

Agency in the Workplace: A Generative Inquiry into Worker Ownership & Worker Control in South Yorkshire



EMPLOYEE
OWNERSHIP
ASSOCIATION



SOUTH YORKSHIRE
SYMCA



MAYORAL
COMBINED
AUTHORITY

**“FOR ONCE, IT FEELS LIKE WE GET
TO WRITE THE RULES.”**

EMMA PLANT, DONCASTER SKATE CO-OP

**“[EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP] HAS
TOTALLY TRANSFORMED MY LIFE...
SOMETIMES PEOPLE AREN'T EVEN
AWARE THAT THERE'S OPPORTUNITY
AT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE.”**

JASON FRANCIS, ESP PROJECTS

**“WORKER-LED ORGANISATIONS ARE AN
OPPORTUNITY TO BE YOUR WHOLE SELF
IN YOUR WORK.”**

MARYAM JAMEELA, THE CANARY WORKERS' CO-OP

BACKGROUND

In early 2023, the South Yorkshire Ownership Hub – hosted by South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, or SYMCA – and Opus co-designed a ‘generative inquiry’ exploring worker ownership and worker control at South Yorkshire organisations.

The core internal aim of this work was to record testimony and generate ethnographic research about worker ownership and control which could inform strategic planning, throw a spotlight on the needs and barriers of the region's businesses, and feed into messaging around the Ownership Hub's offer.

Outwardly, we hoped to raise understanding about the values behind employee-ownership

and control, and to inspire existing business owners and prospective business founders in South Yorkshire to consider new models of governance, operation and control in the workplace.

The project was co-designed with input and support from a steering group which included people working across the country with knowledge about worker ownership and worker control.

ABOUT GENERATIVE JOURNALISM

Generative journalism is a ‘possibility-oriented’ method of guiding conversations and telling stories which emphasises what might be about to happen, what part we can play

in that change and what our next steps could be in that direction.

Taking cues from non-deficit-based approaches such as [appreciative inquiry](#) and [asset-based community development](#) (ABCD), generative journalism tries to move us beyond organisational and institutional narratives, towards deeply personal stories which relate to new life or new or unrealised potential in communities.

Writing for Axiom News, one of the pioneer platforms of generative journalism, [Angela Fell](#) says:

‘Generative journalism is a promising design for surfacing a system’s existing strengths. It can also be part of a larger ecology of practices that focus on how those strengths might be combined and then turned into fresh visions and actions that establish the new and eclipse the old.’

OUR INQUIRY

This work was made up of three strands:

1. Generative inquiry

We hosted and published a series of ‘possibility-oriented’ interviews with people working at co-operatives and employee owned businesses in the region, framed around the central calling question: What if everyone in South Yorkshire had real agency in their workplace?’

Our sequencing of interview questions was designed to draw out deeply personal stories relating to agency at work – with the dual purpose of ‘bringing new life into the world’ by helping interviewees to discover and explore related issues in new ways, while also providing a human way into the topic area for readers of our magazine, Now Then.

The inquiry document starts with this ‘statement of possibility’:

‘It’s possible that we already have the strong foundations of a South Yorkshire which supports and nurtures the growth of worker-owned and worker-controlled ventures – for the benefit of both people and organisations.’

We can empower and enrich the lives of South Yorkshire people through the structures, cultures and values of our companies and organisations. We can share power, create equity, listen deeply and adjust accordingly. We can open up new potentials, challenge injustices and old-fashioned ways of working, and create security and meaning for people at work.’

With some variation, we asked interviewees these questions:

- How has having ownership/control in your workplace changed your life?
- Why is ownership/control important to you?
- What commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour in your work?
- What is the best thing that could happen?
- What would you like to see happen next?
- What do you need from the community to make that happen?
- If worker controlled organisations became the norm, how would communities in South Yorkshire change?
- What, if any, meaning has been made for you in this conversation?

We published 11 interviews via Now Then, from April to August 2023, with individuals from:

- **Big Smile Tattoo**
- **Arup**
- **Doncaster Skate Cooperative**

- **ESP Projects**
- **Regather**
- **Gripple**
- **HLM Architects**
- **Sheffield Fruit Trees**
- **Airmaster**
- **The Canary**
- **Wicker Pharmacy**

With permission and prior approval from interviewees, our published pieces were edited transcripts of the conversations we had with them.

The published pieces attracted almost 2,400 total page views and reached an estimated 20,000 people on social media (Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram).

2. Events

As part of this work, **we curated and hosted two in-person events** as part of Opus' annual Festival of Debate:

- A panel discussion and audience Q&A called '[What if Everyone Had Real Agency in Their Workplace?](#)', featuring: Maryam Jameela (The Canary Workers' Co-op), Liz Lake (Gripple), Karen Mosley (HLM Architects), David Plant (Doncaster Skate Co-op) and Sam Walby (Now Then Magazine & Opus).
- A more casual '[Co-ownership Drop-in Session](#)', with people who are knowledgeable and experienced in co-operatives and employee ownership: Kiri Langmead (Nottingham Business School), Matt Hill (Union St), Paul Taylor (Creative Space Management) and Jill Fedyk (HLM Architects).

The events were attended by a total of around 50 people, many of whom were engaged with cooperatives or employee owned businesses themselves, or were seeking infor-

mation, guidance and support to start their own venture. A handful of event attendees were inspired by the inquiry to explore worker ownership or control, or were already on the path to new ways of operating and found our inquiry relevant to this.

3. Distribution

Through our flyer distribution service, **we placed promotional material about the Ownership Hub at around 650 public locations across South Yorkshire**, such as cafes, bars, libraries and salons. This totalled around 5,200 flyers in Sheffield, 2,300 in Barnsley and 2,200 in Doncaster.

Opus Distribution Manager Ben Jackson says:

'When our distribution team introduced the Ownership Hub literature into the various outlets there was a real sense of intrigue around what it was about - particularly in the smaller independent businesses - with several of the owners and staff taking copies as soon as they were placed down. There is a small smattering left dotted around the occasional more remote outlet, but overall the uptake has been fantastic across the board.'

SOME COMMON THREADS

We believe the generative interviews are the primary source material in this project and we encourage anyone reading this report to also read the interviews, which are provided in full at the end of the document.

While the final published pieces are edited transcripts, they were co-produced with interviewees and they give the best level of detail, depth and context to the subjects being discussed.

There were many parallels between the personal experiences of the people we spoke to within cooperative and employee owned/controlled organisations. We offer some of these below in the hope they are not reductive of those individuals' experiences with employee owned businesses (EOBs) and cooperatives.

- EOBs and coops are often **driven by values**, alongside or above and beyond the profit motive. Working values, principles and commitments highlighted included fairness, inclusion, equity, mutual support, transparency, listening, servant leadership and shared profit.
- Worker ownership and control offers a **chance for organisations to become more deeply rooted in community** – whether that's their physical place of operation, or in reflecting and responding to the lived experiences of the people and communities they come into contact with. This can bring with it a **greater diversity of thought and ideas**.
- Workers often get to **'write the rules'** themselves in EOBs and coops. This creates the space to be more involved in decision making, financial oversight, governance and day-to-day operations, as well as the overall mission of the organisation.
- Individuals in EOBs and coops often report that as a result of having more involvement, responsibility and opportunity, they have seen their **skills, confidence and sense of purpose** grow.
- Workers in EOBs and coops report feeling more secure in their job and a **greater sense of financial equity**.
- We witnessed a **significant positive impact on mental health and wellbeing** amongst people who have ownership or control in their workplace.

- The people we spoke to felt comfortable **'bringing their whole self'** to work – or as much of themselves as they wanted to.
- EOBs and cooperatives are **more naturally collaborative**, working with other people, groups and organisations who might normally be considered competitors.

We also heard individuals outline some of the challenges to models of worker ownership and control.

- **Worker control does not prevent power dynamics and hierarchies** forming amongst groups of people which can be damaging or harmful. Leaders in particular feel a burden of responsibility to recognise and act on this.
- As a means of legacy or succession planning, **employee ownership trusts can push workers into taking control or ownership in the workplace without full or enthusiastic consent** - for example, if there is a decision between a business closing or being sold off, or being taken on by workers who then must service an organisational debt to its founders. In this context it may not be a liberatory experience for workers.
- **Ownership or control in the workplace may not suit everyone**. Interviewees in leadership positions spoke to us about the challenges around supporting the whole workforce to realise their agency at work. It may simply be, though, that some people prefer a traditional, 'turn up and log on' 9-to-5 job without the added responsibility of ownership or control.
- Agency in the workplace is not seen as standard operating procedure or 'the norm'. In that context cooperative working, and to a lesser extent employee-owned organisations, are **perceived as being the**

preserve of more privileged groups of people. This is a challenge to the sector in the widest sense: How does agency in the workplace become the norm, rather than a 'nice to have'?

- Due to the unconventional nature of our approach, **it was sometimes difficult to secure interviews.**
- **One interviewee was not happy with our edited transcript** and fell out of contact – so their story was not ultimately published.

OUR THOUGHTS ON THE GENERATIVE APPROACH

- **Generative journalism offers a way for interviews to uncover or discover deep meaning in and of themselves, whether or not a story is published as a result.** We experienced this throughout the inquiry through thoughtful silences and moments of revelation from interviewees.
- We found that **interviewees were generally open** to the possibility-oriented, generative approach of our questions, which were designed to be deeply personal, sufficiently open-ended and anxiety inducing with a view to bringing out new energies, thoughts and perspectives.
- **People were sometimes taken aback by our approach,** asked for clarifications and occasionally had to be steered back to giving their own personal perspective. We often ad libbed around our initial sequence of questions.
- As expected, **we encountered some tension between organisational narratives ('the party line') and our interviewee's own personal perspectives.** All of our questioning and prompting sought out the latter.
- In particular, we found that, **'How has worker ownership or control changed your life?' was a good way of starting a personal line of thinking** around people's relationship with their work and workplace. One of our interviewers describes their experience of asking this question as being "like tapping a deep well".

Agency in the Workplace: Regather



Co-founder Gareth Roberts tells us how, and why, agency and control in the workplace should be available to everyone – not just those in the cooperative movement.

Regather is a co-operative of people working to build community through improved food systems and sustainability in Sheffield. They run an organic farm, a veg box scheme and many other community projects. They advocate and make change around sustainably sourced food, locally-based economics and democratically-controlled systems.

Regather was established as a worker-owned co-operative in 2010 and evolved into a community-owned society in 2018.

Co-founder and director Gareth Roberts told me about the commitments he holds, the challenging operating environment which exists in the UK, and why agency as an active practice in organisations is so important.

Tell me about Regather. Tell me about what's important?

My journey through Regather started off as a sole trader, then went on to being an off-the-shelf company limited by shares with me as the sole director. Then meeting Julia [Harrison] and Barney [Harris] to form a kind of 'Regather 1.0' in 2010. The premise of Regather in that first iteration was about getting the best of both self employment and employment, somehow hybridised into a cooperative model. So there was a lot of autonomy. But there was also accountability, you know, between one another.

There's an underpinning foundation of values and shared philosophy, ethics. That actually is what brings you together, and keeps you together, or not, as will happen over extended periods of time. Because it's not 'all peace and love, man'. Just because you're a worker coop, it doesn't mean you can somehow forgo the human condition and, importantly, the

environment in which that organisation exists – that hostile environment, where dominant cultures and huge challenges, such as social injustice and climate change, define so much of what we are about.

