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Interviewing a Cooperator

Introduction

If you're an individual or small group teaching yourself about cooperatives, you can use this resource to help you communicate with cooperators and other business professionals. This will allow you to utilize their experiences and guide your attempts to write a worker co-op business plan.

If you're an individual teaching about co-ops, you can use these materials to facilitate an experiential group learning exercise that will help your participants gain insight from seasoned cooperators and other business professionals.

Before you interview a cooperator, ask yourself: what is it that you want to learn from the conversation? You might consider coming up with 1 to 3 goals for your interview process and keep those in front of you during your conversations. This technique will help you stay on track and guide your conversation towards addressing your goals. Of course, if you want to have a free-ranging, organic conversation, that's fine too.

Below are a series of tools, such as recommended questions and worksheets, you can use for your interview process. Here are the resources and interactive components that you'll find in this module:

- 1) Why Interview Other Cooperators or Business Professionals?
- 2) Making Goals for the Interview Process
- 3) Sample Interview Questions
- 4) Coming Up with Your Own Questions
- 5) Follow Up Group Discussions
- 6) Methods for Finding and Contacting a Co-op
- 7) Best Practices for Contacting
- 8) Who is Best to Contact?
- 9) What Does Your Co-op Actually Need to Know?
- 10) Starting a Co-op FAQ
- 11) Tracking What You Learned
- 12) Action Items

1) Why interview other cooperators and business professionals?

There are a wide range of people out there with a considerable number of experiences, skills, and knowledge on how co-ops as well as other business in your industry work. By interviewing them, you can obtain real-life and on-the-ground insight that will be incredibly useful for building your worker co-op business plan. They could even turn you on to other resources and information you would have had no other way of obtaining. In all likelihood, it would probably be best for you to contact both cooperatives that are and are not a part of your industry, as well as friendly business professionals that do work in your field (or a very related one).

Make sure you approach people with a friendly attitude and tell them what you are doing, you give them a short elevator pitch of your idea, and why you'd like to talk with them. Some people prefer to be contacted over the phone, some prefer e-mail, and some prefer you just come into their store (if they have one). Everyone has a preferred method of communication, so don't be afraid to be polite but persistent if you don't hear back right away. Never try to set up an interview on the spot. Instead, ask the person when would work for them. In addition, be flexible about what mediums you would be willing to conduct your interviews over—whether it be e-mail, in person, over the phone, on Skype, etc. Finally, consider putting at least 45 minutes to an hour (if not more) of time aside for each interview, if possible.

There's a lot of materials below, but all of this is meant to help you get as much out of your interview process as possible. How you take advantage of this is up to you.

2) Making Goals for the Interview Process

If you want, you may choose to set 1 - 3 (or more) goals for your various interviews (e.g. "I want to start thinking about what major hurdles I may face in the development and the founding process of my co-op"). This makes more sense if you are interviewing a series of people rather than just one, but either way, this will help you keep sight on what the purpose of your interviews are.

Interviews Goal #1:

Interviews Goal #2:

Interviews Goal #3:

3) Sample Questions for Any Cooperator or Business Professional

Below are general questions you can consider asking during your interviews. Not every one of these will be relevant to your needs. So before you begin your interview, circle the questions you want to ask in your conversation. Below the questions provided, you also have space to come up with your own.

- **Co-op specific:** Why did you join or start a co-op?
- **Co-op specific:** How has the co-op model impacted your business practices?
- What has been your most significant business lesson?
- Do you know of any other cooperatives (or businesses) in the area I could get in touch with? Or cooperative/business supporters (such as people, institutions, development centers, and so on)?
- What recommendations do you have about obtaining start-up capital for a business or business project? Do you have any experiences about this that you could share?
- What failures or major business hurdles have you faced? Is there anything you could have done differently?
- What is the most successful means by which you have broken into your market?
- What kinds of frustrations have you experienced?
- **Co-op specific:** What makes a worker co-op successful financially and socially?
- **Co-op specific** (After you've explained your idea): What part of my idea seems feasible to you? What needs work or what do you have doubts about?
- How did you identify who your primary customer was?
- How do you reach out to your customer base?
 - (After you've explained your idea) How do you think I should reach out to my customer base?
- **Co-op specific:** Do you market your co-op identity? What is the most effective strategy that you have utilized?
- How do you manage your competition?
- **Co-op specific:** Do you cooperate with other cooperatives at all? If so, how? Is there a benefit in your experience?
- How do you keep your customers happy and engaged?
- Are you committed to keeping your business ethical? If so, how do you accomplish this? Why is it important to you?

