

# MORE THAN A SHOP

Imagine not having boss?!  
Working it a different way

**Beau Bulman**  
*Suma Wholefoods*

**James Wright**  
*Co-operatives UK*

**Also featuring:**  
*Leeds Bread Co-op*



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## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Hello and welcome to More Than a Shop, hosted by me Elizabeth Alker. We're welcoming guests with something new and radical to say about the big issues of the day. Well the flavour of the series is a search for new alternative ideas in the spirit of the worldwide co-operative movement, which happens to started in my hometown of Rochdale.

Well, co-ops proudly offer radical alternatives to mainstream ways of getting things done. They are indeed so much more than a shop.

Well, today we're looking at the workplace where so many of us spend so much of our lives and thinking about different ways of organising the way we work. And I'm joined by two guests, who are both signed up to co-operative ways of working. Good morning. Would you like to introduce yourselves please?

## **James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Hi, I'm James Wright. I work for an organisation called Co-operatives UK. We're the national association of co-ops of all different shapes and sizes. My job there is to encourage politicians and government to create the right conditions for co-op growth. I work a lot with the UK government but also in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and increasingly in towns and cities as well. It's a great job, very proud to be doing it.

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A SHOP**

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Hi, my name is Beau Bulman. I'm the People Development Co-ordinator for the warehouse at Suma Wholefoods. We're a 43-year-old workers' co-operative, and we pay everyone equally. We sell vegetarian wholefoods and a range of household goods. We're very into sustainability and looking after the environment. And obviously, workplace democracy is really important to us. We are Europe's largest equal pay employer.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, well, thank you both for joining me. Later, I'm going to ask you each for a big idea, a radical idea that will change the way that we all work. But first of all, Beau, tell me more about Suma. It's a name that anyone who spent much time in a wholefood shop will recognize – how does it work?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Suma started in 1977. Height of the punk movement, early days of Thatcher, early days of Microsoft – they had two people at the time, we had six; they've kind of beaten us! We've now got over 300 people working for Suma. But it still stayed true to those early traditions of workplace democracy. So, six people started Suma – equal co-owners of the business and now over 200 of the people that work at Suma own the business together as members. Everyone gets a one pound share. And we all take part in decisions that affect us all. We have quarterly meetings and decide a lot of our policy and we also have quite radical decision-making structures for the rest of the business.

We sell a range of wholefoods. Everything from your dried lentils to vegan crisps and vegan cheese, that sort of thing. We have chilled frozen goods as well. And particularly with the zero-waste movement that's growing and growing, we're selling a lot of large things like sort of 25 kilo sacks. And we've just seen constant growth really since 1977 to now. So, over 40 years, you know, it's been a great success story.

And as I said, the key thing for us is that we pay everyone equally. We are Europe's largest equal pay employer, paying everyone a lot more than the living wage, as the government has it.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, so everyone paid the same. Board is answerable to members. Wholly owned by the workers. And workers have multiple roles as well. What is your role then – what do you do there?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I'm the People Development Coordinator for the warehouse. In common parlance that would be 'HR manager' for one section of the business. I'm responsible for hiring and firing, performance management, training and development of people and, sort of, pastoral care. We tend not to call it human resources at Suma. You know, people are everything to us. We're a workers co-op. Humans aren't just resources, they're a lot more than that. And yeah, I look after people. But yeah, I do sometimes have to have the hard word as well. And just because we're a workers' co-op, we're not immune to those kind of issues. But generally people get on pretty well. Like you say we multi-skill, so we tend to do more than one role. I also work in the warehouse; I also invoice goods.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Do you look for people who are multi-skilled? Or do people adopt those skills once they come to work for you and you know, skill-up once they're employed?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