As somebody who works inside a community-owned organisation, do you feel like you have more agency in mitigating the worst effects of that hostile environment?

That's certainly the premise on which we set out to do what we're doing.

I was holding down zero-hour contracts with an institutional employer that had a degree of certainty, but only on a semester-by-semester basis, and the hours [were] very demanding.

And so we basically recognised that these were pervasive characteristics of the work environment – or just the economic environment in which we had to operate, because essentially, it's about making a living.

We did spend a lot of time exploring alternatives to cash – timebanking, local alternative currencies, local exchange trading schemes (LETS). We did a whole bunch of stuff over a period of years to mitigate, and try and reengineer... this relationship between ourselves, our labour and the economy.

How has having ownership in your workplace changed your life?

I hate this term of 'having skin in the game'...

So to make Regather happen I had to put up cash, real money upfront, at the beginning. I raised it from my own sweat and toil, and also persuaded others to relinquish money from their own sweat and toil to put into Regather. So for me, ownership comes with a certain degree of accountability, because essentially that money belongs to the next



Co-founders Barney and Julia in the kitchen at Regather Works.

generation of the family and friends who supported me in those early days, which includes my own children!

...so it made it slightly more precarious, is what you're saying.

To start with, it was a loan. If things didn't go well, then in theory I was closer to the front of the queue, but in reality that's often not how it can go for founding members.

After converting the loan into equity, the only way I can get that money back now is through withdrawing shares. As it happens, the preferred option is to convert those shares into a kind of annual credit on the Regather veg box scheme that I receive in the form of fruit and vegetables. Sometimes I joke that I'm in fruit and veg until I die. There is a good chance my children will have some for quite a while after that as well!

That's obviously the absolute bottom line. But the relationship I've had with the organisation, the kind of ownership... It comes with an enormous amount of responsibility. You become acutely aware of the relationship that exists between any one individual and the organisation that employs them, the job that they do, the role that they have, and the sense of ownership – or not – that the individual has. Those things really matter.

Is it fair to say that having agency in the workplace was a prerequisite in order to

honour that responsibility?

Well obviously, we designed the organisation in the way that we did to give us agency. So the evidence is there that it really, really matters. Because if it didn't matter, then if you think about the evolution of the organisation, we just wouldn't have bothered. It's not an easy evolution, but the best way to describe it was making a model out of not knowing what we wanted to do. And importantly, drawing on shared ethical values whilst making that model.

We described it very early on as creating a mutual local economy. There's articles in past editions of Now Then that explain precisely that in our very earliest stages of existence. And we knew what that meant in a theoretical, kind of, academic sense. But obviously

practices, or oppression, or power relationships, there's so many different reasons why somebody, somewhere – whether they knew it or not – fails to give, or blocks, or takes that agency away from people.

I want to turn the whole thing on its head, and rather than just saying, 'Oh, yeah, we practise agency, and we only can practise that in a cooperative organisation,' practising a particular way of doing things that agency actually could be accessible to anybody. As things stand we are a long way from this, because there's the injustice and the violence of the hostile [economic] environment we all have to live and make a living in. And this is something I've come to really recognise on a deeper, more personal level over the past year, that that environment, the society we live in is, on certain levels, in a variety of

I'VE QUALITIES WE'RE TALKING ABOUT – AGENCY, AND SO ON – SHOULD BE ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE WITHOUT HAVING TO PULL YOURSELF OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM AND CREATE SOME SORT OF LIFEBOAT VEHICLE

we didn't really know what that looked like in practice. That's what Regather does – it is a practice... We've done our best to design the agency in, we've practised it and we've retained it as much as we can.

I suppose the challenge I would make to wider society is that this agency doesn't have to be something that is exclusive to being a co-op. I want to believe in the fact that these are qualities that can and do exist in any organisation. It's just that in organisations where this extent of agency isn't a quality, it's because nobody's taken responsibility to design the organisation in that way. Whether it's laziness, or incompetence, or exploitative

ways, fundamentally hostile and fundamentally violent.

What's the best thing that could happen?

Have a situation where there's some, I suppose, solidarity. Let's start with that.

Recognising that we have far more in common than we have in difference, that actually by coming together in solidarity, we stand a much better chance of making the change we want and need to see happen.

Qualities we're talking about – agency, and so on – should be accessible to everyone

without having to pull yourself out of the mainstream and create some sort of lifeboat vehicle to exist in a sort of alternate universe. Because that, essentially, is still a mechanism of privilege.

I would argue that I come from a relatively privileged background. It has to be recognised. For me the relationship with that privilege is one of a burden of responsibility.

That's why so often the very bright examples of solutions that do exist get boxed into this kind of like, 'alternative'... 'It's the middle class, it's for affluent people, it's for those that can afford it.' It's a dilemma we must face up to – recognising the opportunity to be the change, whilst also being responsible for making that change as accessible as possible.

What we need to avoid is when people elsewhere in the population, who might significantly benefit from change, look at that change and go, 'That's not for us, that's for someone else.' This can and does happen, particularly in community development, and for me, as a practitioner, it's one of the hardest challenges I think we can face.

What commitments do you hold at your work that are important for you to honour?

That's a really difficult question. For me it is anyway.

So I mean, I have commitments to customers. As a business, the customer comes first. I mean, it's a cliché, isn't it? But it's so true.

I suppose the reason why [the customer] comes very close to the top of the list, if not at the top of the list, is the fact that particularly in a food business of our nature, our service is driven by customer demand. We offer a service, and those people who choose to purchase that service are practising a differ-

ent form of food system. And without them, that food system wouldn't exist.

What commitments does Gareth Roberts hold?

I have to be honest and say it's a commitment to myself, my own sense of identity and worth. But then obviously I have commitments to other people as well, particularly my family.

While that's certainly true, that we're all to some extent working for ourselves and our own self worth, you quite particularly have decided to draw your self worth and align it with a wider purpose.

Fundamentally, yeah. So that's a commitment to a sustainable future on this planet, commitment to nature. And it's a commitment to a community like Sheffield.

Agency in the Workplace: Wicker Pharmacy



Wicker Pharmacy on the 65th anniversary of the business.

In a new series, Wicker Pharmacy Managing Director Ellie Bennett tells Now Then about the employee-owned venture which has served Sheffield every day since 1952.

Associated Chemists (Wicker) Ltd has operated Wicker Pharmacy in Sheffield since 1952, opening its doors every day for more than 70 years in service to patients across the city, many of them from marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

In 2012 Wicker Pharmacy started the journey towards employee ownership. Today, around 75% of the business is owned by employees.

Ellie Bennett is Managing Director at Wicker Pharmacy. For the first piece in a new Now Then series exploring agency in the workplace, Ellie told me more about her experience of part-owning the business she has worked at for almost 35 years.

How has having ownership in your workplace changed your life?

I think it's given me the feeling that I have more autonomy than if I worked in a different organisation. Everyone here, hopefully, feels like they can make suggestions that will be listened to. I think lots of people feel a loyalty towards the organisation in a way that they wouldn't do otherwise. And so I feel quite cared for.

We had to open throughout Covid and, you know, that was a scary time for everybody. But I did feel that the organisation was doing its best to take care of their employees as much as they could, given the circumstances.

I think for me personally, I feel like if there was some particular avenue I wanted to pursue [at work], and I could persuade everyone it was a good idea, then I could do it. I wouldn't be restricted. So I guess: freedom.

In my own experience, the contrast between working in other organisations, let's say more traditionally-structured organisations, versus the way I work within Opus – there's a day and night difference there. Is that something that you've experienced in your own work life?

Well, I've worked here a really bloody long time! I've worked here, on and off, since I was 16, and I'm 50 now. There's lots and lots of people who've worked here a really long time.

I did work for the University of Portsmouth for a few years as a Pharmacy Researcher and that was a completely different kettle of fish – you know, voiceless beings making pronouncements about stuff. Whereas here, I understand the reasons for decisions that are made.

they've got accountants that are looking at the bottom line all the time. So their choices [are] around what makes the best profit. I'm not saying that they don't make ethical choices – they do – but we have more freedom.

So I guess that sense of everybody should be treated fairly, both within the organisation and patients, some who are really disadvantaged.

I had a look on the website before we started this chat, and the flavour of how you present what you do clearly comes through. Is that an important part, the way that you present yourself to the world?

Yes, absolutely. We want to be known as an ethical organisation. We're going to treat our employees well, treat the people of Sheffield

WE'VE GOT A COMMITMENT TO CONTINUE TO OFFER A SERVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF SHEFFIELD

What commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour in your work?

I guess a knowledge that what we do is ethically right, for the good of patients. I know because of the way that we're owned, we might take different decisions than other pharmacies, because we've got a commitment to continue to offer a service to the people of Sheffield.

Some of the decisions we make might be not particularly profit making, but we actually think it's a good thing to do. So as long as we can get to a point where we're breaking even at least, then we will try and pursue things. Whereas I think a lot of pharmacies – well, they're owned by [corporate] 'multiples',

well and do the best we can as a pharmacy. We don't always get it right, but we try our best!

I think it says on the site, you've basically never been closed since...

1952!

Is that some kind of record?

I don't really know! You would think so, wouldn't you? I think there are pharmacies that are older than ours, but I don't know if they're open every day-style pharmacies.

I mean, that takes a real commitment, especially during Covid. So many pharmacies had

to close because pharmacists were ill. You're not allowed to be open as a pharmacy unless a pharmacist is present.

I think, because of the kind of organisation it is, our pharmacists have been extremely willing to give up their spare time. If somebody else was off ill, people would say, 'Yeah, I can come in after I've already worked for a day. I'll come in and do a few hours this evening.' That kind of commitment – which I've found awe inspiring.

Lot of pharmacists have trained – obviously, we've been open since 1952! – lots of pharmacists in Sheffield either trained with us or have done some time working with us. So I feel like we have a soft spot in many people's hearts. And a lot of the dispensary staff work with us and then go on to work in hospitals and other sectors. So we have lots of people who will come back and do a shift here and there. I think that's partly because of the way our ownership is. It feels very much like an extended family. People go off and live somewhere else, but they come back and visit now and then. So that part of it is really nice.

What would you like to see happen next?

I would like to see us be fully employee owned. At the moment we've got an employee trust [which] owns a certain amount of shares. I think overall, we're probably 75% owned by employees, people who are working here right now. The remainder of the shares are owned by people who used to work here, or the spouses of people who used to work [here].

So I would like to see it become completely owned by the employee trust, which owns the shares on behalf of all the people who are employed at that moment in time. I think that would be a positive step forward, but unfortunately, we've been completely screwed on funding, so that has been a difficult aim to achieve over the last ten years. But I'm an optimistic person. Maybe one day – you might need a change of government – but at some point someone's going to realise that they should pay pharmacies properly.

Is there anything that you want or need from the community at large to achieve that aim of 100% current-employee ownership?

We did actually consider crowdfunding at one point. There was a point where we were



Wicker Pharmacy staff in 1952.

just like, 'This is ridiculous. We are a community resource. Actually, maybe what we should do is try and crowdfund the ownership of this and then leave it as a community resource forever for Sheffield.'

