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“What are the advantages and disadvantages of Twin Oaks’ labor credit system?”

Twin Oaks is an intentional community located within Virginia and is known for its distinctive labor system. As an intentional community, Twin Oaks’ core tenants are focused around egalitarian principles and the labor system reflects the community’s aims for equality. For every hour a member works, they are allocated a labor credit. Each member must work approximately 40 hours per week but are provided the flexibility to choose when they work. Should a member work more than the required amount, they gain extra labor credits that they can use for vacation hours or to compensate for missed work hours in the past. Twin Oaks’ labor credit system is based on trust, where every member is expected to self-report how many hours they worked and what type of jobs they did within a week. Although the labor credit system is advantageous in respect to providing autonomy and equality, it is also disadvantageous since it is easily exploitable due to being based on trust. As well, the system provides few incentives to motivate members to work, which can potentially lead to stagnation of the work force.

Twin Oaks’ labor credit system has many advantages in comparison to traditional work systems instated outside of the intentional community. For instance, the system is highly autonomous and flexible. By allowing members to choose what jobs they want to work and when, the labor system is providing community members with more freedom to plan activities throughout their day. In addition, the labor system allows members to plan for vacations more easily by turning extra labor credits into vacation hours. These vacation hours may then be used for actual vacations or saved to cover for sick days. In addition, the labor credit system is based around equality, as “one hour of work is worth one labor credit regardless of the type of job” (15). This emphasis on equality allows each member to work at their own pace. Since each member is allowed to choose what job they want to work and can work multiple jobs throughout a single day, the system also encourages productivity as it allows people the freedom to choose jobs that cater to their personal skills. Therefore, people that are better suited to manual labor can work as farmers while people that are more artistic and indoor-inclined can works as hammock-makers. The system allows workers to perform their jobs without the worry that their occupations are inhibiting the salary they receive and prevents any instance of people working jobs they dislike just for the only reason that it pays well. In addition to promoting productivity, the equality of the labor system also fosters “honest [and] cooperation” throughout the community, helping to unite members of Twin Oaks.

However, the “labor credit system is a mix of positive and negative” and has disadvantages in addition to its advantages (15). As Twin Oaks’ labor credit system is centered on trust and is “built on members picking their own work and pace”, the system can be “easily abused and exploited” (16, 15). Since a labor credit is earned per hour of work, “no matter how much or little is accomplished in that hour”, members can still receive their labor credits even if they placed little effort in accomplishing their work. This can potentially cause the labor system to degrade as workers are no longer working to standards acceptable in maintaining the amount in production of goods required to earn a profit. In addition, the labor system provides few incentives for people to work more efficiently, aside from being able to exchange extra work hours into vacation hours. Because of this lack of incentives, the “community is significantly more inefficient than it could be” as members have no reason to improve their efficiency as they still receive labor credits for inefficient work (18). As well, some members, especially the new ones to the community, may find it hard to stay motivated in the face of countless “day-in, day-out jobs” (16). Because the system allows members to choose jobs that interest them, many members will only work the few same jobs as those are the ones that are best suited to them. This may result in a feeling of being trapped in the same situation daily and can lead to stagnation in the work force. As well, this lack of motivation can cause a further decrease in efficiency as members do not feel the need to be efficient if they are repeating the same tasks every day. Unmotivated members can also find themselves stuck in the ‘labor hole’, which is “when a member owes work to the community”, either due to illness or just not working the weekly required amount (16). Depending on the amount of hours a person owes, it can be challenging to get out of the labor hole and still meet the required amount of hours per week, especially since many members little to no vacation hours in reserve due to the lack of motivation to work those extra hours and save up.

Although Twin Oaks’ labor credit system has disadvantages which could potentially hinder it, the system is unique in providing equality and large amounts of autonomy to every worker. Even though a lack of efficiency and incentives to increase worker motivation is a problem within the system, I believe that the egalitarian principles promoted by the system greatly outweigh its disadvantages, especially since these principles reflects the community’s mission as a whole to be egalitarian. Due to this, Twin Oaks’ labor credit system contributes to the community’s goal of becoming a utopic society and sets it apart from traditional society through the labor credit system’s egalitarian nature.

I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work. Renae Taylor

Works Cited

Anonymous. “Twin Oaks’ Labor Credit System.” *Communities* 135, (2007): 15-19.