

# EXPERT OPINION: JO SUTHERLAND



**JO SUTHERLAND** is managing director of Magenta Associates, a certified B Corp and employee-owned communications consultancy working with progressive businesses from a range of sectors. With more than 15 years' experience in strategic PR and communications, Jo specialises in helping purpose-led organisations tell clear, credible stories that stand up to scrutiny.

Jo led Magenta's transition to employee ownership in 2024 and its B Corp certification in 2025, and has a particular interest in how ownership, culture and communication combine to create more resilient businesses. She regularly writes and speaks about employee ownership, ethical business, and the changing role of communications in an AI-shaped world. Alongside her professional role, Jo is studying for a Master's in AI, Ethics and Society at the University of Cambridge, where her research explores the implications of AI for media, communications and public trust.

## WHY EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP IS THE WAY TO GO FOR SUSSEX BUSINESS OWNERS

Sussex is edging towards a new phase of regional decision-making. Devolution is moving forwards, albeit more slowly than anyone first hoped, with the finer details now stretching into the latter part of the decade. That matters, of course, but it's not the most interesting part of the story. What matters more is the kind of economy Sussex is quietly building underneath those structures. And one of the most practical, underused ways of strengthening it is employee ownership.

Employee ownership (EO) is often viewed (and sometimes treated) as a solution to succession planning or, worse, as a tax-efficient transaction. In reality, it's one of the most robust long-term business models available to founders and owners who care about continuity, performance and legacy. Well-run employee-owned businesses are consistently shown to be more productive, more resilient in downturns and better at retaining talent. For owners, EO offers a credible route to step back or exit without selling to competitors, private equity or overseas buyers, protecting the culture they've built and keeping the business rooted locally.

For employees, the shift is just as significant. Employee ownership changes the psychological contract at work. It gives people a meaningful stake in the success of the business. Research consistently shows that employee-owned firms tend to have higher levels of engagement, stronger job satisfaction and lower staff turnover, alongside better pay progression over time. People are more likely to stay, to invest discretionary effort, and to think beyond their immediate role when they feel the business genuinely belongs to them.

It also reshapes relationships with leadership, encouraging greater transparency, trust and shared accountability, and gives employees a clearer line of sight between their day-to-day work and the long-term future of the organisation they are helping to build. That said, this shift doesn't happen automatically just because ownership moves into a trust. Like any meaningful change in workplace culture, it has to be nurtured through clear communication, education and collaboration.

We learned that at Magenta Associates when we became employee-owned in 2024.

## EO lessons from EOs

We deliberately invested in training with EO expert Campbell McDonald because we didn't want ownership to exist as a legal structure but not a lived experience. The main lesson was that employee ownership has to be earned through communication. That message was echoed repeatedly at this November's Employee Ownership Association's annual conference, where more established EO businesses were candid about what they'd got wrong before they got it right.

Again and again, leaders talked about the danger of assuming people 'get it'. Shortcuts - "it's a bit like John Lewis" being the most common throwaway explainer - create more confusion than confidence. Employees need clarity about how the business actually works, how decisions are made (and why), and where they have influence. Without that, ownership is just an abstract concept.

When businesses don't take the time to explain employee ownership properly or bring people with them, the risks are real. Expectations rise, trust can wobble, and cynicism creeps in when the language of ownership isn't matched by lived experience. In those cases, EO can feel hollow - something done to employees rather than with them. But when organisations invest in clear, honest communication and create genuine routes for involvement, the benefits are substantial. Understanding builds confidence.

Confidence leads to engagement. And engagement is what turns ownership from a structure into a strength, unlocking better ideas, stronger accountability and a workforce that thinks and acts for the long-term health of the business.

Transparency came up just as strongly. Employee-owners expect more openness, and the businesses that lean into that rather than resisting it are reaping the benefits. Sharing the numbers regularly, talking honestly about challenges as well as successes, and explaining the reasoning behind decisions all helps build trust. Over time, people stop asking for reassurance and start asking more strategic questions - a clear sign they are thinking like employee-owners.

Instead of "Are we doing okay?", the questions become "Why are we spending here rather than there?", "What return are we actually getting from this marketing activity?" or "How could we shift budget or effort to deliver more long-term value for the business?" That shift in questioning signals a deeper understanding of how commercial decisions are made and a growing confidence to influence them; exactly the mindset employee ownership is designed to unlock.

That change in thinking only really takes hold when people are given safe, visible routes to contribute ideas and challenge decisions. The conference reinforced that innovation flourishes in employee-owned businesses when everyone genuinely has skin in the game. The most effective EO organisations aren't relying on annual surveys or half-baked suggestion schemes. Instead, they create active forums where ideas can be tested, debated and developed, alongside clear governance pathways that show how decisions are made and who influences them. Just as importantly, they close the loop, so people can see what happens after they speak up.

## THE GOOD GUYS COME FIRST

This thinking aligns closely with another journey we've been on. Earlier this year, Magenta became a certified B Corp. What struck me was how complementary B Corp principles and employee ownership are when undertaken together. Both demand transparency, accountability and a long-term view of value. Both require organisations to prove, not just claim, that they balance profit with people and purpose. And both fall flat if they're treated as badges rather than commitments.

For Sussex, this combination matters. Ours is a region full of SMEs, creative businesses and values-led organisations that care deeply about how they operate, not just how fast they grow. Many are thinking about succession. Many want to stay rooted locally. Employee ownership, supported by strong communication and reinforced by frameworks like B Corp, offers a credible route to do that without sacrificing standards or culture.

This is where the wider context quietly re-enters the frame. As Sussex inches towards greater regional autonomy, the real measure of success will be whether people feel more secure, more involved and more invested in the economy around them. Structural change can enable that, but it can't deliver it on its own. Employee ownership can. When it's done well, it builds resilience from the inside out. It gives people agency at work. It shares wealth. And it reflects the values Sussex already prides itself on: fairness, creativity, and a healthy scepticism of anything that looks good on paper but doesn't hold up in practice.

Devolution may still be finding its feet, but employee ownership doesn't need to wait. The lessons are already there, the evidence is growing, and the opportunity is very much now. If Sussex wants an economy that genuinely belongs to its people, this is one flag worth waving.

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