At the time – I think this was just before Covid – we were busy, so that was the end of the idea for now! Not saying that's something we might not revisit in the future.

If worker-owned organisations became the norm, how might communities in South Yorkshire change?

I think it might lead to more cooperation. We already have good links with a series of community groups. I think partially because of the way we work, if we can do it, and we think it's a good idea, we'll do it. I think other people would start thinking like that, rather than just being like, 'Oh, actually, no, that's not something we normally do.' You see what I mean?

For example, we've got within our building a charity called Sheffield Working Women's Opportunities Project (SWWOP). They work with trafficked women and sex workers. They do an amazing job. I feel like if there were lots of organisations who have that community base – who are actually thinking, 'What's best for our community right now?' rather than, 'What's best to get the maximum amount of money in, to give to somebody who lives in a different country?' – perhaps then everybody would benefit.

So it's that idea of serving a community with what you do as an organisation.

Yes. Because I think, if you've got people who live in the community actually steering the direction of the organisations within that community, hopefully they're going to decide to make choices for the good of the community. Then everybody wins.



Wicker Pharmacy in 1970.

Agency in the Workplace: The Canary

Writer and editor Maryam Jameela tells us how the popular online publication was taken over by its workers in 2022 – and how worker-led organisations can help people be their whole selves in their work.

Founded in 2015, The Canary is one of the UK's most popular politics news sites. In mid 2022, after its directors left the organisation, Canary writers discovered evidence of financial misconduct and decided to take matters into their own hands by setting up the Canary Workers' Co-op.

Maryam Jameela started as a writer at the Canary and now also acts as an editor, as well as a worker-member. Maryam told us more about the experience of converting the company into a worker-led collective and the reasons behind that decision.

Hello Maryam, and thanks for taking the time to talk to us today. Okay, so straight into it. How has having ownership and control in your workplace changed your life?

In quite an alarming way, I think. Because

initially, we wanted to become a co-op before any of the details emerged about the previous directors' activities. We write about other co-ops, we write about taking control from bosses. But it's weird that we hadn't done that ourselves.

The thing that accelerated the process of us actually becoming a co-op, and the workers actually having control of the whole organisation, was when the directors left. What they left behind was the full financial records, which the workers had never seen before.

So when we saw all of that, we realised that there had been some things that were illegal, that broke the law in relation to Companies House and the directors interactions with shareholders, and there were some things that were not illegal but [that] the team had a big problem with morally.

We were always told that our jobs were at risk and if we didn't work harder, we were going to lose our jobs. That wasn't true, and we were actually making a lot of money. The thing was, directors would keep that money themselves via bonuses and directors dividends. Again, some of that was legal, some of it was illegal.

When we uncovered this information, it was never really a question that we were gonna have to reckon with this in some way. It wasn't an option to cover that up... The thinking behind the co-op was something that seemed to be the logical next step, but also the next best step, emotionally and morally. It was the check and balance system that we needed, because these were our colleagues, these were people that we thought were our comrades.

There was a big sense of betrayal, and a lot of anger and hurt, because these people weren't who we thought they were. I think naturally, it's very human within that to be like, 'We can never let this happen again.'

Thinking about it from solely your perspective, why would you say that having ownership and control is particularly important?

I think that sometimes having hierarchical structure and having bosses for me has clouded ownership of my work.

I also think I hadn't realised how much that hampers what you feel able to do creatively. A lot of the writing that I do is political, and it's about dismantling certain structures. Having taken ownership of the Canary, I feel much more comfortable in doing the work that I actually want to do, rather than doing the work that I feel like I should be doing, because it's what a boss might want.

I feel like I've been able to check myself and not do things because it's the conventional

way to do it, or because it's the established way to do it.

On the point of the co-op, it strikes me that the success or failure of that is predicated on collective understanding and mutual appreciation. So on that point, what commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour in your work?

I think disagreement is really important in a collective structure. You have to be really open to disagreement, because I think otherwise it's very easy to replicate a more corporate structure.

I think that knowing that we're all in it together has allowed me to lean on my colleagues emotionally, maybe more than I would have felt comfortable doing if we weren't a co-op that hadn't been through all this stuff in the last couple of years. And I think that that is sometimes the only reason I'm able to keep writing about the things that I write about.

I realised that it's really important for me to be with people who are going to seek out those questions and those answers, because it's something they believe in, because it's something that is part of their outlook. They're not waiting for me to go, 'Hey, maybe we should care about this, right?'

But I also know that if I get stuck with something... there are people who I work with who understand the processes so much that I don't need to explain myself, I don't need to account for myself. Sometimes the conversation has already happened hundreds of times, so it's easier when it needs to happen again.

This sounds utopian.

I promise you it's not! [laughs]

But that shared outlook of mutual coordina-

tion and cooperation – that is the essence of how it's got to work, right? Again, slightly utopian lens on this, but I'm just going to come straight out and ask it: what's the best thing that can happen?

I think I would like to feel comfortable enough to have a break. I think I've been involved in a lot of projects where there's no separation between my life and my work because it's very much together. I think when I started doing that type of work, I felt obligated to continue doing it without a break, because it was the feeling of: if I don't do this I feel like I'm doing a disservice to the things that I care about, and I'm not doing enough.

I think the longer I do the work, I feel like the question that people ask me the most is:

I think it's really hard to blend together people of different political stripes. There's so much nuance in it because a lot of the time... these conversations will be described in terms of left wing and right wing, and I think in practice it's not really a useful way to think about it.

In practice with people that you work with, for something that is overtly political as the Canary it's really hard to blend those things together.

I think that there should be disagreement. And sometimes it needs to be okay that that disagreement means that there's no way forward, whether that's in terms of a specific article or a direction of content or the entire co-op.

WORKER-LED ORGANISATIONS ARE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE YOUR WHOLE SELF IN YOUR WORK

what makes you hopeful? The only answer I've roughly been able to muster up over the last decade has been to know that when something fails, there's something to learn and you put it down, and you leave it. If you can't do something, there's a good reason why you can't.

I think the thing that would make me happiest is knowing that I could step away from something and my internal sense of self and how I see my place in writing about anti-racism wouldn't just completely cave in on itself.

Sounds perfectly sensible to me. It also perhaps begs the question: what do you need, what conditions are required or what inputs are needed from the community or from the team, or even from yourself, in order to make that happen?

I think there is a tendency amongst people in co-ops, because they're so difficult to set up and they're relatively rare, to scramble to preserve it at any cost. 'At any cost' often means the emotional, mental, physical wellbeing of the cooperative members and that can't be acceptable, because that is exactly what a capitalist structure is, where you're supposed to chip away at yourself in order to sustain this machine that is bigger than you.

Assuming for a moment that this kind of movement does continue to spread as it is demonstrably already doing, and if worker controlled organisations actually became the norm, how do you think communities, specifically in South Yorkshire, would change as a result?

I feel like it's become more apparent over

the course of the pandemic, but it feels like people in general are more panicked and hurt and grieving, and there's a lot of loss. And I feel like worker co-ops are about bringing forward the connections that are already there without necessarily tying those connections to formal structure.

Within that, I very strongly feel like I've been in other situations with cooperatives or collectives where the fundamental point of the workers co-op is understood to be that we get rid of hierarchy. I think there's a difference between hierarchy and responsibility. In practice, it doesn't work for everything to be flat, because people are different and people have different experiences.

At the Canary, for example, our current editorial team is made up of two brown women, a couple of trans people. We're all working class, we all have different sexualities... That's pretty rare for an editorial team. But all of us have different needs and different experiences and different interpretations of those things.

Somebody's identity on paper is different from how those identities work in practice. For example, whilst we have a majority brown editorial team, we have a majority white newsroom. If you leave these things to chance, naturally there will be more and more white people. We've all agreed that's not what we want, so it's our responsibility to check in on that.

I think that it makes sense within workers' organisations that there are going to be people who take on more of a leadership role and I don't think that's something we should shy away from. Because I feel like the point is more to give everybody the best chance, and the difference between something that is 'fair' and something that is 'equitable'. I think equity is something you work out and 'fair' is something that is more on paper. It might make sense on paper, but it doesn't work in reality.

People will often talk to me about how Sheffield and South Yorkshire have a tradition of trade union activism and activism in general.

The logo for Canary workers' co-op is displayed on a bright yellow rectangular background. It features a stylized black bird icon to the left of the word "CANARY" in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below "CANARY", the words "workers' co-op" are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.

CANARY
workers' co-op

And we do, but even within that activism history, there's racism embroiled in it. We can't understand trade union history in Sheffield, in South Yorkshire, without understanding that it was a white supremacist goal in some way, because white supremacy always seeks to maintain itself. It does that by reaching for what it knows, and what it knows is other groups of white people who end up shutting out communities of colour.

You could use the example of trade union activism in South Yorkshire as an example of fairness, but we know that it wasn't. So I feel like ideally, collectives in Sheffield and worker-led organisations should give people the tools that they need to be like: What am I missing here? What am I missing in my experience? And through my identities, what can I literally not see, that could be in front of me, that somebody else could point out to me?

I feel like worker-led organisations are an opportunity to be your whole self in your work.

Hopefully, the idea of worker-led organisations should be that you can bring forward the connections that are already there, but also give yourself the time and the space to nurture those connections, so you don't fall into the conventional way to do things.

Agency in the Workplace: Doncaster Skate Co-op

Emma and Lewis tell us about how their new co-op took on Twisted Skate Park in Doncaster – a hub for the city’s skating community – and their experiences of control and ownership at work.

Earlier this year, a group of local people teamed up to buy Doncaster’s Twisted Skate Park as a worker co-operative. Previously run as a profit-making business by someone not connected to the scene, it’s now headed by a team of skaters who have big plans for making the space more accessible and community focussed.

Emma Plant and Lewis Johnson told us more about their experiences so far – and how the joy of riding and building community is fueling their work in one of the UK’s newest cities.

Hey both! Thanks so much for having me in your awesome park. There’s some serious nostalgia happening for me here! So let’s get straight into it, shall we: How has ownership and control in the workplace changed your life?

Emma: This whole thing is pretty life changing, to be doing something like this.

For some of us, it’s been a really big learning curve, having to suddenly be responsible for everything and learn all these things about running a business that we were never privy to before, because of the way hierarchies exist in workplaces.

But this is what it is – you just turn up every day and you do the work, and all the work gets done by you... It’s super empowering, because usually you don’t have control of what your day-to-day is.

Lewis: For me, I’ve come from construction for the past 12 years, where I have been just told to turn up to a job and get it done. No supervision from employers, because I can be 50 miles away from them on a construction

site. So it's just a difference in dealing with people.

Emma: It's just a whole new learning curve of new co-workers, having to balance out the natural hierarchies that do tend to come out as well, and figure out how to work around those [issues] addressed in ourselves and see them for what they are, because they're going to come up!

On that basis, why would you say that ownership or worker control is important to you in this context, as opposed to other potential operational methods?

Lewis: I think with the skate park, it needs to be controlled by the workers on a day-to-day [basis].

We run sessions that start at half 12 on a Thursday. We expect one person and if one person turns up and gets that practice time, we're happy with that. It's not about the money. As much as we will understand that businesses need money to run and function and to be prosperous in the future, if you're sitting looking at a spreadsheet and profit margins in an office, not on site, you're not gonna give the community what it needs.

