

## Business interview – Calverts

*Calverts is a communications design and printing company, based in Bethnal Green. Founded in 1977, it is a worker co-operative with fourteen members. The firm's assets are owned in common by the workforce, who are paid equally. All members participate in strategic management, and profits are reinvested in the co-operative or used for community aims. Calverts specialises in branding, publications and sustainable print. It produces high quality literature for corporate, community, government and arts organisations such as the British Museum, Tate, Arup, 3i, and the Royal College of Arts.*

*The interview is with Sion Whellens, one of the longest serving members of the co-operative. The full interview can be found on the VLE.*

### **Q1. What circumstances led to the establishment of Calverts?**

The founder members were previously employees of IRAT Services, the print and publishing arm of the Arts Lab. They started Calverts on being made redundant in 1977.

### **Q2. Had the founder(s) any experience or knowledge of co-operatives at that point?**

Yes.

### **Q3. Why did they choose a worker co-operative model rather than a traditional private limited company or a partnership?**

They valued collective working and governance, and wanted a genuinely democratic model to deliver their vision of self-management and workers control.

### **Q4. What support did you receive during your early years?**

A small loan from Industrial Common Ownership Finance (ICOF), and advice from Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM).

### **Q5. Could you give a brief explanation of the company's governance model?**

Legal: IPS. Practical: collective-type worker co-operative, historically between seven and twenty three members (currently fourteen), generally 100 per cent membership, governed by the general meeting of all the members. No external directors. Effectively, all worker-member-directors are managers with a high degree of autonomy, and mutually accountable. Special purpose committees and working groups handle particular projects and tasks, such as disciplinary and grievance issues, building projects.

### **Q6. How important are the co-operative values and principles to the business?**



Crucial!

**Q7. What is your attitude to growth being a co-operative?**

In general we have sought (and achieved) qualitative rather than quantitative growth, i.e. going up the value chain in our markets, heavy investment in technology, development of new skills and services. We have succeeded in bringing 100 per cent of new employees into membership and see this as an important goal.

**Q8. What is the greatest benefit or competitive advantage you derive from being a co-operative business?**

In order of importance:

Low management overhead costs; very high staff and skill retention and development rate in comparison with our industry; high degree of workforce flexibility; market profile as a sustainable, transparent and ethical business; cultural USP as a co-operative.

**Q9. What is the biggest constraint to your business by being a co-operative?**

Lack of familiarity with our legal model among financial, legal and commercial partners. No other real constraints.

**Q10. What are the key things you need to get right to run a successful worker co-operative?**

Good formal governance; investment in new member training and continuing personal development; reinforcement of co-operative ethics and a culture of respect at work; good links with the wider movement.

