoting healthy sexuality and making a profit support the idea of a new store. Those who came to the company to be part of a cooperative and have a direct voice in governance and management are likely to have some concerns. Another factor is that apart from one other cooperative, growing in terms of opening new stores has never been tried before.

Although there are conflicting opinions, expansion is not rejected by cooperative rooted owners. At the last general meeting, the owners voted and decided to follow the expansion path. Some owners faced a decision:

“At first I was not interested. More money will be used to reinvest and less will be going into our pockets as owners. I had to decide and I went with it because I love it here. Personally, I could have jumped ship, but now I agree with it. I think we will give up some of the family feeling in the change, but we are following the path now.”

Other owners reflect a similar nervousness as to how the company will deal with making sure the cooperative aspect remains alive and people still feel like owners. One suggested alternative is moving to a more representative board structure where there will be board members as representatives for each location. This would allow for smaller meetings and a chance to express more people’s views. Suggestions like these show the positive manner in which the company is trying to deal with the issue. Instead of ignoring the concerns of some owners, the board is embracing them and working with them to suggest alternatives. In the end, the only way that this cooperative would be forced to sacrifice the cooperative aspect of itself is if the owners decided collectively that they did not want to own the company any more.

A fourth economic issue facing Working It and Owning It concerns the health and safety of the workers. While this issue initially seems to be a social one, it has ties to financial costs. About two years ago, the owners proposed a health and safety reform. At that time, the company was experiencing some financial difficulty. One active member said “it was really scary for people in management to deal with the realities and costs of being healthy.” Another owner remembered how at first injured workers were looked at as complainers and upstarts. The costs to the company, however, could not be overlooked. Aside from the monetary cost of a rising company insurance rate, it was costly to have people on disability and to have to train new people. Also, morale was low when workers would watch their coworkers continually be injured or sick.

When the reform occurred, a safety specialist was hired to teach owners about stretching, lifting, and working in a healthy way. Workers are encouraged to take as many stretch breaks as possible. A stretch program started where workers would get a

star each day they stretched five times at work. If enough stars are accumulated, the worker is treated to a massage, paid for by the company. Other health issues, such as personal days allotted to workers as well as sick days, are provided for as well. The company bought new equipment as well that was designed to reduce stress and tension of repetitive tasks. Money is also given to each department to be spent on morale each month.

This health program does not come without ironies. In spite of the management’s and the owners’ investments into health, there are still workers that do not take advantage of the program. Not everybody stretches. People that remind others to stretch are called “Stretch Nazis” behind their backs. One owner said that he did not believe that it was an effective program because there are not people reminding workers constantly to stretch. An owner on the safety committee sees it in a unique light.

“I think it is something that takes getting used to a lot. You can only be on them and tell them to be safe so many times. I have been on the committee over a year, and I still have to remind myself to do it. I can only imagine what it is like for people who are new to the company to have to do it. Once you are there for about three weeks you realize that you have to do it or you are going to hurt yourself.”

Another owner commented that the most avid stretchers are the ones that had suffered reoccurring injuries.

Conclusions and Implications

The research I conducted at Working It and Owning It was very insightful in understanding the worker’s perceived culture of cooperatives. I began my research expecting to find a business where every worker was treated as equal and paid the same wage. In reality, this was not the case. While democracy was supported and encouraged, there were definite levels of power and pay that separated workers. Compared to a

traditional corporate job, these different levels were minimal. Compared to a pure cooperative, however, these differences were large. I believe that these levels are necessary and effective when put into context of the setting. Because the Bay Area is so expensive and because of the growth plans supported by the workers, managers and differentiation of worker status is necessary to have a productive business.

An overall egalitarian ideology was present at Working It and Owing It. Workers were valued and encouraged to their voice their opinions. Healthy workers were emphasized and supported through stretching, new equipment, personal days off, and morale. Worker-owners have a direct connection with management and issues relating to the company as a whole.

The worker-owner role appeared to vary depending on the individual. Some workers used committees and task forces to become more involved in the company, while others participated less. Participation seemed to be the key that linked the workers to self-identify as owners. Some workers substituted the satisfaction they derived from playing an active role in the company for the higher pay they could receive at a more corporate job. This substitution reflected two ideologies: (1) the value each individual worker-owner placed on participation and involvement in their workplace or (2) the value the individual placed on helping to promote healthy sexuality. It is not necessary that these two ideologies were separate in the minds of the workers, but it is important to note that they were different.

By doing this research, I have gained an understanding of how a cooperative can survive in a modern capitalist market. Acknowledging the success of Working It and Owing It is a step in understanding alternative methods of business. While the company

does have a power hierarchy, the fact remains that it is comprised of approximately sixty owners that are all working together. This group process has shown itself to be an effective way of running a business. It is my hope that this study could help society understand some of the options apart from corporate businesses.

In doing this research, I have learned much more than I expected about ethnographic work. One instance I experienced truly made me realize that I was an ethnographer. After concluding my fieldwork, I attended to the Working It and Owning It holiday party. I agreed to go, thinking of all the fun I would have. I wanted to show my new friends that I was not all about tape recorders and analysis. When I got to the party, however, I was in for a shock. The two people I thought I had gotten to know the best didn't come over to greet me. One worker introduced me as "the girl that analyzes us". I joked these comments off with them, saying I was off the clock. However, the reality of my role as an ethnographer was hitting home. I was not these people's friends. I was a researcher that they agreed to have around. I had identified and established myself in the role of a researcher, and that was how they saw me. I began to feel out of place and invasionary at their Christmas party. What right did I have to go to their event? It was supposed to be relaxing and fun away from work and me being there brought up uncomfortable images of being analyzed.

I understand that the secrets of being an ethnographer has just been revealed to me, but I am a bit shocked and uncertain as to how I will deal with them. I do not regret these lessons, however, and feel I have completed an invaluable case study on cooperative culture.

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