Emma: We get full and total say... as to what to do with everything that we're building

here. We don't have to refer to anyone else that's higher than us who isn't in the culture.

Lewis: And it could reflect back to the wage bill as well... We've seen the value in putting the unpaid hours in, whereas if you employed somebody they will just sit on reception and do what they need to do for their hourly rate. That will not make this place survive.

Emma: One of the reasons that we made it into a worker run co-op was because we wanted everyone that ever got involved here to feel like they were part of it, that they owned a part of it and they had that responsibility for making it what it is.

We came from a wide community and network of people. We just want to keep tapping into that network and boosting everyone up with us. That's only going to work if we are run by ourselves and not run by some big, faceless, nameless boss.

Within this community, as well as the park itself, what commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour your work?

Lewis: Oh, that's a bit of a vague question! [laughs]

With the commitments, it's just being here every day. We have young teenagers who

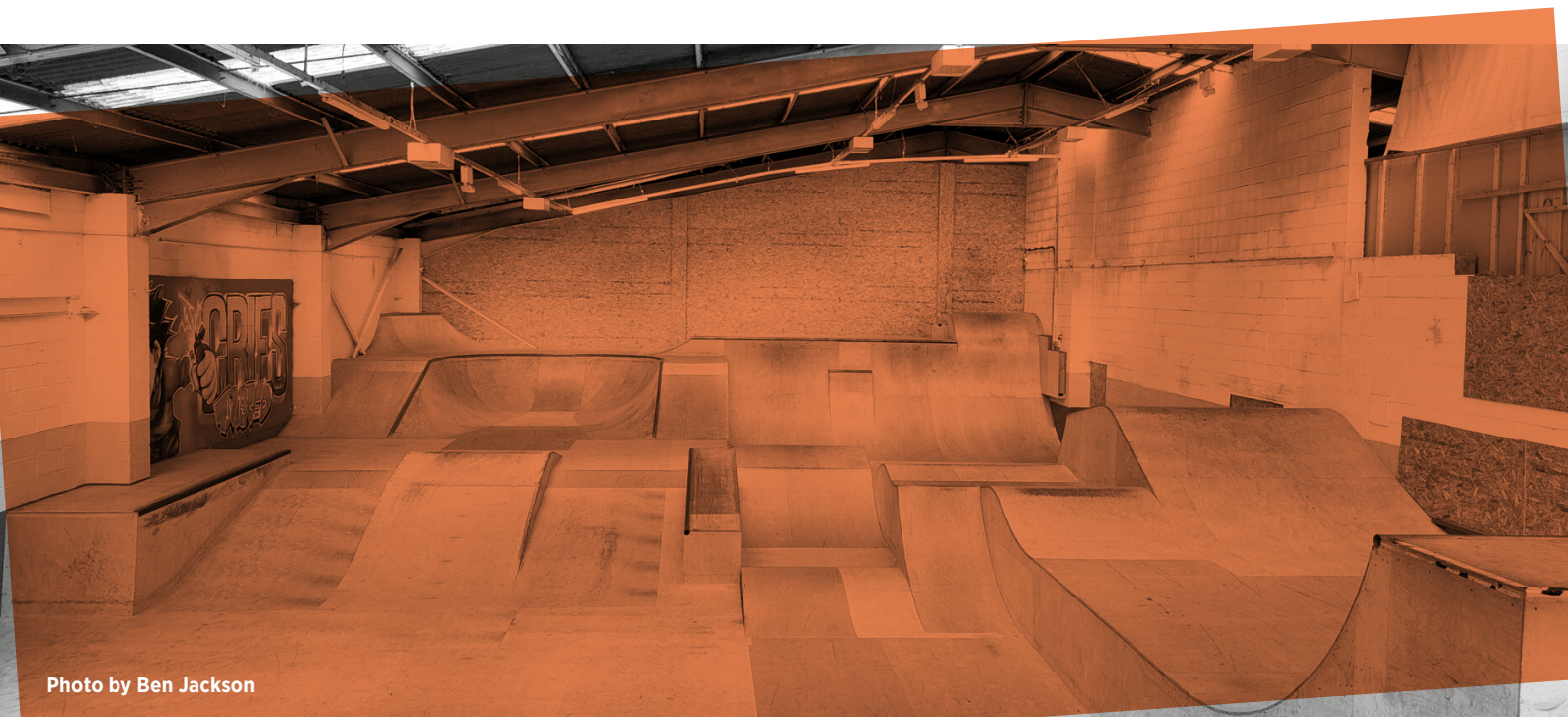


Photo by Ben Jackson

will get on a train from home to Doncaster, do the big journey by themselves. If we are not here when we've said we're going to be here, that is a massive disappointment and leaves people stranded in a city that they don't know. And the commitment to this place. Just personally, I love skateboarding – my whole life is skateboarding – and so I was here every day anyway. I'll be here every day no matter what.

'Commitment' sounds like it's meant to be a hard thing: 'I'm committed to this and I'm going to do the grind'. No, I just wake up and I'm like, 'I run a skatepark and I'm gonna go smash it!' [laughs]

FOR ONCE IT FEELS LIKE WE GET TO WRITE THE RULES

Emma: And I think, to add on to that, commitment to skateboarding and the culture and to scooter riding and everyone who does extreme sports, because we're a teaching environment here as well. It's just sharing the love for it and the passion, getting as many people on a skateboard or scooter or whatever, because there's so much freedom and joy to be found when you're riding.

**What does 'good' look like for this place?
What's the best thing that could happen?
And what would you like to see happen
next?**

Lewis: It's all about the generations. It's just a long process of nurturing all action sports. Not just skateboarding, but scooter riders, BMX, inline [skating], everything, so that they can progress, get competition ready... [or get] ready just to teach and start up their own tuitions.

Skating outdoors, unless you're a fully-grown male, can be quite scary and quite intimidating. And this is key: this is a safe space where people can come and practice and not fall off the skateboard and end up with glass in their hand.

Emma: I'd say that the dream is to get as many people on skateboards and scooters and whatever their thing is as possible, but we want to start doing school outreach and just get bigger and better and make the ramps a lot more accessible... We need things that are suitable for all ages and all abilities. I think because we're a community hub, we have access as well to multiple cross-sections of people from all different walks of life. To be able to meet them, converse with them and share ideas, experiences and things like that is a really powerful thing.

We get a lot of at-risk kids that come through our doors... Even if they're not skating, they can come and chill out. We want to be everything that the community in Doncaster needs, because we've got the space for it, we've got the love for it. We're all community builders and just want to turn Doncaster into the awesome city it really could be if it had the drive and the people to do it. These people are everywhere, so it's just giving them the space and the resources they need.

If worker controlled organisations became the norm, how do you think communities in South Yorkshire, particularly Doncaster, might change?

Lewis: I think workers' mental health would massively improve. To get back into my construction past, I've decorated a care home that was owned by the people who lived in it. They employed the staff themselves, they employed the receptionists, and it was all owned by the people who were in care. It was the nicest, cleanest, most vibrant place I've ever decorated. Coming into any place where

people have control and say in what's going on just, I think, makes people happy. Even the workers were happy, because it was all close communication. It wasn't going through channels above to come back down.

I think the regular ways workplaces are structured is quite manipulative. It's set up in a way to abuse the worker for as much financial gain as possible.

Emma: This feels like the most natural way to run something and do something. I've worked through a lot of jobs where there's been a big boss sitting behind the glass doors, and you can't go and talk to him about anything. It's all through secretaries and hierarchies. You're just there earning someone else money and making someone else's dream come true. With worker-owned collectives, you're making your money and you're making your dream come true.

Through this process, we've learned so much about the business world and all the icky bits of it – how unfair it is and how the rules are clearly written by businessmen for themselves. For once it feels like we get to write the rules and we actually get to be in control. I think if everyone could do that in their own work, our workplaces would be so much better. We'd have a higher quality of things or whatever that we're actually putting out there.

Lewis: And I'd say it's a lot more possible

than what people might think. Even if it's not a cooperative, and you just set up a company for yourself, go out to be a window cleaner for yourself – do it, fail, learn how the system works.

Emma: It's about community. Nobody can do anything alone in this world. We need each other.

That's what working as a collective is – not doing it as an individual. It's doing it as a collective of people, knowing that what affects you will affect the collective, and what's good for you is good for the collective... I hope everyone gets to work or run or become a member of a coop because it's a different way to do business.



Agency in the Workplace: ESP Projects



The management team at ESP Projects, with Jason Francis (R).

Jason Francis, Managing Director at the Sheffield IT company, tells us how worker ownership transformed his life.

ESP Projects is a managed IT service provider formed in Sheffield in 2002 with the aim of creating a sustainable business with social aims and objectives. ESP provides services to small and medium sized businesses, primarily in Sheffield but also nationwide, while prioritising employment for people in the city from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Following a restructuring of the business starting around 2008, ESP moved towards an employee ownership model, with workers now owning more than 40% of the venture. Managing Director Jason Francis told us about his personal journey since joining ESP.

How has having ownership in your workplace changed your life, Jason?

There's a bit of a history lesson, with this one, for it to make any sense in the final context!

When I came into the business, there was a policy that meant that once I was a permanent member of staff that the [initial employee ownership of] 8% would be divided in two, so I ended up with four shares. As time progressed and we employed more people, that 8% was diluted further and further, until there was only one [share], at which point, the model came into question. So, [ESP founder] Morgan [Killick] set out on a plan to try and change that model.

In 2014, I bought Morgan's private shares and his staff shares, which collectively amounted to around about 57% of the business. I donated 8% of my shares to existing staff. We now have just over 40% staff ownership.

So going back to the beginning, which was the question: what does staff ownership mean to me? What it means to me, from my

point of view, is opportunity. If I had not been a shareholder of the four shares which Morgan kindly donated to me [...] then I wouldn't have had the opportunity to purchase Morgan's private sector shares. So as an individual, the biggest thing that's come out of that entire story is opportunity.

How has that changed your life specifically?

It's totally transformed my life. Not that I had a bad life in any way, shape or form before my ownership, but I lived in a relatively disillusioned community of Wybourn in Sheffield. Opportunities there were few and far between, I would say. Of course, the city as a whole offers a plethora of opportunities to everybody. But you have to go out and seek it, and in those disadvantaged areas, some-

talking about an individual neighbourhood; Sheffield as a whole is important to us. That's primarily because that's where we want the majority of our customers to come from. So our staff should come from there too. So that's number one.

And people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It's important to us that we offer those types of people the same opportunities that somebody with a more advantaged background would be offered. So in the business we've got people with disabilities, we've got people from different ethnic backgrounds, we've got people that have different sexual orientations.

We have hired over the years a whole raft of apprentices. There's probably 15 or 16 people

SOMETIMES PEOPLE AREN'T EVEN AWARE THAT THERE'S OPPORTUNITY AT THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE

times people aren't even aware that there's opportunity at the other side of the fence.

Because before I came to ESP, I was struggling to find the opportunities [...] In joining with Morgan, those opportunities arose. Now I live a comfortable lifestyle with what I consider to be a healthy salary, with good benefits from the business. My family is well looked after. My son now works in the business. It's transformed my life.

What commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour in your work with ESP Projects?