4) Coming Up with Your Own Questions

The questions above are general inquiries that could be applied to most industries. Below, you should create a list of questions you would like to ask in your interviews. If you are interviewing someone who is in your industry or a related one, try to come up with some questions that they could specifically answer. Perhaps you are just beginning your business planning process and your questions might have a more general tone, or maybe you have a good idea of very specific questions you want to know the answer to.

Use the below space as a brainstorming area. The first rule of brainstorming is to write down everything you think of, without editing or cutting anything out. After you come up with all of your questions, then you can start to cut out or blend redundant ones together. Remember to also prioritize them with a 1 (very important) through 5 (least important). These conversations can take a bit of time, and the person you're speaking with may not be able to give you all day, so you want to make sure you have an eye on the most significant questions.

It is also highly recommended that you use the "Tracking What I Learned" document (on pages 26-27) alongside these interview questions.

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

5) Follow Up Group Discussions

In your co-op group, talk about what you learned from your interviews after you've completed them. You can do this after each one or after they've all been conducted. Below are some potential questions you can use to guide your conversation. You can (and should) use this in conjunction with the "Tracking What I Learned" document (found on pages 26-27).

- Who did you interview? Why did you choose to interview them?
- What stood out from your interview(s)?
- What do you understand now about your co-op idea or industry that you were unaware of before?
- Did your interview(s) bring up any new questions for you about any? Did they relieve any worries you had?
- What actions or tasks do you think you need to take after these interviews?

What other questions or points do you think you should discuss? List them below:

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

6) Methods for Finding and Contacting a Co-op

Are there any co-ops near you? Local co-ops and cooperative organizations have extremely valuable insight to offer to both starting and existing cooperatives. There also may be co-ops near you, but none that are in your field. It would be worth holding interviews with cooperators (and other business professionals) that are local to your geographic area but also those that are somewhere else but share your industry.

One of the best ways to learn is through experience. Therefore, if you want to learn what it's like to work in or start a co-op, it would be to your benefit to speak with someone who has first-hand experience in this type of business or knows your appropriate market (whether its local or not geographically focused). Remember, though—cooperators are regular people too, who are trying to work, make a living, and live their life. They may not have time to talk with someone if they are not getting anything out of it. That shouldn't stop you from trying, though, because there will be people happy to speak with you—or they may know someone else who will. And, if they can, co-ops should assist other aspiring cooperators according to the [sixth cooperative principle](#). There are several ways you might consider making initial contact with co-ops, cooperators, or other allied businesses. Below are some resources that can be utilized to find and contact someone to interview.

Resources for finding a co-op or allied business

- Find.coop: <http://find.coop/>
- Go.coop: <http://go.coop/>
- US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC): <http://www.usworker.coop/front>
- North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO): <http://www.nasco.coop/>
- Canadian Worker Co-op Federation: <http://www.canadianworker.coop/>
- Cooperative Development Institute (CDI): <http://www.cdi.coop/>
- National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA): <http://www.ncba.coop/>
- Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO): <http://geo.coop/>
- Cultivate.coop: http://cultivate.coop/wiki/Main_Page
- Cooperation Works!: <http://www.cooperationworks.coop/>
- Food Co-op Initiative: <http://www.cooperationworks.coop/>
- The Democracy Collaborative: <http://democracycollaborative.org/>
- Network of Bay Area Worker Cooperatives (CA): <http://www.nobawc.org/>
- Eastern Conference for Workplace Democracy: <http://www.east.usworker.coop/>
- Western Worker Cooperative Conference: <http://west.usworker.coop/>
- Federation of Southern Cooperatives: <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/>
- International Organisation of Industrial, Artisanal and Service Producers' Cooperatives (CICOPA): <http://www.cicopa.coop/>
- The ICA Group: <http://ica-group.org/>
- Small Business Association: <http://www.sba.gov/>

7) Best Practices for Contacting a Co-op, Organization, or Business

In general, people really like to help other co-ops and provide advice or technical assistance if possible, especially in the co-op community. That said, they are also people, with jobs, and day-to-day objectives separate from the success of your co-op, so remember: just because your work life may revolve around your co-op, that doesn't mean that everyone else's will.

