**Headline:** Montana’s First Worker Cooperative Is In It for the Long Haul

**Teaser:** How the custom steel fabrication and design company Crucible built a “gravel road” for other Montana worker co-ops to follow.

By Damon Orion

**Author Bio:** Damon Orion is a writer, journalist, musician, artist, and teacher in Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in Revolver, Guitar World, Spirituality + Health, Classic Rock, High Times, and other publications. Read more of his work at [DamonOrion.com](https://damonorion.com/).

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**[Article Body:]**

Worker cooperatives—businesses owned and democratically managed by their employees—have shown high rates of economic stability, employee retention, and productivity.

A 2019 [report](https://democracy.institute.coop/2019-worker-cooperative-state-sector-report) from the [Democracy at Work Institute](https://institute.coop/) (DAWI) and the [United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives](https://www.usworker.coop/en/) (USFWC) noted that “mature worker cooperatives” that were operational for six to 10 years in the U.S. had a 25.6 percent success rate, while the success rate for other small businesses in the country which had been functioning for the same amount of time, was 18.7 percent. Data analyzed by economics professor Virginie Pérotin also [shows](https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/2020-10/worker_co-op_report.pdf) that worker co-ops have more stable employment and “are more productive than conventional businesses, with staff working ‘better and smarter.’”

Cooperatives also play an important role in building more equitable communities by bridging the wealth gap. “Cooperatively-owned businesses have the potential to unlock ownership and wealth generation for so many traditionally excluded individuals and communities,” [states](https://www.start.coop/) the Start.Coop website.

Despite these advantages, worker cooperatives are relatively scarce in the U.S. The DAWI and the USFWC [found](https://democracy.institute.coop/2021-worker-cooperative-state-sector-report) only 612 worker co-ops nationwide in 2021. This, however, marked a 30 percent growth since 2019.

In contrast, the National Institute of Statistics [counted](https://euricse.eu/en/structure-and-performance-of-italian-cooperatives/) 29,414 worker co-ops in Italy in 2019, and a 2024 piece by Grassroots Economic Organizing [mentioned](https://geo.coop/blog/argentinas-worker-co-ops-under-attack) that there were more than 23,000 cooperatives in Argentina.

A 2020 article by the executive director of Start.Coop, Greg Brodsky, [attributed](https://medium.com/start-coop/the-3-reasons-we-dont-see-more-cooperatively-owned-businesses-e0172217e7ed) the small number of worker-owned cooperatives to many factors, including funding hurdles, preference for traditional business models, and unsupportive legal and regulatory structures. The article also states that a lack of awareness and education around this model makes co-ops an unpopular choice.

The members of Montana’s first worker co-op, [Crucible](https://www.crucible.coop/), are no strangers to this phenomenon. Philip Munson, the company’s vice president, says that although “Montana understands an electric cooperative, a consumer cooperative like a grocery store, or a communication cooperative,” the concept of a worker collective is foreign to many residents of the area.

Crucible’s president, Tyson Holland, states, “I can’t tell you how many times we’ve been asked, ‘What’s your ownership in the company?’ and have tried to explain, ‘Well, it’s equally shared.’”

Situated in the southwestern Montana city of Bozeman, Crucible specializes in custom steel fabrication and design. Its impressive interior and exterior structures and furnishings can be seen in local businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and diners.

Holland and Munson met in “about 2014” while working at a structural steel fabrication company. They quickly found that they had similar, if not identical, thoughts and feelings about working for another company.

“Before we even made the first steps toward the formation of Crucible, Tyson and I had many conversations about how the traditional way of conducting business left the best talent and strongest assets of a company unsupported, unrecognized, and ultimately in a hostile or generally adversarial situation with management,” Munson notes. “This was a common situation from our experience, and the only way to address the issue came down to a foundational cultural shift in how business should be done.”

This led Munson and Holland to explore alternative avenues of business ownership. That search led them to the co-op model, which “hit all the points we had discussed in terms of really being able to edify and empower the people working *with* you rather than *for* you,” Holland states. He adds that this model paired well with his and Munson’s view that team synergy “doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the company owner or the management.”

“It has more to do with culture,” Munson says. “Fundamentally, what it comes down to is the people you work with.” He adds that good relationships are the foundation of good business, as summarized by Crucible’s slogan, “United by Design.”

The [Montana Cooperative Development Center](https://mcdc.coop/) (MCDC) was instrumental in helping Holland and Munson establish a worker cooperative in an area where none existed. Holland recalls that after Crucible was officially incorporated in 2017, the new team “went around the state and did workshops with the MCDC, talking about worker cooperatives when we really didn’t have any experience whatsoever.”

Now significantly more experienced, Crucible is playing the long game. “A common way startups go about business now is to build a company that specifies what the service is, systematize it until it’s dialed, and sell it off to a multinational corporation,” Munson says. “That’s the exit strategy. That’s how the owners make their money. With a cooperative, success is the only exit strategy.”

Holland adds that whereas “a lot of businesses make it because they focus on a niche and become very good at it,” Crucible “would like to have a lot of niches.”

Munson explains that one of Crucible’s hopes is to “assemble a consultation team that can advise on building design.” He feels this service will remain useful even as automation and AI gain prevalence. “Even if you have robots doing the physical labor, you’re still going to need the blue-collar information.”

Worker co-ops like the [Spruce Design Cooperative](https://www.sprucedesign.coop/) and the [Organic Integrity Cooperative Guild](https://www.organicintegrity.coop/) have appeared in Bozeman since Crucible’s inception. Twelve miles southwest of Bozeman, [Big Timberworks](https://bigtimberworks.com/) offers timber design and framing, custom metalwork, box beams, and a reclaimed lumber sawmill.

Crucible seems to have helped pave the way for the worker cooperative model in Montana, but according to Munson, “It’s not a paving. It’s a gravel road.”

“It might be a dirt road at times, too,” Holland jokes.

“It’s a rough cut on the side of a mountain,” Munson says. “It might be a little steep, and if you go up one side or the other, you might be in serious trouble.”