When Morgan started the business [...] ideals were that people would be employed from the local community. By the local community, we mean specifically Sheffield. We're not

in the business that have stayed with us that started as apprentices. So it's important that we offer opportunities to young people, but also people from diverse backgrounds. And it's important that they're committing something back to the local community, being Sheffield.

Now you're here, what would you like to see happen next?

We've just broken the £3 million turnover barrier. I've got a very clear personal plan, in that I want to have a choice to exit when I'm 55. I want to be in a position where personally, my finances would allow me to do that either by continuing to earn a living from my shareholdings from ESP, or by selling my shares. Most likely by transitioning my shares to my son, who's worked in the business for

around five years now. We also have two daughters at home and so there might be a time where they get involved in the business too.

To do it in a really comfortable way, the business would need to be turning over £10 to £15 million. Then certainly the staff here will have been well compensated for their time at ESP as well. So that's the personal desired outcome.

In terms of what will the business offer? The product with the biggest potential is our Core software offering, that we've built ourselves that could be taken off the shelf by any business across the world.

What's the best case scenario?

That's the best case scenario, because the ratio which we have to increase our staff versus our turnover would reduce. In essence, it's an off the shelf product that can be sold to hundreds or thousands of businesses without us needing to increase our staffing levels.

What would you need most from the community to make that happen?

Well, I guess if we're talking about Sheffield businesses, we would need more Sheffield businesses to come to the table to look at the product and to help us get it off the ground, but also to help us develop it in ways that are suitable for their businesses. We're not trying to create a product here that is ESP focused; we're trying to create a product that's focused on whatever business needs it. And hopefully our primary customer base would be charities and third sector organisations, in keeping with our history.

Focusing on worker-owned organisations – if that became the norm, how might communities in South Yorkshire change?



Well, I mean, there are a lot of really, really big software companies in the world, but also in the UK. And if the Core product really did start to fly, then we would want to stick to our core principles of employing local people.

Again, the word opportunity comes into play. If we can drive the income levels and the profitability of our business up to multiples of where they are today, then we can drive multiples up in terms of employment opportunities for local people.

What meaning was made for you, if any, by the conversation we just had?

Okay, so to add a little bit to the personal story, and starting back towards the beginning – I had a child when I was 15 years old. School life ended in a very difficult scenario, in that I had a child whilst needing to deliver and perform in exams. Thankfully, I've got a really, really strong family around me, so it wasn't as much of a problem as it could have been.

The biggest thing that the business has offered me is opportunity, and development and understanding, and certainly interaction with people from lots of different backgrounds in such a way that I feel like I'm relatively sympathetic or empathetic of lots of people from all different backgrounds that stands me in good stead.



Jason Francis, Managing Director at ESP Projects.

crucially right smack bang in the middle of my own community in between Manor Park and Wybourn. There are many, many things going on in that area that relate back to the history of Sheffield itself, but also that relate to local people and opportunities, which is where we started the conversation about myself. One such example of that is the Rhubarb Shed Cafe. A guy there had an opportunity to start a business [...] and now it's a jewel in Sheffield's crown.

I had to teach my own children how they should live their lives. And I don't think that would have happened if this business wasn't connected to the third sector businesses that it was connected to.

It's important to say that the business' biggest asset is certainly its people. We really try to engage with staff in such a way that they feel like a family, and that is important as we continue to grow, that that ethos stays through the business.

Who do you know who is working on something that you admire and whose story deserves to be shared?

I think it's not an employee-owned business that I want to bring into the conversation, but it is one that employs lots of local people and has lots of local volunteers – Green Estate. It's

Agency in the Workplace: Gripple

Gripple's Riverside Works in Carbrook, near Meadowhall.



Our series on worker ownership continues with Sheffield manufacturing company Gripple. Team leader Liz Lake tells us about her experiences in part-owning the company she works for.

Gripple was founded in 1984 by businessman Hugh Facey. Starting with a simple manufacturing innovation – a wire-joining device made in a disused furniture factory in Birley – the business now trades internationally with a wide range of products and divisions.

Facey made the decision to convert the business to employee ownership in the 90s, with workers able to buy shares in their company from 1994. Since 2011, Gripple has been 100% owned by its workers, who can choose to invest more or less in the company, driving a culture of engagement and motivation which feeds into collective financial return. Gripple team leader Liz Lake told us about her experience of working at the 20th largest employee-owned business in the UK.

**Hello Liz! Let's jump straight in, shall we?
How has having ownership and control in**

your workplace changed your life?

Hello! I'm a team leader at Gripple, so for me one of the things that I think it really helps with is that all my team are really engaged. It's easy for me to ask things of them, and to explain changes and new processes, because it benefits all of us.

From that point of view, it makes a massive difference for me [as a team leader]. I don't have to 'sell' things to people – they already understand. And if they don't understand, I can show them, I can explain to them, how this will be better for us. It's our business. And so yeah, it definitely makes my life in that sense a lot easier.

I can see how that makes sense. Holistically, the team has all got more equal representation. Kind of an extension of that – why is

ownership or control important to you?

I think because it allows us to make decisions for the people. It allows us to decide to do things not because it's necessarily always the best financial decision, but because we can. We can choose to do things because it's going to allow our people to progress, we can share the benefits with them. So it just makes making those decisions easier. I can do things for the right reasons – not always financial benefit, I guess.

One of the things that I'd say how Gripple's changed my life is that I've found a new confidence in myself, because my voice is listened to – not all the time, you know, sometimes [laughs]. But because I've found somewhere where what I've got to offer is of benefit, it's built a confidence in me. I can

but it still didn't have the same sort of feel. It was still one person making a decision and you've just been told that's what you're going to do. Whereas with my team here, we sit down once a week and we will look at the sales figures and stuff. For me, that seems quite normal now.

What is the best thing that could happen? And what would you like to see happen next?

I've recently been elected to Glide, which is our employee ownership group, so I'm a Glide rep now.

I guess for me personally, the best thing that could happen is for me to learn about more employee-owned businesses, different models and how they're different to ours, and

I'VE FOUND A NEW CONFIDENCE IN MYSELF, BECAUSE MY VOICE IS LISTENED TO

speak to different people [from] any different backgrounds... about Gripple. And I think I am passionate about it as well. That definitely helps!

What commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour?

Being open and honest. I like being able to tell people the full picture, because if you're asking somebody to do something, it's nice to be able to tell them the reason why you're asking them.

I can go down and share our daily sales figures, I can show people the business performance, and I can be completely open.

I mean, I've worked in some big corporations and then also small businesses. There were four of us in the last place where I worked,

perhaps offer different things to the business. And then maybe just share that with my colleagues, my team, and help them understand why we are quite special. But also if there's anything else that we could include, as a wider business.

We've got four Glide reps: a team leader, someone who works on my team, a packing operative, a warehouse operative and we've got a quality engineer. So we then go represent our site at the Glide board meetings, and we can question MDs [managing directors] on any business decisions. We'll read their board report beforehand and we can drill them for more information that we can then share with people.

It takes everybody out of their box and really further just evens the playing field.

What do you feel like you need from the wider community in order to make those goals happen?

To be honest, I know that we are quite well known within employee ownership circles. I know that we reach out to businesses, but they're starting to reach out towards [Gripple] more and more. So that's brilliant. We can share our model, but also learn about how theirs differs. Recently we met with *Go Ape*, and they've recently moved over to employee ownership. So yeah, that's a way that we're enabling more enrichment and we're getting involved with their business.

If worker-controlled organisations became the norm, how would communities in South Yorkshire change, do you think?

In a more engaged workforce, there'd be a lot more investment, probably locally, I'd have thought, because one of the things that people like about Gripple is that no one's creaming the profits off. We're not working for 'the man' or anything – it's all for us. We're taking it back ourselves through dividends.

We also manage our own investment, whether that be in buildings and premises or machinery, and people as well. That's done in all of our regions. Locally, we can invest in, say, training for people and improving the factories, buy new machines, which we would source, again, locally.

So yeah, I think that the investment and the growth.... It'd be amazing.

Was there anything that has come up whilst you've been chatting to me today that's made more meaning for you?

Yeah, definitely.

I know how special Gripple is and I'm quite proud to be an ambassador for Gripple and

tell everybody about it. But it just reminds you about how different we are and how empowering that is, and the confidence that it gives people. When you start to think of it, it puts it into perspective why this is such a special place to work.

Agency in the Workplace: Sheffield Fruit Trees



Oli Sumerling of local worker coop and social enterprise SFT talks about what the team is doing and how working cooperatively should be an “everyday, normal way of doing things”.

Sheffield Fruit Trees cultivates fruit trees across its two sites in Sheffield, with a view to widening access in public and communal spaces, sharing growing skills and building community in the city. The small team of Daniele, Julie and Oli specialise in trees that are well suited to the Northern climate, including many varieties which are unique to Sheffield.

SFT started life as an offshoot of urban fruit harvesting project Abundance in 2014, branching off into independent operation from 2017 as both a worker co-operative and a social enterprise.

We spoke to Oli Sumerling about his experiences of worker agency within Sheffield Fruit Trees and what the future holds for the group.

So the first question is about your own experience of being in what, as I understand it, is a cooperative and has a social enterprise aspect to it. How has having that ownership and control in the workplace changed your life personally?

This isn't necessarily exactly the case for Julie and Daniele, but for me individually, most of my post-uni working life has been, with a couple of exceptions, through working for organisations or businesses that have some aspect of collective ownership. So this work, being part of Sheffield Fruit Trees, is more like a continuation of that for me. I can point to various examples of where I've just been working for someone who's managing me. But I've got a few formative experiences of working in other cooperative models, some bigger than this. So yeah, this doesn't feel

like the exception – this more just tallies with my other experiences.

So it's an extension of your values and your belief in that way of doing things?

Yeah, I mean, without going on too much of a tangent, working as self employed in my other work, doing building and carpentry work, that feels like less of a political statement, if you like. With Sheffield Fruit Trees it definitely has more importance than just the practical side of things that we are self governed, self managed, and we also have a flat hierarchy.

I guess, for me, now – compared to, say, five or ten years ago – a lot of those points are a bit less to the forefront, in my mind. I'm more focused on trying to get things done. The framework is not incidental, but it's less of what I'm focused on, I suppose.

You used the word 'political'. What do you mean when you use that word?

Well, in the sense that by running this project, this business, we each have an equal stake in it, and we each have an equal say in the decisions we make, and a lot of agency over it, effectively. That feels, in a lot of cases, a bit at odds with the way that things are organised in society.

But I don't feel like we're doing something new, necessarily. Maybe in some people's eyes it would be 'radical', in inverted commas, but that framing of it doesn't feel like something that I need to grab onto. I more like the idea [that] it's a bit of an everyday, normal way of doing things that makes sense, especially when we're in a small group.

In terms of community access to fruit trees, what's the best thing that could happen there? Wouldn't it be great for every street or every neighbourhood to have its own

orchard?

Yeah, I think the vision for exactly what that looks like is a bit up for grabs. I don't feel like we've got an idea of a specific template.

I think we recognise that we need to do more than just grow trees, grow an apple tree and plant it somewhere and then, like magic, all that fruit is going to go into needy people's mouths. It obviously needs to be a more joined-up approach. So that's why we're also really interested in the education and skills side of things now, in terms of pruning and understanding how to manage fruit trees. I guess that's our vision of what we want to have an influence on. I don't know if I'm directly answering your question...

