

5 Years of Employee Ownership: What we've learned along the way



We all know that cultural change doesn't happen overnight. Receiving an email from our managing director in January 2017 telling us that we were now owners of the business felt exciting – but also a little anticlimactic. What did that really mean? How would it change our day-to-day working lives?

According to the UK government's website, the employees of an employee-owned (EO) business must hold two crucial forms of power within that business: a financial stake (in our case, shares held by an employee-owned trust) and a say in how it's run.

For us, the consultation process started a couple of years before ADP converted from an LLP to an employee-owned limited company. It formed part of a succession plan to allow the previous partners to retire, but it was also about creating a sustainable practice – one that truly put people first. We formed an employee council with representatives from each studio and an elected employee director.

Everyone wants to feel they have a voice. Having a voice can be just as important to staff as the promise of financial reward. When making decisions about software, studios, charity events, training, social events, HR policies and more, it makes sense to consult with those who will be directly affected. We want our employees to be engaged, happy and motivated, and involving them in key decisions is a big step towards achieving this.

As more architectural practices become employee-owned and step away from traditional partnerships, I hope the spirit

of an EO business remains front and centre – a spirit where employees are the owners, they are all treated equally and have a genuine voice in the business. This inevitably means a shift in the emphasis of leading. Leaders remain accountable, but their role focuses on empowering employees and giving them the space to generate new ideas.

During our five-year journey we refreshed our brand purpose and identity. Our new vision is one that we feel better reflects our views and values, and our ultimate mission to create more joy in our world. We want to spark joy for our staff, the users of our buildings and the wider communities we impact.

Building on previous feedback from employees we made our vision a little more tangible by redefining what success means to us in terms of sustainability, belonging and engagement (SBE). We measure this on our projects using our own SBE toolkit, and aim to weave this thread through all aspects of our business.

Our journey to changing the culture of ADP is by no means over, but here are a few things we've learned over the past five years.

Being on the Board

Undertaking the EO structure requires bravery and change at all levels within the practice. It will involve adapting to new ways of thinking, new ways of communicating and ultimately an evolution of roles in the day-to-day leadership of the practice. An open and transparent style of leadership can

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increase the challenges around business decision-making in the middle of a global pandemic. But we think we did ok! We elect an employee director to sit on our board to represent staff views, and the top agenda item on the monthly board meeting is feedback from the employee council. Prioritise what staff are feeding back to you, and this will set the right tone for the rest of meeting.

It's also important to make more information more accessible. You'll need to decide how transparent you want to be - ask your employees. Sometimes too much information (particularly financial / business operations can be challenging and at times adds a lot of pressure!).

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Consultation and Communication

Try to make sure that your employee council is as diverse as possible in terms of role, seniority, genders, race and so on - this can be tricky if you're electing council members, but you don't want a group of people with largely similar ideas, backgrounds and experience. Diversity creates positive conflict, which drives progress and collaboration. We elect staff for initial two-year terms to continually bring new voices to the council.

Council meetings provide an opportunity for employees to raise ideas and issues with the management team, but remember to try and keep feedback constructive and/or positive to the wider benefit. It can be too easy to simply find things to criticise - you want to encourage solutions and alternative ways of doing things. The council should also help to clarify messages from the board to the wider practice with reasons why a decision has been made.

It may take time, but gradually the mindset of staff will shift focus from thinking about themselves solely as individuals to considering their role within the whole practice, and weighing up what's most beneficial to their business as a whole. It will be impossible to find solutions that every single staff member agrees with, but the council is there to listen to all views and find a consensus.

Learning to Listen

Communicate across a variety of mediums. Even if it feels repetitive, different people engage more effectively with different channels. Polls, surveys, face to face, Zoom, blogs, video - these all have a place, provided that the message is consistent and clear. They can also help get feedback from all employees, and not just the ones who shout loudest. We have an annual "Are We Listening?" practice tour where the chair, employee director and practice director visit all studios to listen to staff directly and answer questions. There's

something about taking the time for face-to-face engagement that can't quite be replicated digitally (Covid permitting). We want to get the best of our collective community.

Ask specific questions as well as open ones - even it's just to get a conversation started. Keeping your questions too open can make it hard for people to respond. It's also important to listen actively to each other, without interrupting or getting defensive. If you don't agree with someone's perspective, try and understand why they might feel that way.

Welcome informal communication across all levels of staff - employees should always feel comfortable calling up a director with a great idea.

Making Mistakes

Mistakes will be made - the important thing is to be honest about it and move on. This process will be a learning curve for everyone, and if you're not making mistakes then you're probably not trying anything new. On the flipside, make sure you celebrate success - the big and small - with the knowledge that you are one collective team and that everyone has played a part.

Future Focus

We're excited to see what the next five years look like. The transition from the former board to the new board members is now complete and we start 2022 ready to work towards our shared ambition for creating positive impact and to help solve world problems.



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