devlords: an open-source cooperative dev agency

The documents contained herein act as a constitution of sorts for a democratic cooperative of software developers. Rather than working for the benefit of a small group of executives, agency members will have equal say as stakeholders in a company that we direct together.

Project structure

Source code for the charter documents is contained in Markdown files. "Releases" will be packaged in HTML and PDF. The project Wiki will serve as a separate document. All are encouraged to participate, so please fork and contribute.

References

Wolff, Richard, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism*, 2012 kindle

Small constitution

The organization is a cooperative worker-directed agency. Decisions typically made by an owner, CEO, or board of directors made up of owners and managers will instead made democratically by all those whose livelihoods and well-being depend directly on the business and who directly contribute to the production of the surplus.

Democracy is a central value for modern civilization. But our local and national elections in modern democracies only give us limited input into the actual running of things. We may elect our leaders, or our electoral college may do so, but can't really keep our leaders in line, and they often end up fighting for the interests of lobbyists and campaign donors rather than their own constituents.

Beyond biannual elections, democracy doesn't really happen in our communities and workplaces. Most workers are subservient to their managers and owners. If they attempt to unionize or otherwise make their voices heard, they would risk getting fired or passed over for promotions.

In contrast, a worker-directed cooperative would directly involve the collaborative efforts of all employees to build the company and run it democratically.

The *surplus-producing* workers together function as the board of directors, so that decisions dealing with the appropriation of the surplus are made by those who produce it*. Other decisions should also take into account the opinions of any *faciliator* worker-members (such as sales, office managers, accountants).

Rule of management

Unlike other organizations, there will never be a time when there are development managers who don't actually write code. We will say right now: this is hereby forbidden in our constitution. Developers may rotate between writing code, QA, project management, and DevOps. But they will always rotate back into development.

Plans for business development

Many developers coming to the organization may have clients of their own. They may choose to bring their clients over to the agency or keep them separate. In addition, new clients would be solicited via the ordinary agency's ordinary practices.

Some of the incentives for bringing clients into the agency include

- availability of coworker input for ideas, architecture, code reviews, and quality

assurance, etc.

- access to shared resources including test servers and licensed developer tools.
- project continuity should the project be transferred to another team.

A target *average* billing rate will be determined democratically, and that should inform individual project fees.

Investment

The chief goal of a worker self-directed enterprise is to prevent situation in which those who produce the surplus are exploited by the business owners in order to further their own financial aspirations. As such, there cannot be outside "shareholders" in the normal sense of the word. Still, there would likely be a need for investment, for example to provide a buffer for salaries or retainers, or to purchase new equipment, in situations where the previous months' surplus is insufficient.

Some possibilities may include

- A required "entry fee", similar to union dues, whereby a new member helps contribute to the initial capital.
- A limited offer of non-voting common shares for a promise of dividends.

In many companies, shareholders may have the power to elect the board of directors and as a result the directors are beholden to those shareholders and maximizing those profits. In an agency like ours, however, the developers themselves *are* the directors, and the goals of the organization are to take care of its members over its investors.

As a whole, the devlopers/directors will decide how to distribute the surplus among the organization's members as well as what rate to pay dividends to investors, if there

are any. In such a case, shareholders must know at the beginning of a given period what they could expect to get out of it, and this could be decided at the beginning of the year by the developer/directors. Then at the end of the year, the directors may fulfill this expectation or exceed it, while still having the right to increase distributions to the workers themselves. By solidifying and publishing these decisions at both the beginning and the end of the year, developer/directors will have a good balance between fulfilling expectations and enjoying pleasant surprises.