So there's various different ways that we recruit. Sometimes we recruit specifically for skills – we recruited two graphic designers recently. We needed those skills in our business. But in the past, we've tended to rely a lot on general recruitment grounds. So we look for people with co-operative values, co-operative backgrounds, and a co-operative ethos that chimes with us, because that's so important to us. You know, it's no good having someone that can come and do some work that we want if they don't share the values of our business. Because, obviously, being a co-operative is front and centre for Suma.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, well, in some ways – in many ways – it sounds like the dream, a fantastic way of working. If you don't mind me saying, perhaps a bit chaotic, maybe? Is it difficult to find these people who have these values? Tell us – what are the downsides?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I mean, it's certainly not perfect. We're not utopia. We don't exist within utopia. We exist within the capitalist economic system. We have to make profit, that's how we pay all our workers the same wage, we make profit, we're part of the economic system. It is a very good place to work. And generally, people want to keep working there. I mean, we don't see a lot of people leaving. And people you know, come and it's a job for life. Those don't really exist anymore, in the wider world, in other parts of the capitalist economy.

People are kind of always keen to climb a ladder. At Suma, there's no ladder. You come, you do your trial period. If you're successful – not everyone is – but more often than not, you are equal to everyone else – you're paid the same. You can apply for any job at Suma potentially get trained in something that is totally new to you. So, you know, you might come and start picking orders in our warehouse, you might end up being part of our management accounts team. Or potentially you could end up doing graphic design if we were to invest in that you know.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And you can make more money if you work more hours. Is that right?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Absolutely. We're paid the same *hourly* rate – everyone gets paid exactly the same for an hour's work. But if, for example, you're a driver, and maybe three days of the working week, you're driving HGVs, you might end up doing quite a lot of overtime, because it's long days out in the wagon. So your weekly pay would end up being quite a lot more than someone that did the bare minimum. But hour per hour

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So there's some incentive?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

There's some incentive to do more work if that's something that you want. And we generally find that younger people, when they're trying to start family or saving for a mortgage, they might want to do some of those and jobs and they might want to do some extra hours. But you know, other people at different stages in life might not want to do the minimum.

We're quite flexible. We try and work with people as much as possible. Suma is all the workers, at the end of the day, so if someone really needs something, we usually try to make that happen.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And with that the Board answerable to members... What about making decisions and getting things done?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I mean, yeah, this is kind of one of the bigger questions. People assume the worker co-ops and more directly democratic businesses will be chaotic. And, you know, those issues can exist. The more people that are involved in making a decision, potentially the less efficient that decision making process is going to be. You know, think Brexit and think general elections. You know, these large-scale decisions are difficult to make in a hurry.

You know, we've been experimenting with different ways of doing governance. We've recently changed our governance structure to this Board and Members' Council structure. So, you've essentially got nine people elected to the Board. They're fixed term, they're recallable and they're from the membership. They're paid the same as the membership. We've then got a Members' Council. Again, elected, recallable – part of the membership, paid the same as the membership. The Member Council represent the views of the membership and they hold the Board to account specifically.

The Board, certainly at Suma, could not get away with putting something through that the entire membership disagreed with. It simply wouldn't happen they'd be disposed of. And, you know, and they're quite acutely aware of that. They're not acting like, you know, a Board of dictators. They're not even – they're nothing like – what you'd see in a traditional business where they're kind of calling all the shots and everyone else is jumping into it, you know, those people might be embedded in any of the many departments. Some of them drive wagons, some of them might work in IT, or accounts or sales, you know, for some of their work and work.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So even if it takes longer for decisions to be made in the long run. It's worth it and there's a better outcome.

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Absolutely. I mean, you know, the more people that are involved in making a decision, the more buy-in you're going to get to that decision. We don't see 52:48 kind of splits. You know, we don't say that level of disagreement generally, in the co-op. Yeah, we do sometimes make decisions by majority vote. And often that majority is highest, like 75% majority. But we look for consensus. We look to get people on board, we run forums in the run up to our quarterly general meetings that bring people together to try and find commonality, try and improve communications. And that's always part of our strategy to work better together. It's important to us, actually.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And James, is this something you recognize, there are a lot of co-ops working this way?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Yeah, I mean, there are a lot that work that way. I think it's quite flexible. There are a lot of different ways to do worker ownership. There's a lot of flexibility in terms of the legal arrangement in terms of how worker ownership comes about in the first place, how things are organized day to day. But generally speaking, if the business is worker owned from the outset, the likelihood is that it's going to be a very democratic worker co-op with lots of innovation in organisation management in the way that Beau's just described.