I guess you've described it in terms of, it's working on the conditions to bring that stuff about. Just plonking some trees down somewhere isn't going to achieve all the things that you want to achieve, in terms of a better connection and a better understanding of how food can be produced in a more regenerative, ecologically sustainable way. And in terms of community buy-in, that's something you have to build – it's not something you can just expect to spring up as a tree does.

I feel quite aware of the limitations of what we can do through this project, you know. We're obviously a small group, we're trying to make this thing pay its way and we don't have limitless resources, in terms of time in particular. So there's stuff going on, which we're aware of – there's the ShefFood group, which we aren't really engaging with that much. We have connections with some of the other groups who are involved. I think there's stuff that we aren't doing that we would like to be doing that's about engaging with that more holistic approach.

In terms of what you're building and the rea-

sons you're doing it, what do you need from the community, the wider communities, to make that happen?

Well, I suppose there's some things that we're already getting – people supporting us through their custom, through buying trees off us and coming to workshops and coming to volunteer workdays that we have up on the new site. So that's all really important – that's helped us get to where we are now, helped us build it to the point of practically needing to take on another site, and just gen-

WE RECOGNISE THAT WE NEED TO DO MORE THAN JUST GROW TREES... IT OBVIOUSLY NEEDS TO BE A MORE JOINED-UP APPROACH

erally growing.

What about in terms of your average Sheffield resident? What can they do to support and be part of what you are trying to achieve?

Well, there's definitely been – particularly around here, but probably other bits of the city as well – community gardens springing up more and more. I think that's a really good model for creating spaces where not only food producing plants, but more greenery, more plant life can be brought into urban areas. So I think that's something that we see is a way that more food production can be brought in really close to people's doorsteps. Obviously then those spaces need to be

created and engaged with by people who live around them... But I think for anyone who's already got that interest, that would be a really direct way.

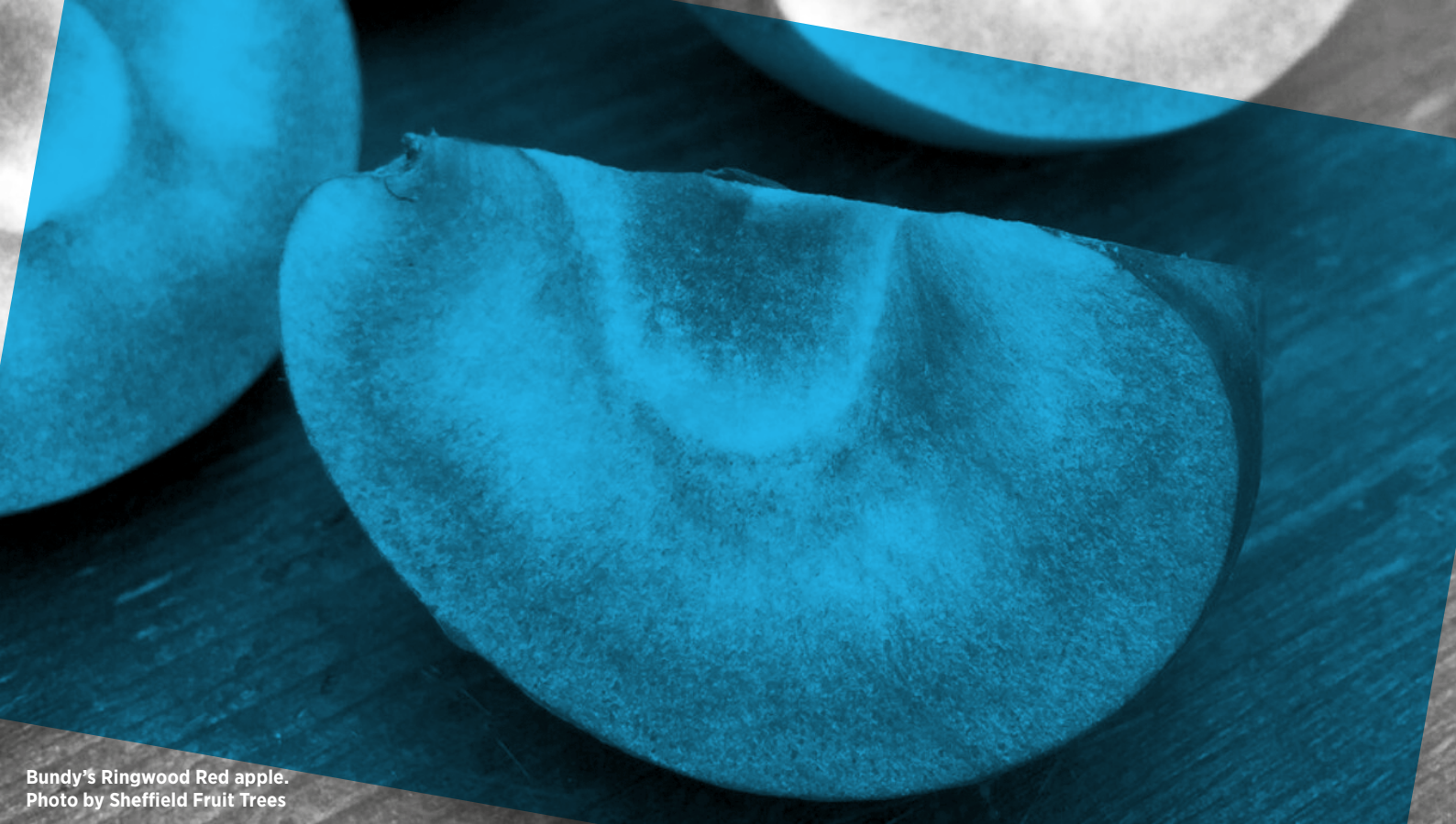
And one of the things we've been trying to develop over the last year and a half or so is this Community Tree Fund, which is where we invite people to donate to the fund, and then that fund pays for some trees that we've grown to be donated to any kind of public or publicly accessible space that doesn't have fruit trees planted on it.

Going back to the structure, ethos, ways of working. If all organisations, companies, groups in South Yorkshire were operating under a worker-controlled or worker-owned model, how would that change things? What would that look like?

Well, hopefully we'd be more focused on service and quality of service than profit and syphoning off surplus money. That's something that feels quite fundamental to why we're doing this – that at the same time as we want to create paid livelihoods for the members of Sheffield Fruit Trees, we also want any excess money on top of that to go back into the business and furthering the aims of what we're trying to do.

So in the same way, if that was applied to buses – would be the classic, obvious example – or refuse collection, these bread-and-butter things, then I would think that it would be for the benefit of people using those services rather than businesses that are providing them.

What we're doing is a very small group, where we are obviously all very engaged in it in a day-to-day way. I don't know too much about what structures exist for organisations that have thousands and thousands of people to then be worker-controlled or more democratically run, but I'm definitely interested in



Bundy's Ringwood Red apple.
Photo by Sheffield Fruit Trees

the idea.

What meaning, if any, has been made for you in this conversation that we've just had? Have you discovered anything or had new thoughts about what you do and why you do it?

In terms of us envisaging more fruit trees in public spaces, what route we're taking to make that happen, and the already existing web of organisations that are working on the local food system, and that being something that we probably don't really have time, or the resources to fully engage with... It would be great if we could do that more.

I guess more broadly, we've got our own individual perceptions on what it means for us to be a workers co-op and we come to that with our own experiences. It's interesting to hear myself slightly de-emphasise the radical credentials of us being a workers coop. It makes me realise that it's important to keep other people's experiences fed into my own.

Agency in the Workplace: Airmaster



Managing Director Lisa Pogson details how the local heating and cooling company moved to being owned by its workers – and what the future holds for Airmaster.

Airmaster is an employee-owned heating and cooling company based in Sheffield with a national reach.

Starting out in air conditioning, the business has expanded to become a £9m turnover mechanical services contractor, which unusually for its sector has been owned by its workers through an employee ownership trust since 2021. The trust was set up to create a path to retirement for its founders, as well as helping to safeguard its working culture and build deeper involvement from its workers.

Lisa Pogson, Managing Director at Airmaster, told us more about the transition from traditionally-owned business to employee ownership trust – and what could happen once the company's founders have been fully bought out by its workers.

How has having ownership in your workplace changed your life?

I've been with the business for a while, pretty much since it started in '92. It was my brother-in-law's business which he started, literally on his own in a van. I was helping out with bookkeeping and things like that and came to the business full time in 2001.

In 2021, we managed to find a way for the founders to sell the business... [The founders] said, well, why can't we do that ourselves and let our own team run it [through an employee ownership trust]? So that's basically what they've done.

What's changed now is everybody in the business is part of the team, literally part of the team because they've got a say in what



Lisa Pogson.

happens... We are still paying off the founders, which is a challenge because you're using the profitability of the business.

But it also means that people are working for that profit for a different reason – because then at the end of that they will have their say, which is great. People have said that they feel much more involved, much more in control. As MD, that is a really nice feeling – that we are making a legacy for the team that we've built. So that's how it's changed my life.

Do you have any commitments that you hold that are important to you to honour in your work?

I think part of the reason... this type of employee ownership trust was a good fit for our business was because [the company] was dealt with as if it was giving people a say already. So the fit was good and it's carried on that way.

I still feel committed to the team. I think I am a little bit more mindful when I do things that there's a lot of people behind that decision –

it's not just me. I'd like to think that I have the best interest at heart, and I always have, but I think it does feel a bit more important to me now that it's their business.

Why is that important to you?

Because it's always been a bit of a family business. It started out that way and we've kept saying that it's got a family feel.

In 2016, we lost our joint MD... He had cancer and passed away in 2019, and part of our plan was that we were going to do a buy-out. We didn't know about the employee ownership trust [option], but we knew that we wanted to do it in some sort of way to involve all the team in it, because we wouldn't be able to afford to do it on our own.

I think that family feel, that ethos is carried on through me. We did go through two trade sales that didn't work out, and I'm so glad they didn't, because they wouldn't have kept the ethos of the business, the family feel.

What would you like to see happen next?

I'd love that we can pay off the founders, which hopefully will be in 18 months' time. Because that is a challenge and obviously you're eating money while you're growing. So I'd like to see the founders paid off and a bit more of a move towards an employee council. I don't like the word council really, but a bit of a cooperative thing. I have been speaking to Cooperatives UK and just trying to get a feel for having a bit more of a committed team.

I'd rather people [at the company] get a bit more involved. We are trying to move that way, with having staff opinion without pushing too hard, because some people genuinely don't want to own a business and we sort of impose that on them. But I still know that they want to have a say in what we're doing.

What do you need from the community to make that happen?

I do need the Airmaster community to get a bit more understanding of what it's like to be an owner, so I'm trying to get a bit more push towards that. The [South Yorkshire] Ownership Hub... I think what that has given me is some extra connections that I didn't have and didn't utilise. Before we did the trust, I didn't utilise the Employee Ownership Association enough and I think I need to use that a bit more, and Cooperatives UK, because they've got lots of people that have done it.

When me and Mark were originally looking at how we could buy Airmaster, Gripple was one of the companies we looked at. They have been really helpful in supporting us and hosting things for us, and really open about

life and I'm 54. People are quite parochial, but they're also quite proud of where they come from. I think it would help to support growth in the area because people are too, 'It's always the boss who tells me what to do and the boss is bad,' and it's very difficult to do that if you're the boss. I've seen that from when my brother-in-law started the business and then all the things he learned about his boss, he became.