When approaching someone for help, there are a couple simple tips you can follow to increase the success of your conversation, and better insure you will receive the help you are searching for (and not frustrate anyone in the process, too!):

1. Have a brief (1 minute or less) elevator pitch to present to the person you speak with. Have your pitch include information about your co-op and what you are looking for.
2. You will probably have to speak with multiple people before you get the person who can help you, so know what kind of advice you need. That is, if you are looking for advice on sales, it will save you, and the organization you are contacting, time and effort if you ask to be transferred to the sales department as opposed to human resources or communications department.
3. When you do get to the person you need, they probably won't be able to have an extended conversation with you right away. So, when you do get them on the phone, first ask if they would be willing to talk with you about X, and if so, would they want to set up a time to chat? Giving the person you are speaking with options, and control over the meeting time, will increase your chances of scheduling a meeting.
4. Know what you want. When you speak to someone on the phone, know exactly what questions you want this person to answer: Saying you need help with starting your co-op is too broad and signals to the interviewee that you need more help than they can provide (unless of course they specialize in helping start-ups).
5. Be clear about the commitment you are asking for. Interviewing someone can take time; asking to have a brief chat does not equal a 45-minute in-depth conversation about marketing strategy.
6. What can you give back? You may be a start-up co-op and not have the money to pay someone for help, but there is a lot more you can give back than money! Think about bartering your services, or knowledge—you may be able to provide advice that is relevant to the person helping you. Either way, communicating that you want to give back, even if you aren't sure what it is, will be meaningful to the person helping you.

8) Who Is It Best to Contact?

There are a quite a few options in this resource list. Furthermore, you might have personal contacts or local businesses that unique to your co-op. That said, there are a lot of folks to work with! Now, where to start? Below you will find some suggestions for what kind of co-op, business, or organization can help you with your specific needs or means to find them. (You can use this in conjunction with the “Resources for Finding a Co-op or Allied Business” document on page 6).

Start-up and Business Planning:

- Cooperative Development Centers (CDI, CW, etc.)
- Local Cooperative Alliance (VAWC, NoBAWC, etc.)
- National Co-op Organization (USFWC, DAWN, etc.)
- Government Organization (SBA, Local Development Office, etc.)
- Established local co-ops

Local Questions:

- Other Local Businesses
- Local Cooperative Alliance (VAWC, NoBAWC, etc.)
- Local Government Development Office
- Local co-ops

Questions Specific to your type of co-op (examples: printer, delivery service, IT):

- Co-op Directory (Go.Coop, Find.coop, etc)
- Local Cooperative Alliance (VAWC, NoBAWC, etc.)
- National Co-op Organization (USFWC, DAWN, etc.)
- Any Local Business in your Field

Conferences and Convergences (for Co-ops or your business field):

- Local Cooperative Alliance (VAWC, NoBAWC, etc.)
- National Co-op Organization (USFWC, NASCO, DAWN, etc.)
- Government Organization (SBA, Local Development Office, etc.)
- Eastern Conference for Workplace Democracy
- Western Worker Cooperative Conference
- Business Affiliation Group (Radical Printers Network, etc.)

International questions:

- National Co-op Organization (USFWC, NASCO, DAWN, etc.)
- Government Organization (SBA, Local Development Office, etc.)
- The ICA Group and CICOPA
- Co-op Directory (Go.Coop, Find.coop, etc)

Subsidies and Incentives:

- Local Cooperative Alliance (VAWC, NoBAWC, etc.)
- National Co-op Organization (USFWC, NASCO, DAWN, etc.)
- Government Organization (SBA, Local Development Office, etc.)
- Similar Businesses in your State

Hirings and Growth

- Local Cooperative Alliance (VAWC, NoBAWC, etc.)
- National Co-op Organization (USFWC, NASCO, DAWN, etc.)
- Government Organization (SBA, Local Development Office, etc.)
- Cooperative Development Centers (CDI, CW, etc.)

9) What Does Your Co-op Actually Need to Know?

More often than not, the interview is the easy part. How many times have been gathering information from a knowledgeable person, finished the conversation, and exclaimed, “Why did I not ask that?” Going into an interview fully understanding what you want to know will save you time and effort. Furthermore, it also allows you to assess what you do and don’t know, and in turn, what your co-op’s strengths and weaknesses are.

