

CARROT SHIFTS: MEMBERS EARN EXTRA CREDIT FOR HARD-TO-FILL WORK SLOTS

February 7, 2023

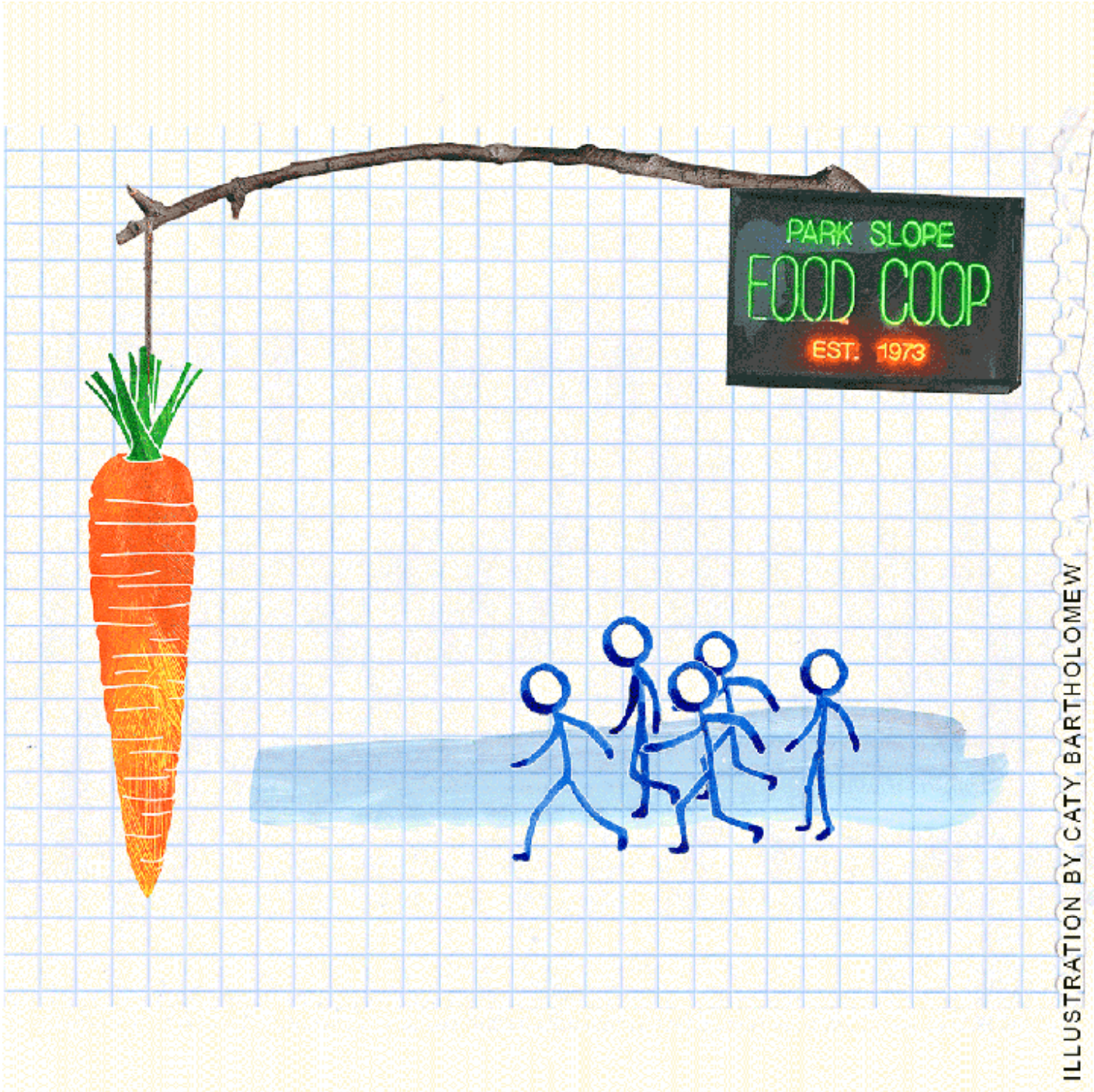


ILLUSTRATION BY CATY BARTHOLOMEW

By Walecia Konrad

It's about 8:30 a.m. on a rainy, raw January morning, and as usual around that time, the giant United Natural Foods, Inc. (UNFI) truck is parked outside the Park Slope

Food Coop. Palette after palette filled with dozens of cases of products are lined up on the sidewalk, waiting to be unloaded inside.

