2026 Southwest Ohio Employee Ownership Forum

November 10, 2026 • Cincinnati, Ohio

Agenda at a Glance

This year's forum has expanded! In addition to a full slate of sessions for ESOP companies, we'll also offer sessions for worker cooperatives (in partnership with Co-op Cincy), business owners considering a sale to employees, and policymakers and economic development professionals.

Time	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4
8:00 – 8:30am	Breakfast and Registration			
8:30 – 9:00am	Morning Welcome — OEOC / Co-op Cincy			
9:15 – 10:30am Concurrent 1	*All EO Companies* **The Ownership Story: Winning Candidates, Keeping Employee-Owners**	*All EO Companies (in equivalent leadership positions)* **CEO & CFO Roundtable**	*Worker Cooperative* **Worker Cooperative Session — TBD (Co-op Dayton)**	*Selling Owner / Economic Dev.* **Employee Ownership and Economic Development: A Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Strategy**
10:30 – 10:45am	Short Break			
10:45am – 12:00pm Concurrent 2	*All EO Companies* **HR & Communications Roundtable**	*ESOPs* **Governance 101: How Your Board and Trustee Should Actually Work Together**	*Worker Cooperative* **Governance & Growth: Sustainergy / Our Harvest (Co-op Cincy)**	*Selling Owner / Economic Dev.* **Selling to an ESOP 101: Structure, Process, and What Comes After**
12:00 – 1:00pm	Lunch (served 12:00–12:30 · speaker 12:30–1:00)			
1:00 – 1:15pm	Short Break			
1:15 – 2:30pm Concurrent 3	*All EO Companies* **What Actually Builds Ownership Culture**	*ESOPs* **Funding the Repurchase Obligation: Cash Strategy for the Long Haul**	*ESOPs* **Culture, Capital, and Closing the Deal: An ESOP Acquisition Panel**	*Selling Owner / Economic Dev.* **ESOP Alternatives for Selling Owners: Worker Cooperatives and Employee Ownership Trusts (EOTs)**
2:30 – 3:30pm	Reception			

Session Tracks

- ESOPs
- Worker Cooperatives
- Selling Owner / Economic Developer

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(continued)

Session Details

Concurrent Sessions 1 — 9:15am – 10:30am

Room 1

Track: All EO Companies

The Ownership Story: Winning Candidates, Keeping Employee-Owners

Most ESOP companies believe employee ownership makes them a stronger place to work, and for the most part they are right! But does that belief actually show up in the recruiting pipeline, or in why people stay? NCEO's newly released 2026 Recruitment and Retention Survey surveyed 433 ESOP companies to find out, and the results reveal a real gap: while the large majority of companies say ownership helps them attract and keep employees, most candidates never hear about it during the hiring process itself. This session digs into what the data actually shows. It will cover the recruiting methods and messaging that work, the retention strategies companies are using across the employee-owner lifecycle, and where the disconnect between belief and practice is costing companies talent. Attendees will walk away with a clear-eyed look at where your own company might be leaving its biggest advantage on the table and strategies to get the most out of employee ownership.

Speaker(s): *NCEO – Liza Shifrin; OEOC Network Company – Betsy Thrush, CostQuest Associates (Cin, OH); OEOC – Mike Palmieri*

Room 2

Track: All EO Companies (in equivalent leadership positions)

CEO & CFO Roundtable

Moderated by OEOC staff, this roundtable is a confidential, peer-only space for CEOs and CFOs of employee-owned companies to talk candidly about the realities of running an ESOP — from governance to growth to succession. No company is the only one facing a given challenge. This roundtable puts you in the room with peers wrestling with the same issues, ready to trade real strategies and practical fixes. Attendance limited to C-suite leaders from employee-owned companies.

Speaker(s): *OEOC – Chris Cooper*

Room 3

Track: Worker Cooperative

Worker Cooperative Session – TBD (Co-op Dayton)

Speaker(s): *Co-op Dayton*

Title and description TBD.

Room 4

Track: Selling Owner / Economic Dev.

Employee Ownership and Economic Development: A Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Strategy

Employee ownership models — including Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs), worker cooperatives, and Employee Ownership Trusts (EOTs) — are a powerful but often underused tool for business retention, succession planning, and long-term community wealth creation. This session offers a clear, practical overview of how employee ownership models work, why they matter to business owners and employees, and how economic development professionals can use them as an effective strategy within a community's Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) efforts. Attendees will learn when employee ownership makes sense, the basic mechanics and benefits of the three models, and the role they can play in keeping locally owned companies rooted, stable, and growing. The session will also highlight nonprofit support organizations across Ohio and the resources they offer to businesses, advisors, and economic development professionals exploring employee ownership as a path to business continuity and shared prosperity.

Speaker(s): *OEDA; Zen (DAWI); OEOC – Mike Palmieri*

Concurrent Sessions 2 — 10:45am – 12:00pm

Room 1

Track: All EO Companies

HR & Communications Roundtable

Moderated by OEOC staff, this roundtable is a confidential, peer-only space for HR and Communications leaders at employee-owned companies to talk candidly about the realities of building and sustaining an ownership culture — from communication and engagement to onboarding and recruiting. No company is the only one facing a given challenge. This roundtable puts you in the room with peers wrestling with the same issues, ready to trade real strategies and practical fixes. Attendance limited to HR and Communications leaders from employee-owned companies.