If it's a more established business that kind of converts to employee ownership, they tend to use a slightly more complicated legal arrangement. The degree of employee control tends to vary somewhat. And they might also

inherit some more traditional practices and ways of working, but even say most of those businesses tend to be quite innovative and forward thinking and become more so over time the more that employee control becomes a factor.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So, we talked about the flexibility and the range of models. Where does, say, a business like John Lewis, fit with that?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

I suppose John Lewis was one of the pioneers of a conversion. It didn't start out being a worker owned business. The owner of the business essentially gave away ownership of his business to a trust – an employee ownership trust – which then owns and controls the business on behalf of all employees. And what they made sure is that they created structures within that in which all employees were able to democratically have a voice within the governance or operation of the business. So, it's one part of a spectrum, I suppose, of how this can work.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So we see a lot of the principles that I was talking about, but maybe fitting a little more loosely than in this case?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Yes. there is a spectrum. There are lots of different ways of approaching this.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, so we've asked you both to come prepared with a particular challenge something that's challenging the way that you work – your area of work. Beau, what's yours?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I find that people don't really know what co-ops are. And there's not a lot of awareness out there about what we do, who we are, and there's a lot of misconceptions. So for me, the challenge is trying to mainstream co-ops and, you know, increase awareness, bring us more into, you know, normal thought about business models. Because we won't get mentioned in it academic textbook; we're not really thought of by people setting up new businesses as an option. And I think, you know, that absolutely needs to change.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And what's getting in the way of spreading the message.

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I find that obviously, we exist within the economic system with certain orthodoxies. You know, a lot of those orthodoxies were around, you know, the individual doing good. You know, the Richard Branson thing, the Alan Sugar thing, of the individual entrepreneur coming up with this great idea, pushing this business model forward, making all the money ended up with an airline or a mansion or whatever else. Yes, it's this rights to riches story sometimes, or it's the kind of city playboy. It's these models of individualistic achievement as opposed to a more communal endeavour, as opposed to a group of people doing something.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And that's about our values...

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

It is, it's about our values. It's absolutely that. You know, we are in quite an individualistic, selfish society. You know, a lot of that stuff kind of came to the fore in the 80s and probably hasn't really gone away since, unfortunately. We see businesses as something that *someone* sets up, *someone* makes good *someone* profits from. Whereas the co-operative model sees it differently. It sees businesses as things that *many* people set up that *many* people sharing that *many* people developed together.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And that message that if everyone's benefiting, you know, we each benefit as much as each other as much as each other. Why is that? Why do we not hear that more?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I think potentially because it threatens certain vested interests. I think that orthodoxy actually is beneficial to people in power, to people that own businesses. You know, for quite a lot of business owners, single business owners, they potentially feel quite threatened by a more democratic model, by a more egalitarian model.

You know, we're not interested in enriching small numbers of people. We're interested in spreading out the wages to as many people as possible and either / or spreading out the decision making to as many people as possible. Clearly it's a threat to someone running that old business model where they just want one person calling the shots when we're suggesting that actually, employees can equally be involved in calling the shots.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And James does that chime with what you recognise as a challenge to the way we work as well?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, ultimately, awareness, understanding, confidence in worker ownership is far too low, you know, amongst people founding new businesses; amongst workers; amongst business owners; and crucially, people who advise them as well.

