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***Would You Like a Vote With Your Paycheck?
Equal Exchange Named One of the World's
Most Democratic Workplaces for 3rd Consecutive Year***

WEST BRIDGEWATER, MA—April 17, 2009—For perks some companies offer flextime, job training, or 401k contributions, but at Equal Exchange full-time permanent workers can get a vote to go along with all that. The 23 year-old, \$34 million employee-owned firm, best known for their Fair Trade coffee, tea and chocolate, is run like a small New England town where the workers are the citizens, the employee-led Board is the City Council, and the top managers fill a role similar to the City Manager. The votes at both the employee and board levels have real weight on important matters and are distributed in the true democratic fashion of one person/one vote, without regard to rank or seniority. For example, the company co-founder has one vote, as does an entry-level employee.

Because of a wide range of practices like these Equal Exchange was just named as one of the world's most democratic workplaces. The announcement was made by [WorldBlu](#), an Austin, Texas based non-profit specializing in organizational democracy who has compiled the annual list since 2007. Equal Exchange has made the list all three years.

In keeping with basic democratic principles, this characteristic of Equal Exchange is not something bestowed by management, but rather reflects rights possessed by the 86 worker-owners and therefore can never be taken away. Other examples of Equal Exchange's democratic workplace include the power to nominate and elect the Board of Directors; the right to run for a board seat (six of the nine seats are reserved for non-executive employees); employee control over the company's purpose and long term vision; free speech; and access to information such as finances, strategic plans, and more.

While rare in the U.S. Equal Exchange's structure is not unprecedented. Its formal structure is that of a for-profit worker co-operative. There are approximately [300 such co-ops in the U.S.](#), and thousands more in Canada, Europe and Latin America. In [Spain's Basque region](#), and in Northern Italy, there are thousands of worker co-operatives who collectively have over 100,000 employee-owners and billions of dollars in annual revenue. With 30% annual average growth and 100+ employees Equal Exchange is one of the largest and most successful worker co-ops in the U.S.

For-profit and non-profit organizations from around the globe compete for the WorldBlu list. This year the 40 winners come from the U.S., Canada, Mexico, England, India, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Malaysia and collectively represent nearly \$12 billion in combined annual sales. The wide applicability of workplace democracy is demonstrated by the diversity of the winning organizations who represent the technology, healthcare, telecommunications, media, marketing, manufacturing, aerospace and retail industries.

On May 8th the 86 worker-owners of Equal Exchange will carry out one of their most notable democratic traditions by electing three Board Directors as well the Worker-Owner Coordinator, a key figure who facilitates the deliberations of the worker-owners. Three of the four offices will be held by rank-and-file employees, a typical outcome at the co-operative. The fourth position is that of an outside board director, whose nomination also came from the worker-owners.

While all the firms on the WorldBlu list integrate democratic practices in different ways Equal Exchange (and fellow worker co-op winner [La Siembra](#)) may be distinct for how it weaves its democratic elements with evenly distributed employee ownership, thereby adding an extra level of security to its innovative workplace culture.

“We’re honored to have again been named to the list and hope the award will fuel people’s desire to reform the way work is organized” said Equal Exchange President Rob Everts. “It doesn’t really make sense that in America we both worship democracy, and yet leave it at home when we go off to work every day – and accept this situation as normal and immutable.”

Rob Everts went on to explain the lack of workplace democracy in the U.S.:

“Most of the forces that shape the structure of business, including capital markets, business schools, economic theory, a variety of laws, and even our own upbringing trains us to assume that at work you’re either an employee or a boss, but never a citizen. So at Equal Exchange we understand why workplace democracy seems such a novel concept. We simply don’t accept it.”

This is Equal Exchange’s fifth award since March 1st. In early March Equal Exchange was honored with the [Social Innovation award](#) from the Financial Times newspaper and JustMeans.com for its unique Fair Trade/worker co-op business model and alternative capital structure. On March 27th, the co-operative received the annual Aaron Feuerstein Spirituality and Business Award that is bestowed by the Symposium on Spirituality, Values, and Business. More recently Equal Exchange has also won awards for its innovative Fair Trade education programs and for the environmental features of its [new downtown Boston café](#).

About Equal Exchange:

A pioneer and U.S. market leader in Fair Trade since 1986, Equal Exchange is a full service provider of high quality, organic coffee, tea, chocolate and healthy snacks to retailers and food service establishments. Major customers include Shaw’s, Whole Foods, Hannaford, Ten Thousand Villages, hundreds of natural food stores, restaurants, and thousands of places of worship nationwide. 100% of Equal Exchange products are fairly traded, benefiting more than 40 small farmer co-operatives in 22 countries around the world.

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