

Your Company
Your Future



Imagine walking into work on a Monday morning to discover that your company—the place where you've invested years of your life, built relationships with colleagues, and developed deep expertise in your role—has been sold overnight to a faceless corporation based halfway across the country. By Tuesday, rumors of layoffs begin.

By Friday, your department learns it's being "restructured." Your future, and the futures of dozens or hundreds of your coworkers, has been decided without your input or consent.

This scenario plays out thousands of times each year across America. But what if there was a better way? What if you and your colleagues had the first opportunity to purchase the company yourselves when the owners decided to sell?

A New Vision for Business Transitions

When a company goes up for sale, whether it's a small family restaurant where the owners are retiring or a mid-sized manufacturing firm being eyed by a corporate giant, the employees who helped build that business typically have no say in its future. They're left to hope that new ownership will value their contributions and preserve their jobs.

Under a right of first refusal policy, this dynamic would fundamentally change. Employees, perhaps through an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) or a similar structure, would receive the first opportunity to make an offer to buy the company. This ensures that their interests are prioritized in the ownership transition.

This isn't about socialism; it's about smart economics. We're not talking about government takeovers. We're talking about giving American workers the tools and opportunities to control their own destiny.

How It Works: The Basics

The concept is straightforward. When business owners decide to sell, they would be required to notify their employees first and give them a reasonable period—perhaps 60 to 90 days—to organize and make an offer before entertaining outside bids.

During this period, employees could form a cooperative, establish an ESOP, or create another ownership structure that works for their specific situation. They would develop a business plan, assess the company's value, and arrange financing.

To make ownership transitions feasible for workers, government-backed financial assistance would be available. Employees would have access to loans, grants, or other

support to help them raise the capital needed to purchase their company.

If the employees choose not to make an offer or cannot agree on terms with the current owner, the business could then proceed with a traditional sale. The key is that workers get the first opportunity, not that they're forced to buy.

Real Stories, Real Success

This approach isn't just theoretical. Across America, employee ownership has already proven successful in companies of all sizes and across diverse industries.

Consider New Belgium Brewing Company, maker of Fat Tire beer. When founder Kim Jordan decided to step away from the business she built, she sold the company to her employees through an ESOP. The brewery continued to thrive under employee ownership until 2019, when the employee-owners collectively decided to sell to a larger brewing conglomerate—a choice they made together, with each employee receiving a portion of the sale proceeds.

Or look at Bob's Red Mill, the popular natural foods company. When founder Bob Moore turned 81, he surprised his employees by giving them the company through an ESOP. "It was just the right thing to do," Moore explained. "These people are why we're successful." Years later, the company continues to grow and prosper under employee ownership.

Even in cases where businesses face closure, employee ownership can provide a path forward. When Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago announced its closure in 2008, leaving 250 workers unemployed, a core group of employees formed a cooperative and reopened as New Era Windows.

Today, they own and operate the business together, making decisions democratically and sharing in both the responsibilities and rewards of ownership.

Benefits Beyond the Workplace

The positive impacts of employee ownership extend far beyond the companies themselves. Communities benefit when local businesses remain under local control rather than being absorbed into distant corporations.

When a small-town manufacturing plant becomes employee-owned rather than closing or being acquired by an out-of-state conglomerate, those jobs stay in the community. The economic activity remains local. The tax base is preserved. Families can continue to build their lives without facing the devastation of a plant closure or the uncertainty of new

corporate management.

Employee-owned companies tend to lay off fewer workers during economic downturns, providing stability to communities when they need it most. They're less likely to relocate operations overseas. And the wealth they generate is distributed more broadly, helping to address the growing inequality that threatens our social fabric.

For individuals, employee ownership creates a path to wealth-building that many American workers currently lack. When employees share in the value they help create, they can build financial security, save for retirement, put children through college, and achieve other milestones that might otherwise remain out of reach.

Answering the Skeptics

Some will question whether employees have the expertise to run the businesses where they work. But employee ownership doesn't necessarily mean that every worker becomes a day-to-day manager. Depending on the structure chosen, employee-owners might elect representatives to a board, hire professional management, or develop other governance approaches that leverage existing skills and expertise.

Others might worry about employees taking on financial risk. That's why government support is crucial—not as a handout, but as a smart investment in economic stability and growth. With proper financing tools and technical assistance, employee ownership can be structured to minimize individual risk while maximizing collective opportunity.

Critics might also argue that current owners deserve to sell to the highest bidder. But the right of first refusal doesn't prevent owners from receiving fair market value; it simply gives employees the first opportunity to meet that value. Many business owners, particularly founders of family businesses, already prioritize their employees' welfare when considering a sale. This policy would formalize that priority while still respecting owners' property rights.

Making It Happen: Policy and Practice

To make employee ownership through right of first refusal a reality, we need practical policies and support structures.

The government could provide loan guarantees specifically for employee buyouts, making it easier for workers to secure financing.

Tax incentives could encourage owners to sell to employees rather than outside buyers.

Technical assistance programs could help employee groups navigate the complexities of business acquisition and ownership.

Educational initiatives could ensure that both business owners and workers understand the benefits and processes of employee ownership.

Legal frameworks could be developed to streamline the transition from conventional ownership to various forms of employee ownership.

Financial institutions, from community banks to credit unions to impact investors, could develop specialized products and services to support employee buyouts.

Philanthropic organizations could provide grants or low-interest loans for technical assistance and capacity building.

The goal isn't to force employee ownership but to make it a viable, attractive option when businesses change hands.

With the right support systems, thousands of businesses that might otherwise close or be consolidated into larger corporations could instead continue under employee ownership.

A Vision for the American Economy

This approach promises to create a fairer and more sustainable economic system where workers directly benefit from the fruits of their labor. It offers a middle path between unfettered corporate capitalism and government control—a distinctly American solution that embraces both entrepreneurship and economic democracy.

Imagine an America where millions more workers have a meaningful stake in the companies where they work. Where business decisions consider not just next quarter's profits but the long-term interests of employees and communities. Where the wealth generated by our economy is shared more broadly among those who create it.

This vision isn't radical; it's deeply rooted in American values of self-reliance, initiative, and fairness. It doesn't prevent businesses from growing or succeeding; it simply ensures that success is shared with those who help create it.

By giving employees the first opportunity to buy the companies where they work, we can build an economy that works better for everyone.

We can preserve jobs, strengthen communities, create paths to wealth-building, and

ensure that the American dream remains accessible to all who are willing to work for it.

The next time a business in your community goes up for sale—whether it's the local hardware store, the manufacturing plant that employs hundreds, or the tech company where you work—imagine if you and your colleagues had the first chance to buy it.

That's not just a dream; with the right policies and support, it can become reality.

This isn't about upending our economic system. It's about making it work better for the millions of Americans who power it every day.

It's about ensuring that when a business changes hands, the people who helped build it have a say in its future—and a fair shot at owning a piece of the American dream they've helped create.