The evidence that we have suggests that there's a growing interest in society and in business in doing things differently and working more collaboratively, more ethically, more justly. The problem is that the people who are interested in doing that, whether they're trying to set up a business, or they have an existing business that they might want to change, if they do find out about a worker co-op model or employee ownership model, they tend to find out about it by chance rather than because the system actually helps them do it.

So we've got lots of evidence to show that most people who advise people starting new businesses or advice business owners don't know anything about worker co-op models. So there's an information failure, if you like, which is compounded by the fact that government spends 10s of millions of pounds on business advice every year, none of which has anything useful in it about starting or relating to worker ownership.

It's partly because of the things that Beau's already mentioned. You know, there are vested policy interests that pull government in a different direction. It's partly because even if politicians say warm things about employing worker initiative, which they often do, when it comes to, you know, allocating finite resources, as they have to in

government, there are always other priorities. And what we really need to do is try to push that dial, because there are so many benefits from employee and worker ownership, that we need government to understand those and prioritise trying to achieve that as an objective and allocating resources towards it.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And is it also about overall contribution to the economy? Is that part of it as well?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

It is about it, yeah. I mean the benefits, from a policy perspective, if you like; you're talking about things like more resilient local business bases. Co-op start-ups are more resilient than non-co-op start-ups. Conversion of a business to employee ownership is a way of stopping viable businesses from disappearing from place, keep jobs, decision-making capital local.

There's strong evidence to link worker control and worker well-being – which is increasingly important in society at the moment, the idea of well-being and an economy that generates well-being. There's evidence that links worker control and performance in a business. You know, these are all really important things. And, you know, above all, like we urgently need to transition to an economy which is better at sharing well-being, wealth, power, in, you know, increasingly narrow ecological constraints. And this is not going to be easy. You know, worker ownership is a proven way to do that.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And, as with many things, if there was spending more in that area, they may not have to spend as much in others.

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Business as usual is a catastrophe ultimately.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, one of the places where workers co-ops really seem to thrive is Leeds and our producer Geof Bird has been along to visit the workers at the Leeds Bread Co-op, to see if we can get a rise out of them.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

So what's your name please?

**Jenny, Leeds Bread Co-op**

It's Jenny.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

What are you doing here? We're in front of a big mixer with a huge dollop of dough in the bottom.

**Jenny, Leeds Bread Co-op**

Yeah, I'm just scraping out from the mixer, our seedy sourdough, and then that'll go into a bulk fermenter in our warm room over there, and then we'll shape it later on today and bake it.

I'm a baker. I've only been here actually since October last year. So a few months, you have to do and six months within the business before you can then take on probationary membership for another six months before you become a full member.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

Do you think the customers care? Or do you think they just want a nice loaf of bread?

**Jenny, Leeds Bread Co-op**

I think there's a mixture of customers. I think certainly a lot of people just want real bread. But I do think people know we're a co-op, and I think some of them definitely choose us for that reason.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

The sourdough then... Do you have a kind of secret stash of sour dough that keeps going and going and going?

**Jenny, Leeds Bread Co-op**

Yeah, this is our mother at the moment, as we call it, which is the sourdough starter. But in a minute, actually, I'll feed that.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And do you know how long this mother has been going?

**Jenny, Leeds Bread Co-op**

I think it's since the start of the co-op. So it's a fair few years now.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

Wow. Fabulous. Thank you. Okay, so we will be waiting for the full complement of Baker's to arrive. And I'm with Sarah, and, Jake, and what are your positions here?

**Sarah, Leeds Bread Co-op**

So I'm on the Marketing and Sales team and I manage the wholesale accounts. I schedule the baking classes, and I co-ordinate the farmers' markets.

**Jake, Leeds Bread Co-op**

I work in operations admin, making sure everything runs smoothly.

**Sarah, Leeds Bread Co-op**

We've both been here since last summer. So we're technically in a sort of probationary period, still. Once we've passed our probation, then we'll be offered membership.