Speaker(s): *OEOC – Mike Palmieri*

Room 2

Track: ESOPs

Governance 101: How Your Board and Trustee Should Actually Work Together

Every ESOP company navigates a governance relationship that most private companies never have to think about: the board's relationship with the ESOP trustee. Done well, this partnership protects both the company's fiduciary obligations and its ability to run the business without second-guessing every major decision. Done poorly, it becomes a source of friction, delay, and mistrust. This session brings together experienced ESOP professionals to walk through what boards and trustees should each be responsible for, where the common flashpoints arise (valuation disputes, major transactions, executive compensation), and practical approaches for building a working relationship that serves the company and its employee-owners.

Speaker(s): *OEOC – Mike Palmieri*

Room 3

Track: Worker Cooperative

Co-op Cincy — Governance & Growth: Sustainergy / Our Harvest

Growth opens up real opportunity for a worker -erative — more capacity, more impact, and new possibilities for its worker-owners — but it also changes the organization in ways that go well beyond the balance sheet. This session looks at how two Cincinnati-area worker cooperatives grew and what it took to manage that change: Sustainergy, which grew organically over time, and Our Harvest, which grew through acquisition. Panelists will discuss what a scaling co-op stands to gain, along with what needs attention along the way — adapting governance and decision-making structures, keeping communication clear across a larger or newly combined team, and managing the operational demands of a bigger organization. Walk away with a clear-eyed, balanced look at what growth can offer a worker cooperative, and how to navigate it well.

Speaker(s): *Co-op Cincy; Our Harvest; Sustainergy*

Room 4

Track: Selling Owner / Economic Dev.

Selling an ESOP 101: Structure, Process, and What Comes After

This session covers the fundamentals of Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs) as a succession and ownership strategy, the alternatives owners typically consider, how a feasibility study shapes the decision, and what the transaction process itself looks like. We'll also cover what the first year as an employee-owned company tends to involve — the employee rollout, communicating ESOP benefits, and building an ownership culture. This session is ideal for companies considering an ESOP, those with newly established ESOPs, employees or management new to an ESOP company, or any organization looking to better communicate the ESOP to their workforce.

Speaker(s): *TBD*

Lunch — 12:00pm – 1:00pm

Lunch Speaker – 12:30pm – 1:00pm
Speaker(s): *TBD*

Concurrent Sessions 3 — 1:15pm – 2:30pm

Room 1

Track: All EO Companies

What Actually Builds Ownership Culture

Building a strong ownership culture takes all the pieces you'd expect — clear communication, ongoing education, real opportunities for participation, and rewards that reinforce the ownership mindset. But there's a piece that often gets missed: most employees don't experience "the ESOP" through plan documents or committee meetings — they experience it through the leaders closest to them, day to day. And leadership isn't only a title on an org chart — it shows up in anyone employees look to for how to communicate, how much trust to extend, and whether ownership is something to take seriously. This session covers the full picture of what builds ownership culture, with a close look at the piece hiding in plain sight: recognizing and equipping the leaders in your company — titled or not — as a central piece to building a strong ownership culture.

Speaker(s): *OEOC – Mike Palmieri; additional speakers TBD*

Room 2

Track: ESOPs

Funding the Repurchase Obligation: Cash Strategy for the Long Haul

Every ESOP company eventually has to buy back stock from departing and retiring employee-owners — and that obligation only grows as the workforce ages. Left unplanned, the repurchase obligation can quietly compete with the cash a company needs for growth, capital investment, and debt service, sometimes forcing hard choices at the worst possible time. This session gives CEOs and CFOs a practical grounding in how to forecast the repurchase obligation, the funding strategies available (sinking funds, insurance, cash flow planning), and how to build it into long-term financial planning so it never becomes a surprise.

Speaker(s): *Tim Jamison - Prairie Capital Advisors*

Room 3

Track: ESOPs

Culture, Capital, and Closing the Deal: An ESOP Acquisition Panel

Acquiring another company can be a powerful growth strategy for an ESOP — more scale, more capability, and new opportunity for employee-owners — but it also tests the culture that makes employee ownership work. This session brings together leaders at ESOP companies who have led acquisitions inside their companies, alongside the professional advisors who help structure those deals. Panelists will discuss what growth through acquisition can offer, along with what deserves real attention along the way — valuing and financing the deal, integrating a newly acquired team, and preserving trust and ownership culture through the process. Attendees will walk away with a clear-eyed, practical look at how ESOP companies grow through acquisition, and how to do it well

Speaker(s): *Parallel Technologies - OEOC Network Member*

Room 4

Track: Selling Owner / Economic Dev.

ESOP Alternatives for Selling Owners: Worker Cooperatives and Employee Ownership Trusts (EOTs)

Many owners like the idea of employee ownership as a succession strategy, but find that for one reason or another, an ESOP just doesn't work for them and their company. Fortunately, there are other options. This session explores two of them — the worker cooperative and the Employee Ownership Trust (EOT) — covering the basic structure of each model and the situations in which they can be most effective.

Speaker(s): *Co-op Cincy Staff; Greg Daugherty, Porter Wright Morris LLP (EOTs)*