Meanwhile, in the Coop basement, member workers on the 8 a.m. lifting shift are on either side of the conveyor belt, lifting and storing boxes of everything from feather-weight toilet paper to hefty cases of bottled beverages. There's fun music on the speaker and Receiving Coordinator Francisco Ferreiro keeps everything moving from the lift to the conveyor belt so lifters can stock shelves quickly.

"It's an enormous amount of goods to move at a dynamic pace," said Ferreiro. "There's enough people today so we can keep it moving."

The fact that workers showed up on this dreary morning may be in large part due to something called the "carrot shift."



Henry Green

Carrot shifts started when member labor returned to the Coop after the COVID-19 lockdown. That's when the previous squad system—wherein members signed up for a specific squad that met at the same day and time every cycle—gave way to the current system, in which members can sign up for any available shift 30 minutes in advance.

“WE USED TO HAVE A HUGE ABSENTEE RATE ON THESE SHIFTS. NOW WE HAVE A REALLY LOW ABSENTEE RATE AND CAN GET THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WE WANT.”

GENERAL COORDINATOR ANN HERPEL

The new system immediately worked well for member labor and staff alike. But coordinators soon noticed that, just as in pre-pandemic times, they were having trouble getting enough members to work early morning slots starting at 5 a.m. and late evening weekend shifts for hard-to-fill jobs like lifting, cleaning and bathrooms.

Prior to the pandemic, coordinators tried to incentivize members to work those shifts by making them shorter—two hours instead of the usual two hours and 45 minutes. But even with the shorter hours, the Coop still had trouble with no shows, forcing staff to fill the gaps themselves. Then, those same no shows would crowd more appealing slots to do their makeups, causing an oversupply of labor during popular times.

So the staff decided to incentivize workers in a different way. Each carrot work slot completed is worth 1.2 shifts. In other words, work five shifts, get a sixth free.

“We used to have a huge absentee rate on these shifts, like 20 percent cancellation when it was squads,” explained General Coordinator Ann Herpel. “Now we have a really low absentee rate and can get the number of people we want for these shifts,” she said.

Missing work at the Coop used to mean a punishment, explained Herpel. But with the new system, members choose the shifts they can work and are able to cancel without penalty. “We’re hopeful that we’re moving away from the punitive thing,” Herpel said.

In other words, the Coop is using the carrot instead of the stick.

MEMBERS LOVE CARROTS

If the recent rainy day lifter shift is any indication, some members prefer carrots. Julia Foote, who joined the Coop this past summer, said, “I like to know where everything goes, and I’m not really a people-facing person, so this job is great for me. And I only have two more to go before I get the extra credit.”

Terry Brooks, a member since 2004, said she did the same shift pre-pandemic, “so now the carrot is a nice bonus. I’ve already earned an extra shift!”

New member Henry Green joined the Coop two months ago. He had some free days in January, so he tried out a carrot shift. “Why not? Who doesn’t want a free shift?” He said that enthusiastically while lifting and stocking the lightweight boxes of pretzels that came down the conveyor belt. To his credit, his exuberance dimmed only slightly when he started hoisting cases of Field Day canned pumpkin. “These are heavy!” he said, still smiling.

“HONESTLY, THE LATE-NIGHT HOURS WORK BEST FOR ME. MY KIDS ARE ASLEEP AND I CAN’T REALLY COME MANY OTHER TIMES. AND THIS CARROT THING IS GREAT! I’VE ALREADY GOTTEN ONE OR TWO EXTRA SHIFTS.”