**Geoff Bird, producer**



And what will that offer that you don't have now,

**Jake, Leeds Bread Co-op**

So as a member, you become a director of the company itself. So as part of that you become kind of legally responsible for what goes on. And as a result, you sort of join in with the members meetings, you get to say basically, in the direction that the co-op takes

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And how important is that to you?

**Jake, Leeds Bread Co-op**

I think it's really important to have that kind of sovereignty and ownership over your work as an individual, and as a collective. I think it's really helps to kind of engage people with what they're doing.

**Sarah, Leeds Bread Co-op**

And you know, we've all got each other's backs, where sometimes in a more hierarchical company might not feel like that. We look after each other. You know, we've got... staff well-being is one of the core principles. So yeah, I think you come to work at a co-op because you're attracted to that community, that culture. And you want to move away from a more cut-throat environment.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

What's the nicest bread that you sell?

**Sarah, Leeds Bread Co-op**

Personally, my favourite is the Deli Rye Sourdough. What's yours, Jake?

**Jake, Leeds Bread Co-op**

Easy, it's seedy sourdough.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

Seedy sourdough? You can't fail to sell that out. All right, thank you very much.

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

My name is Lizzie, and I'm one of the members of Leeds Bread Co-op. I do finance and HR. And I've been here since 2013.

**Woody, Leeds Bread Co-op**

So I'm Woody. I'm also a member.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And there's a poster behind which says 'Proud to be a co-op'. What does being a co-op meant to this organisation?

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

It's a really core part of who we are and what we do. We talk about our name, summarising everything about us, really. So us being about Leeds, us being about bread and us being a co-op. So it's kind of like one third of us in that respect, and it's really great to be part of a business that we wholly control as a workforce.

You know, there's no other managers or bosses that come in and tell us what to do. We work on a consensus decision making basis, so every member is a director. We've got a staff team of about 30, and that includes a mix of contracted staff and casual staff.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

How do you avoid decision making becoming an endless process if it's about consensus?

**Woody, Leeds Bread Co-op**

So we've started trying to split up into a separate teams, so we haven't got a huge number of people in each meeting, and then it's consensus within that team.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And how does the pay work?

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

So every member of staff gets the same basic pay. We have a small enhanced salary for members of the co-op. So for four hours a week we have an additional 25% of basic pay which gets paid. But all members of staff basically come in on the same rate of pay.

**Woody, Leeds Bread Co-op**

See it puts a lot of equality across the business. I find it does help a lot with the dynamics across two different teams.

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

The idea is that if everyone's contributing to making the business success, then all of our wage goes up. So everyone's got a kind of like equal motivation, basically. I think we're all here for reasons beyond just the money. But essentially, we're all here for employment as well. And that's one of our values as a business is to be a good workplace and to provide an ethical, enjoyable livelihood for people.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

Who set it up originally?

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

There's three founder members, three guys – Ian, Phil, and Zig. They've all moved on to pastures new over the years.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

So it's a bit like a sourdough. It sort of keeps going and it's kind of the same and it's kind of different.

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

That's a very good way of putting it. We haven't thought about it like that – they were the starter culture.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

I'm sure that's how they'd like to be described. But has this spoiled you, almost? If you if you had to leave now and you were forced into a more traditional business, how would you react?

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

It spoiled me in some respect. But there's also... we carry full responsibility. And sometimes, you know, it would be kind of nice to not have that responsibility as well. But I think realistically, yeah, I think I'd also get frustrated, and I think I'd feel un-empowered. And that would not be great at all.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

Would you evangelize about? Or do you think there's a limit to the scope of it?

**Lizzie, Leeds Bread Co-op**

I'd evangelise about it, I often do. I think we definitely haven't got the perfect working model. I don't think any workers comp will claim that they have. But absolutely, I think the principles and the values that we work to as a business, I just wouldn't do it differently.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And by all accounts, the bread Geoff took away with him was delicious.

So it's time to hear your ideas for how to make a difference in the workplace. Beau we heard a lot of parallels there with your workplace as well. What is your radical idea to improve the way you work?