Below is an activity to help you decide what your membership knows and what they need to know.

With your membership, take some time to fill out the questions below—put your heads together to see both what you know, and whether you know it well enough to teach the rest of the worker-owners? Depending on the size and organization of your co-op, it might make sense to do this all together, or by department.

There are sample categories below, and additionally, there is a blank worksheet that you can use to generate topics that are relevant to your co-op.

What do you know about bylaws?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about marketing?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about taxes?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about creating a business plan?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about applying for a loan?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about hiring?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about decision making in co-ops?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about incorporating as a co-op?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about social media?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about successful customer service?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about membership education in co-ops?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about growing your worker co-op?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about conflict resolution?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

What do you know about _____?

What do you need to know?

Now, generate questions based off of what you need to know?

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

Question: _____ Priority: ____

10) Starting a Co-op FAQ

Below are some Frequently Asked Questions from folks starting a new co-op. Use these as a way to generate more questions. We recommend using this sheet alongside your “Coming Up with Your Own Questions” document on page 4.

- How many member-owners do we need to form a co-op?
- What are the differences between a co-op, LLC, nonprofit, and other business models? What are the advantages to being a co-op compared to the rest?
- What are the tax implications of being registered as a co-op?
- Does my state have a separate co-op designation? If so, what does that mean?
- Who can help me create bylaws and navigate the legal maze of becoming incorporated?
- Are member-owners required to register for worker’s compensation or health insurance?
- Is it true that non-U.S. citizens can be worker-owners?
- What co-op organizations can a co-op become a member of? What are the advantages?
- Are there any unique paths for co-ops to gain access to capital?
- What does the hiring process look like for a co-op?
- What are some examples of internal governance within co-ops?
- What are some examples of job rotations in co-ops?
- What are some examples of educating new membership in co-ops?
- What are some examples of different decision-making models within co-ops?
- What are some examples of accountability systems within co-ops?
- How can we best market our cooperative business?
- What are tax laws with online sales?
- Are there any government programs or subsidies that could help our co-op better do business?
- What other co-ops are in my field that our co-op could do business with, or partner with on projects?
- What is a member capitalization program? How can our co-op best utilize this program?
- What makes a successful business plan? Why?

11) Tracking What You Learned

Use the resource on the next page in conjunction with the interviews you conduct. This will help you truly keep track of what you learned and what you need to do with that knowledge to build a better worker co-op business plan.

You can fill out the “What I expect to learn” column before you actually conduct your interview. This will help you manage your expectations, visually map your actual findings, and come to an understanding of how you need to develop your idea. Or, if you need to save time, you can leave that portion empty. You can use one of these sheets each time you conduct an interview, or use one per interview.

What I expect to learn	What I learned	What this means for my co-op idea
<i>Example:</i> Social media is a better tool for launching your business than good word of mouth, because there are millions of people using social media and word of mouth can be slow.	<i>Example:</i> Word of mouth can be much more successful when launching a co-op than social media. With a new business, you usually have to start from scratch with a social media presence, and this can take time to build up. Customers who are extremely satisfied will want to share a new business with friends, etc.—especially if they are incentivized through things like discounts.	<i>Example:</i> While we should use social media at our onset, we shouldn't rely on it. It might work better to, or in conjunction with, offering discounts to people who are able to bring in other customers. This will bring us repeat business and new customers. This is something we can also offer online through our website and social media.

What I expect to learn	What I learned	What this means for my co-op idea

12) Are there any action steps to take based on of these lessons?

Great! Now that you've conducted your interviews, its time to figure out if you need to take any actions for your business idea and/or plan. If it's needed, you can also choose who will be responsible for following up on this step.

Example

Action Step: Come up with some word-of-mouth discount ideas for the launch of our co-op

Who is responsible?: Annie Date to be completed by: January 8

Action Step:

Who is responsible?: _____ Date to be completed by: _____

Action Step:

Who is responsible?: _____ Date to be completed by: _____

Action Step:

Who is responsible?: _____ Date to be completed by: _____

Action Step:

Who is responsible?: _____ Date to be completed by: _____

Action Step:

Who is responsible?: _____ Date to be completed by: _____