

So You Want to Start a Platform Cooperative...

By Caroline Woolard, 2015

[This text comes from the book Ours to Hack and Own: <http://platformcoop.net/book>]

Dear founder,

I'm glad to hear about your idea for a cooperative platform. Congratulations! I'm sure we both agree that a diversity of opinions is a good thing, and that platforms should benefit their participants, as participation is what makes a platform valuable. What follows are a few questions that I wish someone had asked me when I started four multi-year projects, all of which continue to run today.

The projects I co-founded, for what it's worth, are an 8,000 square foot affordable studio space (Splinters and Logs LLC, 2008-2016), a resource-sharing network (OurGoods.org, 2009-2016), an international learning platform that runs on barter (TradeSchool.coop, 2010-present), and an advocacy group for cultural equity (BFAMFAPhD.com, 2014-present). I also helped convene the NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative in 2015, but the structure for that organization is emergent (member-run, with fully open working groups and a member-elected steering committee), so it is too early to say where it will lead.

I am sharing these four questions, along with bits of advice, because I hope that you will succeed in contributing toward the cooperative culture we want to see. To live in a democratic society, we all need more experiences of democracy at work, in school, and at home. Thank you for helping push the cooperative movement forward.

You will notice that a lot of what follows also speaks to founders of non-profit organizations or social impact businesses. I am writing this especially for young, educationally-privileged people who have big ideas but are newcomers to the neighborhood they live in. This reflects my own experience as a college graduate, waking up to working class histories in New York City while trying to build cooperative software and resource-sharing projects. It took me a while to learn outside my immediate group of friends; to reach beyond the academy and beyond the Internet to learn.

1. Can you make a platform for an existing co-op?

In a culture that values ideas over practices, it might be hard to see the existing cooperatives around you. But, I promise you, there are many systems of mutual aid and cooperation nearby.

These “platforms” are systems of self-determination and survival created by people who have been systematically denied resources through institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism (read about redlining if you don’t know what that is). The credit unions, land trusts, worker-owned businesses, rotating lending clubs (susus), community gardens, and freedom schools in your neighborhood may not have great websites, but they are incredible cooperative platforms that you can learn from and with.

These initiatives are often not lifestyle choices made by educationally privileged people, and will therefore not be written up in *The New York Times*, but they are robust and powerful community networks with organizers who *might* be interested in adding an online platform to their work. Here is an often-overlooked challenge: try to join and add to existing cooperative platforms, rather than building your own from scratch. The result will likely last longer as it will be informed by the deep wisdom of existing cooperative community norms, roles, and rules. Perhaps we need something like the Center for Urban Pedagogy for cooperative software—an organization that matches grassroots groups with developers to build software that is driven by community need.

2. Who will build the cooperative platform?

Let’s say that organizers at your local credit union, land trust, cooperative developer, community garden, or freedom school are interested in building an online cooperative platform to add to their ongoing work. Or, they confirm your hunch that the cooperative platform you want to build is necessary. How will you form a team that can make this software come to life?

I have found that innovation occurs most readily in small teams with shared goals but different skill sets. Big groups, on the other hand, are good for education and organizing work, and for refining existing platforms. But to innovate, I like to work in core teams of three to six people, as this allows for deep relationships, shared memory, and relatively fast decision making, since each person can speak for ten to twenty minutes per hour in meetings. The collective Temporary Services says that every person you add to the group doubles the amount of time it takes to make a decision. So, I say: build a small group of rigorous, generous experts whose past work demonstrates that they are aligned with the cooperative platform you want to make. Ask the larger group to consent to the expertise of your small team, and ensure that your small team will make room for feedback from the big group along the way.

Now, build your team! Find people who are better than you in their area of expertise. At the very least, you will need: 1) a Project Manager to help with scheduling events, facilitating meetings, and tracking budgets; 2) a Communications Pro to craft a clear message and recruit people to try out the platform as it develops; 3) a Designer (or two) who makes the front end beautiful, 4) a

Developer (or two) who develops the software and annotates it so that other people can add to it in the future; and 5) Advisors—one per area of expertise above, as well as more who have strong connections to the community you aim to work with. Meet with your core team on a weekly, if not daily basis, and with your advisors on a monthly or quarterly basis.

You are likely the Communications Pro or the Project Manager, since you are reading this letter. Find advisors who are retired, or far older than you, and who have seen the field change and are widely respected for their work. Learn about programming languages—which languages (Ruby, Python, etc.) have active development communities, and which languages are most likely to be interoperable with future cooperative platforms. Find developers who have worked on social justice projects in the past. If you are a non-profit with limited funds, watch out for developers who want to get paid market rate, as developers and project managers (like you) should believe in the project equally and should take an equal pay cut. Watch out for developers who say they can build the site in a public hackathon or sprint, because if they do that it won't be built well.

3. How much time and money do you have?

As you build your team, be honest with yourself about your existing priorities, and the likelihood that your life will change in the coming months or year or two. To gauge our availability to work on TradeSchool.coop, we did an exercise where each core member wrote a list of their top life priorities, including family, friends, health, volunteer projects, art, hobbies, and day jobs. This allowed us to be more honest with ourselves and each other about the amount of time we had to work on our project, which parts of our life were unknown, and also our reasons for doing the project.

Plan for turnover by having clear systems of documentation and open conversations about how to bring in people who might join the core team when someone has to leave. Be sure that the Developer(s) code in teams, or that an Advisor looks over the code, so that it is intelligible to your other Developers. Be sure that the Project Manager and Communications Pro share leadership and responsibility, crafting a clear process for new people to join the core team, moving from roles of assistance to core membership in months. After a year of organizing TradeSchool.coop, I wrote a manual to make sure our systems were clear. Ask yourself: do you want to get it done, or do you want to get it done *your way*? This is the question that Jen Abrams, a co-founder of OurGoods.org, brought to us from a decade at the collectively-run performance space WOW Cafe Theater.

4. What if you ran events and hired a community organizer instead of building software?

Last of all, consider the possibility that you could make a greater impact on cooperative culture and resource-sharing in your community by hosting events rather than building a new cooperative platform online. Software does not run itself; it must be maintained and upgraded by developers who can easily make tons of money working on non-cooperative platforms.

Remember that people won't take the time to learn a new app unless they need it daily. Remember that people are used to Facebook, Google, Twitter, and sites that have legions of developers working around the clock. Remember that hire number three at Airbnb was a lobbyist. If you are starting out, build the smallest feature and do not add to it. It will be hard enough to maintain and upgrade that small feature.

Be honest about your ability to put in long hours and to raise the funds to sustain the development and constant upgrading of online networks for years. Until we have cooperative investment platforms for cooperative ventures, you will have to look for philanthropic support or venture capital that might alter your mission and that will rarely sustain the initiative for years.

If you can't raise \$300,000 a year for a core team of five, don't build a demo site that barely works or buggy software that won't last—organize great events and build community! You can use existing online platforms that your members already know. You can use your funds to pay a community organizer instead. Not only will you sustain the livelihood of a wonderful person, but the knowledge built in the community won't return a 404 Server Error when someone needs help next year.

In cooperation,
Caroline Woolard

PS: If you want more information, just email me at carolinewoolard@gmail.com. I also put a lot of links to organizing, facilitating, and horizontal structures in the *How to Start a Trade School* manual from 2012, and the NYC Real Estate Investment Cooperative's REIC U working group is making a long list as well. Look for it on our NYCREIC.org!