Unknown Speaker 22:52

I want simply more people to know about workers co-ops and I feel that the more we can cheerlead for this awesome radical business model, then the better things are going to become for the economy and for the people that work within it.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And as we said, this is about spreading the message, isn't it?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know, that's part of why I'm here today. And it's part of why I was me t-shirt proudly, when I'm out, you know, out on the street. I genuinely believe that this business model can offer so much to people and much more longevity. Solidarity is absolutely something that we need, you know, we need to rebuild communities in this country. And worker co-ops can absolutely be part of that. You know, there's just so little awareness and getting out there and talking about it positively, trying to get people to understand who we

are what we do, that we're not just some slightly odd eccentric hippies who are stuck in the 1970s. There might be a couple of them but that's not the whole picture. Co-ops are modern as well.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Do you worry that that's how people perceive you? Because you do you know, the wholefoods, vegan foods, you know... it does sort of play into that stereotype, doesn't it?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Sure. I mean, we've got, you know, the benefits of both worlds, I would say, you know. We've got amazing customers who are small, wholefood shops that have been going since the 1970s. And we've got amazing customers who are absolutely up to date, bang up to date, current 2020, you know, part of the increasing interest in vegan food, plant based diets. We straddle both of those parts of humanity, you know, where we're modern, where traditional, we're rooted in, in history and in culture and in really proud worker ownership culture.

But we're also pretty modern, you know we're experimenting with new ways of organizing, we're trying to inspire and encourage other co-ops. And, you know, I'd just love to see more start-ups using the worker co-op model. There's a lot of people that start their own businesses, you know, young people, millennials and the new generation, the kind of Greta Thunberg generation, there's a lot of interest, there's a lot of innovation there. And I think that, you know, work co-ops are not something that should be left in the 1970s. You know, in the days of kind of strikes and darkness, you know, it's absolutely something that is 100% current, and it'd be great to see more and more young people taking up that model.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And why are you so evangelistic about this? Is it because if everyone... or if more people set up worker co-ops it would come back to benefit us all? Or would you just like see more people already reap the benefits that you in Suma have?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I think that there's intrinsic value for humans in choosing and having as much democratic control as possible over their work, and then having as equal say and pay as possible. I think there's intrinsic value in that. But I think there's value beyond that for the rest of society. I think, you know, only good can come from more co-ops. It's not about trying to big up Suma, though I think Suma is absolutely brilliant happily cheerlead for my co-operative. I think it's about what this model can do for society beyond the co-ops themselves. I think having more people engaged in decision making in their work actually makes their work better. And that makes society better, people are happier to go to work. And they're not just doing it to put money in the pocket of, of one man, and it is usually a man unfortunately. But to enrich themselves and to better themselves to develop themselves. It's got to be laudible.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And thinking beyond that, how do you get your message to people who are not just already interested in their co-operative movement and have those values brought to you know, the wider public?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

That's the big question. Because, you know, we're very good at talking to ourselves, as are lots of these kind of movements. We're very good at preaching to the converted, preaching to the choir. Beyond, it's getting ourselves out there, getting our products out there, and telling our story through our products. For Suma, yeah, we produce things like vegan ham and pea soup. And on our cans of vegan ham and pea soup, we talk about the fact that we're a workers co-op. So the hope is that people that buy our brilliant vegan, organic or wholefood products will actually see a little bit of the Suma story and hopefully be inspired. On our wagons on our, on our delivery trucks, we have the fact that we're co-op-centered, a workers' co-op, that we're owned by the workers and all that kind of thing. So you know, part of it we can do through what we're doing anyway.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Yeah. And getting beyond those people who buy vegan pea and ham soup... How do we reach those people?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

