

Sustainable, self-determined, collaborative: Cooperatives celebrate revival as work model of the future

Vienna (OTS) - The world of work is undergoing massive change due to digitalization and fragmentation. Cooperative models such as cooperatives can overcome many of the challenges of this change, according to the conclusion of the conference Rethinking Work - Cooperative Approaches for an Economy of the Future, which Smart Austria, the Austrian Cooperative Association and the University of Vienna jointly organized in June.

Project work, new self-employment, sharing economy - what at first glance brings many freedoms for workers and many conveniences for customers, at second glance harbors numerous risks. Because the brave new world of work all too often also means poor pay, low social standards and isolation.

"Cooperatives and other cooperative models, on the other hand, combine self-determined and responsible work with the support of a community. This is how we can sustainably improve the world of work," Sabine Kock, managing director of Smart Austria, opened the conference last Friday.

Trust, solidarity and "proper management"

Sociologist Sabine Neuhofer, who researches distributive justice at the University of Vienna, demands, "We have to discuss what precarious working conditions do to people, and what kind of society we actually want to live in."

Christian Hopp, an economist at RWTH Aachen University, emphasizes the importance of mutual trust and solidarity as the success factors of cooperative partnerships.

Clemens Pig, managing director of APA, which is also organized as a cooperative, agrees with this assessment. "Digitization does not make people redundant, but creates new professions and training paths. This is what we need to take care of. That's what proper management should do today," Pig said.

Digital platform cooperatives as a counter-model to Uber and Co.

Platform companies such as Airbnb or Uber are exemplary for the change in the world of work. As a viable alternative, U.S. researcher Trebor Scholz advocates digital platform cooperatives that are owned by their members and organized democratically. Such platform co-ops already exist in numerous sectors: from vacation rentals (Fairbnb) to household services (Up & Go) to music streaming (Resonate). They secure better pay and better working conditions, but also higher productivity and better economic resilience.

Cooperative and cooperative practice

Barbara Pogacar, head of the department of consulting for goods and services cooperatives at the Austrian Cooperative Association, names the advantages of the cooperative: these include the freely selectable amount of business shares, easy access to membership and limited liability. "The idea of the cooperative has proven itself over 150 years, but unlike today's sharing economy, it creates trust and security," says ÖGV expert Pogacar.

Ela Kagel from the community hub Supermarkt Berlin pleads for a fundamental paradigm shift in the economic system "from the ego system to the ecosystem", i.e. towards a holistically conceived, ecologically as well as socially and economically sustainable ecosystem of networked communities.

Wolfgang Aigner and Wolfgang Wittmer from the Vienna IT cooperative New World of Work present their contribution to the vision of a decentralized and equally sustainable Internet with the Vienna Cherry Chapter.

Smart Austria, represented by Lisa Pointner and Sabine Kock, is also a concrete model of success from Austria, which enables a combination of self-determined work with the security of employment for almost a thousand artists, creatives and new self-employed people. "An umbrella of solidarity for all those who were previously lone wolves," says Kock.

Cooperatives and other cooperative models are thus also quite present in Austria and in German-speaking countries and are gaining in importance. However, they sometimes struggle with low visibility and the necessary

start-up financing. Many challenges, especially those posed by advancing digitalization, still have to be overcome by the traditional cooperative system itself, the discussion concluded.

Cooperatives as a future model of work

"Nevertheless, the cooperative economy opens up future prospects for self-responsible, solidarity-based working together," economist Oliver Fabel from the University of Vienna is also convinced. Cooperative work creates starting points for a different understanding of justice and a broader concept of work that includes not only gainful employment but also care work, for example. According to Scholz, the cooperative economy is "a path toward collective courage."

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