There's lots of owner-managed businesses [in South Yorkshire] that have elderly men that don't want to let go and a lot of it is because they've got a real connection to their businesses. Some people say it's greed and I don't agree – I think people have grown businesses for the best reasons. Yes, they're making money out of them, but they also want to pass them on to somebody and not

I AM A LITTLE BIT MORE MINDFUL WHEN I DO THINGS THAT THERE'S A LOT OF PEOPLE BEHIND THAT DECISION – IT'S NOT JUST ME

how it's a very different way of doing things, because they're [run with] direct [employee] shares rather than a trust.

I think that for me, it's the employee engagement that's really important. You're not going to get everybody engaged, and I get that, but you've got to get 70-80% of the people on that journey with you and the other ones that are happy to do what they do. I think I need to continue to keep those networks going. I don't think there's anything additional I could ask for – they've been really supportive.

If worker owned organisations became the norm, how would communities in South Yorkshire change?

I've lived in Sheffield and Rotherham all my

everybody's got that person that can pass them on to, even if they've got family.

I see a real positive way for those businesses to get passed on. Because what happens [otherwise] is that it gets sold on because that's been the only way for the owner-manager to really realise some cash out of the business for their pension. So they get sold on, quite often outside the region, and broken up. I think that's the problem– the only way for them to realise some money out of the business is to sell it. And there is a way to sell it, but to sell it to the team that you trust, to pay you off but also to leave them with that legacy.

So what we've got now... we're halfway there. I'd love to be interviewed again when we're

all the way there. We've got some older ones of us still here with the knowledge, but we've also got a young team of people that can take this forward and that's what I think would be good about it being the norm – that things can carry on, instead of getting broken up and the legacy of the knowledge lost. I think that's such a shame.

What meaning was made for you, if any, by the conversation we just had?

I think it's just made me think a little bit more about what we need to do. I think that 'collaboration' just keeps coming up in my head. Collaboration is really important... [It's] about the communities turning this into the normal working practice. It's the collaboration that you'll get which is wider than just that one business... You build stepping stones to other people. It's a network.

Agency in the Workplace: HLM Architects

Employee rep Jill Fedyk tells us about HLM Architects' journey towards staff empowerment since the company became employee owned two years ago.



HLM Architects is an employee-owned architectural practice with offices in Sheffield, Cardiff, Glasgow, Belfast, Dublin and London. Founded almost 60 years ago, HLM employs more than 200 people who since early 2021 have jointly owned the businesses through an Employee Ownership Trust (EOT).

HR coordinator and employee rep Jill Fedyk told us more about the work HLM is doing to empower its worker-owners, including through its Voice Hub.

How has having ownership in your workplace changed your life?

It's definitely improved my life. There are so many positives since we've transitioned to an EOT [employee owned trust]. But ultimately our culture is already embedded in

everything we do, because it goes back decades. Although leaders may have changed, shareholders may have retired, essentially it all remains the same. I think becoming an EOT, and transitioning to being employee owned, just embodied all of that. All the good stuff we've been working on for years – it's encapsulated and formalised it, and given us all a structure.

For me personally, and for quite a few others, it's also been really positive in that it's helped me to progress professionally. I am honoured I was given the responsibility and opportunity to be director on the board of trustees. I'm also an employee rep, so the last two years have been an incredible opportunity to learn from some remarkably experienced people, gain experience and also have the responsibility of representing the employees. I've got



Staff at HLM.

sitting next to them in Sheffield.

I helped set up the Voice Hub, effectively an employee council. But we're architects and we stray far away from the word 'council', so it's the Voice Hub.

I get people really excited, because I'm incredibly passionate, I love my job and just want everyone to be happy and engaged.

Why is it so important to you that there's that voice and connectedness?

Everybody has a voice and we've always had an open-door policy at HLM. In the inductions, my HR introduction always stresses to people not to sit on anything. Don't go home, at the end of the day, worrying. Just grab your line manager, get it out.

Anywhere, it's often the loudest voices that seem to get heard, whereas [with] the Voice Hub, everything is anonymous. The Voice Hub reps are elected from a diverse group, from all over the company, and all different departments. So, in your team or studio, there's someone that you feel is approachable. There's someone there that you can go to if you have an idea.

I think the reason I find it so important is, I want everybody to feel that sense of belonging. That's the whole thing about becoming an owner – you really feel that sense of ownership, like we can all make a difference. We're all accountable.

It's that feeling of, us all belonging somewhere, and we're all working on this together.

What would you like to see happen next? What's the best thing that could happen?

You know what, I think the best things are happening [already], because the Voice Hub has been incredibly powerful.

nothing but positive [things to] say about transitioning to an EOT.

We have a bonus payment scheme, so annually there's a bonus that's paid. If you've contributed in the previous year, then each year just before Christmas, you get that financial benefit that you've worked for. Everybody gets the same percentage.

I suppose it's given me confidence in the security of my job. I'm not going to say it's a 'nicer' place to work, because I love my job and I've always loved working here. That hasn't changed, culture wise. [The HLM] culture is having a voice and having an opinion, and feeling like you're really making a difference. All of that has always happened, but I think [employee ownership] just normalised it.

What commitments do you hold that are important for you in your work?

I am in HR, which means I'm here to look after everyone, across all of the business. I'm a qualified mental health first aider and I was the first one in the business. I'm an employee rep and represent the views of people.

We have this thing at HLM – 'everything's connected'. It's a long-running joke, as it's the most overused phrase, but it's so true! We've got six studios, but we all work as one team. So, you could be working on a project with someone in Glasgow, or Belfast, as if you're

The best thing that's happened is that real sense of understanding how the business works [from] the employees, and understanding the difficult, complex decisions that leaders have to make.

When it came to the cost-of-living crisis, the board went to the Voice Hub and asked: What's the best thing that we could do for the employees during the cost of living crisis? Do you think we should be having Christmas parties? Would people rather have the money? The Voice Hub spoke to staff, and they came back with confirmation that they'd like parties.

But from that they also found that staff could benefit from a bit of education, so I set up some financial wellbeing sessions with our

ter... and they were really helpful with sharing ideas.

I would say, as a community, sometimes businesses are a bit like secret squirrels. But just share – share what you do, because it has a huge positive impact on everything.

If worker owned organisations became the norm, how might communities in South Yorkshire change?

Oh, for the better, definitely.

I have never owned a business, so I can't talk about owning a business, but from an employee point of view, I think it would create more inclusivity and more diversity of thought.

IT'S THAT FEELING LIKE, WE ALL BELONG SOMEWHERE AND WE'RE ALL WORKING ON THIS TOGETHER

pension brokers. We had sessions on budgeting, pensions and retirement, which people found really useful.

Again, everything's connected. It's everyone leaning into people, appreciating that employees really have incredible ideas.

Is there anything that you need from the community to make that happen?

We're still learning from the community. The last thing we did, which I can't take credit for, is we connected with other employee owned businesses within the community.

Gripple especially has been a real support, because at the beginning, you're trying to find your feet and you don't know what's what. So we connected with Gripple, Airmas-

I think you've noticed, I am not a numbers person, I'm a people person, but I am sure I've read somewhere that employee owned businesses are more profitable. If they're making more money, that's more money in local people's pockets, more money that they're going to spend in the local area.

Ultimately, the ownership of the business is in the employees hands now. There's now a structure in place that's given everyone this sense of ownership, because you've got a say in the longer term direction of the business, so it can't be sold, can't be bought out. The main reason I think that's so important is it means that the core values and the purpose can't change. It's there for generations to come and I think that's what would benefit the community – that's why more businesses should do it.

Agency in the Workplace: Big Smile Tattoo



Rae, Josh and Jakob explain how they are challenging hierarchies and abuses of power in the tattoo industry through their egalitarian co-operative structure – and what that means for them as individuals.

Big Smile Tattoo is a tattoo studio located in Kelham Island, specialising in traditional and botanical tattoos. Founded almost a year ago by artists Rae, Jakob and Josh, who between them have more than 20 years of experience, Big Smile wants to use its cooperative structure and egalitarian ways of working to challenge hierarchies and abuses of power in the industry, as well as providing a safe, welcoming space for its clients.

The three artists told us more about their intentions with setting up the co-op and their personal experiences of ownership and control at work.

Thanks Josh, Rae and Jakob for making the time to talk to me today. So, straight in at the deep end. How has having ownership/control in your workplace changed your life?

Josh: My anxieties have kind of changed from things that are unknown – whether the boss is going to be in a good mood, or whether they're going to shut the shop, or hire more artists – it's shifted to things that are known. Still stresses, but it's changed [to] things that can be tackled with organisation, communication, as opposed to just walking blind, hoping that things don't come out of left field and ruin the day.

Jakob: I'd say that having collective ownership has just massively changed me as a person and my mental health. Partly due to the fact that I've always had a problem with authority [...] I was just earning somebody else money and I didn't have anything that I could impact. Collective ownership has made my life better. I feel like I'm working towards something, rather than working against something.



God forbid, take away some of their income stream, it really shines a light on the power structures there. I think if we can remove as many of those as possible, you end up with a much fairer place for people to work.

It's interesting that you mentioned 'shining a light', as the first thing that struck me was just how open and well lit your studio space is.

Jakob: Yeah, that was really important for us, to have a big open space where everyone is on the same level, both physically and mentally.

To follow on from what Josh was saying, this isn't every shop owner in the industry, but a lot of them I've come across, it seems that they start out with the best intentions, but then as soon as they realise they have a very solid revenue stream coming in, then everything becomes about money. It's a very difficult space to work in, that.

Josh: I don't find many people having large, thoughtful discussions in the industry. I think a lot of people see ownership of a space and having a passive income from four or five guys working [...] as some sort of security for later in life, when you maybe can't tattoo until you're 60. But I mean, you can probably earn enough money to put into savings and early retirement funds to bolster that. When I hear people complaining that they don't want a co-op because, 'What am I going to do later in life? I need to get mine,' it's like, you've had the opportunity to earn good money for 25 years. You not put any of it aside to account for early retirement?

You mentioned that if everywhere was a co-op, or held the kind of values that are inherently present in one, you feel that it'd be a positive shift in how the industry operated. If worker controlled organisations did become the norm, in what ways do you

Rae: I think I'd just add that having equal ownership has generally made it a bit more relaxed. We are in control. We don't have to feel guilty for taking time off or anything like that.

Why is having ownership of your working practice, and the associated control, important to each of you in particular, would you say?

Josh: There's a lot of hierarchies, power structures, abuse of power in the world. And the tattoo industry, I think, it's a really unregulated space. It allows for negative attitudes, or mental abuse, or physical abuse, or even sexual abuse in some cases to nip under the radar. We wanted everyone in one room, one space with no physical separation. It gives no space for those things to really happen.

We're all kind of each other's boss in a way, more than just colleagues and friends. It really creates this dynamic where we're all responsible for each other. In some studios we've worked, there's an 'open door policy' with the boss, but it's always on their terms. It's always for their benefit. As long as what you want aligns with their long-term goals, usually financial, then that's fine. But if you've got an issue that is something that would undermine that position that they have or,



tary and duty of care, and responsibility that I'm picking up on. So on that point, what commitments do you hold that are important for you to honour in your work?