I think the world is in flux right now. I think lots of things are up for grabs. I think what Beau was talking about before about a new generation of people coming through who for very good reasons do think differently about how the world should work. They might not necessarily know all about co-ops or be the traditional co-op audience but they're looking for different ways of doing things. At the moment they're perhaps thrashing around vaguely looking for something different. If we can put the co-op model in front of them as one solution to change the world and the way they want to change it, then we will be reaching a much bigger audience than we are now.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And is online helping because, I guess, it's younger people – the next generation – that's how they access their information, isn't it?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

Yeah, I think absolutely. You know, in the past, potentially, the co-operative movement has had an image problem that it's been seen as this older thing. And it's up to us to get out there to get on YouTube to get on the various social media channels and put out the good parts of being a co-op. Talk about how great it is not to have bosses in the traditional sense, how great it is to pay ourselves equal wages. These sorts of things really do chime with young people in particular, you know, they're exciting, they're bold, they're radical ideas. And we know that we need radical solutions to fix the economic and climate problems that the world is facing. Co-ops can be a massive part of that.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And James, what is your idea?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Okay, so our big idea is a concerted national campaign, kick-started by Co-operatives UK and the Employee Ownership Association, to try and achieve 1 million individual worker-owners in the UK by 2030. That would be about a five-fold increase from where we think we are now. We're trying to get the UK Government to adopt that ambition and then, crucially, to begin allocating more funding towards addressing that information failure that I was talking about before so that more people in businesses do understand worker ownership and can access the expert support they need to adopt those models where the fit's right – which we know the increasingly the fit is going to be right with what people want to do.

But we're not waiting for national government. We've already got charitable funding for an awareness and advice pilot, which we can run in two cities – probably somewhere in England, hopefully working with local government and local business networks to prove that this type of approach can make a real difference. So it's an active policy campaign. And it's also a set of practical actions which altogether we're calling 1 Million Owners. So for anyone listening if you want to find out more about it or get involved, go online and search [www.uk.coop/1millionowners](http://www.uk.coop/1millionowners)

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, so you're talking about this becoming declared policy for national and local governments? Why would they be inclined to make such?

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

I mean, we've talked about it before. It's about a resilient local business base; co-ops being more resilient, employee ownership conversion as being a way to prevent business loss, the loss of viable businesses. It's about enhancing worker well-being. It's about better business performance. It's about low inequalities in wealth, well-being, power opportunity. It's about we need to transition to an economy which is better at distributing these goods within the constraints of the planet.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And would that be kind of a top down policy declaration though, that to help her more co-operative way of movement is a some contradiction there and

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

It's not top down. And we want #1MillionOwners to be an ambition that's shared by government, by businesses and really by anybody who thinks that the way we do business and earn a living needs to change. Our theory of change is very much about addressing things from the bottom up and you know, fixing those information failures so that people have the information and support to change the economy for themselves.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And my question to both of you is: Are there areas of work where you think the worker co-op model just simply would not fit?

**Beau Bulman, Suma Wholefoods**

I think that potentially it could work in all kinds of businesses. We've seen some really interesting worker co-ops over the years. There's a social care workers co-op. In America, they've got a lot of electric co-ops, you know, there are some quite odd co-ops. There's various bars and social centres. There is a real plethora of areas where, you know, employee ownership, worker ownership, co-ops – they do work. It can be quite surprising. I guess, things like the financial sector things that are really fiercely hierarchical, fiercely, individualistic and selfish are going to be tougher nuts to crack from a co-operative perspective.

**James Wright, Co-operatives UK**

Yeah, no, I'd agree. But actually, I think there is a bank in Sweden which has more of an employee owned model, so they're even in that system that nut is being cracked.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Even in banking. Okay – and seedy sourdough, as we heard. And well, thank you both. That was a really inspiring conversation.

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More Than a Shop is a collaboration between Co-operatives UK, The Co-op, Co-op News, The Co-operative College and The Co-operative Heritage Trust.

The series is presented by me, Elizabeth Alker, and it's produced by Geoff Bird on behalf of Sparklab Productions.