MEMBER OFER WOLBERGER

Noah Rott, a three-year PSFC member, summed up the general feeling on the squad when he said, “It gives you a good feeling to earn an extra shift.”



Noah Rott

WEEKEND CARROTS WORK THE NIGHT SHIFT

Carrot shifts are also available late at night on weekends. On a recent Friday evening, flex workers started signing in at 8:30 p.m., just as the last shoppers were leaving the Coop. Ofer Wolberger, a member for more than 10 years, was one of them. “Honestly, the late-night hours work best for me. My kids are asleep and I can’t really come many other times,” he said. “And this carrot thing is great! I’ve already gotten one or two extra shifts.”

Wolberger likes the variety of duties on the flex shifts. Workers often start out on checkout or stocking and then move to cleaning and maintenance jobs once the Coop

is empty of shoppers. “I can do cashier, I clean the shelves, I don’t care, whatever needs doing,” said Wolberger. Later he added, “Sometimes they let you drive the Zamboni, that’s really fun,” referring to the Zamboni-like floor cleaning machine.

That night Wolberger was starting at the bread bins, where membership coordinator Karina Gee explained how to gently pull out and clean the bins and how to wrap up and label tomorrow’s day-old baked goodies.

They were joined by another carrot worker, Polly Thistlethwaite, a Coop member for about 10 years. “I only work carrot shifts, and I love the night shift,” she said. “Once you earn that extra credit, you never go back!” She differed a bit from Wolberger on the Zamboni job, though. “I was really disappointed. I thought you got to ride it, but really, you push it. And it’s a big heavy machine!”



Julia Foote

Both Thistlethwaite and Wolberger appreciate the fact that workers can come early to shop and store their groceries during their shift. Or, if it’s just a few items, staff will stay a little later to check workers out.

“WHEN WE SEE A SHIFT ISN’T ATTRACTING ENOUGH PEOPLE, WE MAY ‘CARROTIZE’ IT.”

GENERAL COORDINATOR ELINOAR ASTRINSKY

Herpel has noticed that carrots make weekend night shifts more attractive to members with all types of schedules. Even the most social member may find themselves with a rare weekend evening without plans, she explained. If they do, they can sign up and earn extra credit.

With the online signup system, carrot workers and regular workers can now plan their work slots around their schedules instead of having to plan their schedules around their work slots, she added.

CARROTS TAKE A LOAD OFF STAFFERS

“The reason I’m most excited about the carrot shift,” said General Coordinator Joe Szladek, “specifically with early morning shifts, is that the staff needs consistent support and now we are almost certain to have enough people. If we don’t have enough people, we do all the lifting, and it is really hard on our bodies,” he explained.

Ferreiro agreed. “When workers don’t show, it’s a full-on workout—we’re just lifting boxes non-stop to get everything unloaded.”



Terry Brooks, Iver Cleveland, Margo Johnston

SIGNING UP FOR CARROT SHIFTS IS EASY

If you want to get in on the work-less-for-more-credit bandwagon, go to the shift calendar, use the drop-down menu to find “Only Carrots” at the bottom of the list, and see what’s available.

Keep in mind carrot shifts are very dynamic. Many of them fill up fast, so scheduling ahead may give you more options. At the same time, “when we see a shift isn’t attracting enough people, we may ‘carrotize’ it,” said General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky, meaning shopping for last-minute carrot shifts can pay off, too. This is especially true during the holidays, said Astrinsky, “which is the time the fewest people come to work, but the most people come to shop.”

While there may be changes in which shifts are incentivized—Astrinsky said the coord-

inators are looking at taking the 8 a.m. lifting shift off the carrot list if there continues to be good turnout—the carrot itself seems here to stay. “We’ll always have them,” said Astrinsky. “It’s working really well, and we’re filling shifts we wouldn’t fill otherwise.”