Rae: We want people to know that they will be safe when they come in, and have a good experience. Because there's so many stories on Instagram of certain artists abusing the power and not giving their clients good experiences. So that was very important to us.

Josh: I work for four and a half days a week, and that's great, and I really enjoy it. But what I really hope is that if someone was dangling a big financial carrot in front of me, I could stick to the ideals and go, no, co-operative [working] is the way forward and is best for everyone.

Jakob: The older generation of tattooers don't want [co-ops] because you're taking their income away from them. But the internet came along and all the information is out there.

You don't see until you're on the outside, the manipulation that you're under to believe this is the only way of doing things.

Rae: And you almost feel guilty into that way of doing things, too. Like, 'I taught you how to tattoo, so now your hands are mine!'

Jakob: That's the classic phrase, 'I own your hands'.

Seriously?

All: Yep!

What is the best thing that could happen and, by extension, what would you like to see happen next?

Jakob: I'd love to wake up tomorrow and loads of tattoo co-ops had opened. That

think communities in South Yorkshire might change?

Josh: I feel that in doing this project with these two fantastic people, it's kind of forced us all to progress personally in communication and confidence. I think if more people are involved in things like this there would be a lot more contented, happy people. I'm not sure how that relates to the wider community, but I think more happy people can't be a bad thing.

Rae & Jakob: Yeah, absolutely. 100%.

Jakob: I felt like at previous shops that [...] just because of the dynamics of the shop, it made me feel like everybody out there that's tattooing that's not in this shop is your competition. Matter of fact, that's not the case at all. They're actually your friends more than anything. Everyone benefits from open communication and talking about ideas, rather than just getting your head down and focusing on just what you're doing.

It feels like there's been a sense of proprie-

would be amazing.
I would like to see that then lead to some more regulation in the tattoo industry, but only led by tattooers. We don't want someone who has no idea about tattooing to come in and start regulating it because that's just a recipe for disaster.

Josh: But that's not going to come from shop owners. Self-governance is going to come from workers. Shop owners want to keep everything like it is. They don't want any change.

I'd also like to see more tattooers that are more humble. Because I do know a lot who are humble, and are appreciative of the fact that they get to do this thing they love. But I also see a lot of people that have this kind of rockstar attitude.

Finally, is there anything throughout this process that's come to light for you, or that you felt like you wanted to expand upon in any way?

Josh: The process of preparing for [this interview] has made me think I want to explore these ideas more and write something down [...] send it out to a few places and maybe get a few people talking.

Jakob: We're doing this because we love tattooing and we think this is what's best for tattooing, the tattoo community across the world even. That set-up so there's shared ownership really takes a lot of the stresses away and allows you to focus on doing good tattoo work and just loving the process.

Rae: We're just passionate about the whole idea of it as well. It's not just what was good for us personally, but like Jakob was saying it's about the whole industry, and how something like this would benefit people across the board.

Jakob: If anybody has any questions regarding shared ownership, particularly in terms of a creative space, we're more than happy to answer any questions or direct you to the right information about how to do it.



The Big Smile team: Jakob, Rae and Josh.

Agency in the Workplace: Arup



Sustainability Consultant Lauren Barnes tells us how employee-ownership has helped her identify the things she really cares about and opened up space for important, complex conversations.

Arup is an international company working in engineering, architecture, planning and sustainability. When founder Ove Arup retired in 1970, he set the organisation on a path to being owned by its workers, and the firm is now held in trust for the past and present employees and the operational profits are shared with its staff globally, as well as being invested back into the firm.

Lauren Barnes, Sustainability Consultant at Arup in their Sheffield office, told us more about how having part-ownership of the company enabled her to find her place, identify the things she really cares about, and connect better with the needs of the city and its people.

The first question, which puts us in at the deep end, is: how has having ownership and control in your workplace changed your life?

It's a great question. So I joined up Arup as a graduate. Arup has been employee-owned since 1970, so before I was born. So all I can say is that I really enjoy my job at Arup, the firm and what it is trying to achieve.

As a student, starting off as a structural engineer and wanting to apply for a role, I was drawn to a company that was so values driven, and was not afraid to talk about what mattered to the company – I think for me that is because it's long-held values are in its employee ownership.

Arup started off as a traditional model of shareholder [ownership]. Ove Arup, the guy who set it up – kind of synonymous with the Sydney Opera House – decided that this was the right model for the firm's future, and it was based on his ethos and values. It was about being people-focused and doing our



work of social value. He thought that the firm should reflect that in its structure as well, which I think was pretty countercultural at that time, especially in engineering.

We're something like 18,000 people world-wide now [at Arup]. My experience has been that you have the opportunity to talk about what matters to you and what your values are, and you work alongside people who are also quite open and honest about what they care about, what kind of projects they want to do, how they want to apply their nerdy niche to this big picture. And I think that empowerment – this idea that we're all bought into it to shape a better world – is really why it's kind of stood out to me, why being employee-owned really makes a difference. Having an agency to challenge the norms.

We're a sustainable development company at our core now and I think our focus on what we do has really been driven from its employ-

ees. Our shift has come from what the staff want to do and who they want to work with, as well as what the staff see as doing the right thing. So now, we won't work on direct fossil fuel extraction, we want to work with clients and partners that share those same values as us, wanting to shape a better world, and I think that's what can set us apart from our competitors – we can align our work with our values, enabling sustainable futures.

How have you seen that contrast between this job and previous jobs you've had, and has that unlocked things for you, as a person and as a part of this bigger thing?

Through the work culture of questioning – What is it you want to do? What are your values? What matters to you? – I've been able to transition my role into sustainability. So I now work with a specialist team that looks at how do we implement sustainability at a building scale or city scale, what are the practicalities and how do we help and talk to our clients well about it.

So I feel that it's been really impactful. At Arup I have grown in confidence, people have empowered me to go about my job and understand how to best use my skills and how my interests may play out in the work. I have had the opportunities to talk to different people around the country, around the world, and explore that, something that I love, working in Sheffield, a city I love but being connected globally to experts and other passionate people. That's been really, really impactful for me and my development, my career, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I wasn't sure what those paths were.

Equally, I think that employee ownership's given us the space and the opportunity to explore complex and challenging things like what does sustainability look like, but also what does equity and diversity and inclusion look like in our work? I've been involved in

quite a lot of our internal work on that. I'm part of our LGBT+ network at Arup, and feel like there is an outgoing commitment to learn, create and share what best practice could be, sharing insights from lots of different people with lots of different experiences.

What commitments do you hold in your job which you need to honour?

Ove Arup gave the key speech when the company became employee owned and set out principles that it should seek embolden. There's a number of things that struck me and I keep in my mind; honourable dealings,

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[SOMETHING] GETS
BUILT**

fair and honest conversations, which I think is really important in business. I think there is a lot of trust that is needed to work well and overcome the challenges we are facing – being just and fair will be key to that work.

It's something that really motivates me in how we talk about our work, what our commitments are, what we believe in. I think it's about good relationship building. It's about becoming a trusted adviser, those kinds of things.

I think it's a really good foundation, actually,

and something that maybe in the business world isn't always upfront about, how we all act as people as we walk through the door. I think that's really foundational. I think having the permission to be yourself. There is a part of the key speech that talks about being human and [that] happiness is the main thing we should focus on, and not to lose that by just doing work for the point of it.

The core of what we do is about shaping a better world, and therefore that question: How does this affect people, how does this affect place and how does this affect the planet? Especially in my role [as] sustainability consultant, and I'm sure my peers would speak about this too. We have that responsibility to understand that our work goes on past when we submit some drawings or [something] gets built.

I think that's really significant in that it moves from a position of thinking about accountability and towards everybody's individual responsibility, and what you can all do, I suppose, and how the sum of the parts is greater.

I would definitely agree with that. I'm always blown away when you meet someone new at Arup and [...] you're like, I didn't even know that was a job!

We recognise that we couldn't deliver some really cool projects if it weren't for the joining-up all these core values and that underlying thing that we all want to try and create better places for people whilst respecting the planet.

We need to value everyone, with dignity and respect, and then I think we are able to be socially useful, produce good quality of work and help improve the quality of life for people.

What's the next stage for that? What would you like to see happen next with how you



use that agency?

I would love us to move into a world where we could be truly regenerative, we could truly work within our systems, where we really try and maximise and utilise skills and opportunities to best serve the needs of people whilst not using up all our resources for future generations.

I think we need to change our ideal of what good growth looks like and makes sure it's truly sustainable at each level. I think that's maybe a really big hope, but I'm really inspired by all the Doughnut Economics work that's going on, and think it is an excellent model for us to applying to our lives and our places and our work.

And in that, I'd love to see Arup sit in that kind of intermediary space where we can support and encourage our community-led groups, who are doing some really fantastic work, and the more traditional city development, investment-y, built environment work.

If this was one of a number of models for

worker ownership or control that got adopted in South Yorkshire – let's say that it just became the norm – how would communities change as a result of that, do you think?

I think we all go back to some simple questions: How do we best serve our employees? How do we best serve our communities that we're based in? And I think if we all were to look at that, we'd end up having some quite big conversations about what the needs of our place [are]. How, as a business, are we responding to that?

I'd like to think that we would move into a place where we were meeting more of the social needs, the needs of our people, whilst also reflecting our place and what we need to do to respect the planet. I think we will end up moving into a more sustainable, regenerative place.

You've used 'regenerative' there in a couple of contexts. And that kind of suggests the opposite of 'extractive', doesn't it? You've talked about your position that you've

reached together about not being involved in fossil fuel extraction. But of course, there's lots of different kinds of extraction. There's extraction of profit from business to external shareholders, there's extraction of knowledge and resources and everything else from communities. What you're talking about when you talk about things that are regenerative is moving away from those practices, isn't it? And it seems like a model of governance and a model of operation that is aligned with that is suitable...

...and there's so much the people of South Yorkshire have to offer in terms of skills, community [...] It's about meeting people where they're at.

And I think that's what employee ownership tries to do, or at least gives the mechanisms for those kinds of conversations. I would like to think that it's about changing the system to be distributive by design – so in fact it shares the opportunity and value with those that co-create it.

And wouldn't that be fantastic for South Yorkshire? We should be able to be in place and enjoy it and have community and have purpose and have things like good health and wellbeing.

I just had one more question. What meaning, if any, has been made for you in this conversation?

I think reflecting on this conversation and thinking about it over this weekend, the things that have given me a lot of joy in my work, a lot of purpose in my work, have helped me progress in my job, not just seniority but in my own confidence, thriving, making friends and doing work that's worth doing.

Sometimes I wonder whether someone should just tell me to sit down and do my

actual job, because I tend to just get involved in all sorts of things. But [...] I think what Arup wants to do is get the passionate people through the door, and then you work out where your place is. And it isn't about trying to make me the most efficient. That works with clients too – we help people work out the problem, not just the solution.

Sometimes that's a bit scary. I've definitely felt like there's been quite a few challenges to go and be vulnerable, talk about my own knowledge and experiences, but I think it leads to exciting outcomes.

I think some of that goes back to creating a culture for staff and clients alike: 'Come in, be who you are. You're valued in your place. Come and do good work and you can be rewarded for it [...] Just be yourself and find the things you care about.'



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