

THE BOT ATE MY SLOT!

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THE COOP ROLLS OUT A NEW LOTTERY SYSTEM TO MAKE IT A LITTLE EASIER TO GET INTO A COVETED ORIENTATION SESSION

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By Susannah Jacob

In early August, the Coop introduced a lottery system designed to make orientation slots more accessible and the process less stressful for prospective members. The new lottery system replaces the old system, which released slots on the Coop's website, originally at midnight, later at 7 a.m. and finally at 7 p.m. It became a running joke: The Coop was the city's hardest club to get into.

The old system favored people with the fastest internet connection, or the flexibility to be at the computer at an exact time, frequently midnight. In recent months, the Coop's staff observed access patterns suggesting automative-software tools and bots were being used to search for slots, which were routinely disappearing within 20 seconds of release. The new system is designed to be fairer and give all people an equal chance at registering for an orientation, including eliminating factors like whether someone had a faster internet connection or consistent access to a computer.

On August 18, the Coop emailed over 3,000 people who had expressed interest in joining the Coop within the past year to explain the new system. Prospective members can select from any upcoming dates. If randomly selected for a session, they will receive an email including a deadline to confirm or reject the opportunity.

The email went on, "Dates will be posted on an ongoing basis so you will continue to log in to your account and select from the available future dates."

While the new system may be fairer, the email noted that there are limits. "The demand to join the Coop exceeds the Coop's capacity to welcome everyone," it concluded. "Our goal with this change is to make getting a place in orientation less stressful and more equitable. However, we ask for your patience as it will likely take a while for many of you to be selected and secure an orientation slot."

General Coordinator Matt Hoagland was one of the staff members who helped to create the new lottery system. When Hoagland first joined the Coop, prospective members could walk into an orientation session. “People used to just walk in and say, “I want to be a member, and they’d be like, “Great, show up for an orientation,” Hoagland remembers.

Around 2009, the Coop introduced a way for prospective members to register for orientations online. Thus began the system of releasing a fixed number of slots on a weekly basis.

Prior to this change, the Coop’s membership had grown approximately ten percent for two successive years. The Coop’s physical constraints—chiefly square footage and food storage—couldn’t sustain that pace of growth. The solution was to stall membership growth by limiting orientation slots.

During the pandemic, the Coop lost around 5,000 members, and member work temporarily ceased, while paid staff ran the store. Orientations—and the admission of new members—were paused indefinitely.

As lockdown measures loosened, the Coop staff started releasing new orientation slots on a weekly basis. With social distancing still in place, orientation sessions were private sit-downs with office workers. The Coop launched a new website for prospective members in 2021.

IN RECENT YEARS, COUNTLESS PEOPLE HAVE TRIED, AND FAILED, TO SIGN UP FOR THE ORIENTATION SESSION THAT IS A REQUISITE FOR JOINING THE COOP. A NEW SYSTEM MAY HELP.

Eventually, the staff began publishing the dates and times of upcoming orientation slots on the Coop’s website. The decision was an effort at transparency and reducing

the number of incoming phone calls from people asking about release times. There were repeat callers, whose months-long attempts to get a slot were futile.

It was only when the Coop began sharing the time of upcoming releases that the real problems began. “Instead of slots disappearing within, I don’t know, 15 minutes to seven hours overnight, they were gone in less than 20 seconds,” Hoagland said. “They started disappearing so quickly that some people would wait up and would never see them.”

After originally releasing orientation slots at midnight, the staff tried different release times, including 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., but the problem persisted.

Hoagland said that there was some speculation of whether people were using AI agents to direct web bots to claim open shifts. “I don’t have concrete evidence of any people [successfully using bots],” Hoagland said. But around six months ago, the staff did detect an uptick in the use of automated software tools that allowed people to stay logged in and ready to sign up for a slot the second it became available.

Nevertheless, Hoagland said that concerns over bots were not the main reason for the new system. “The main reason was how quickly orientations were disappearing,” he said. “Nothing’s going to be perfect, but we think this is a big step towards making it more pleasant and yes, fairer to get people who are interested in joining in.”

Susannah Jacob is a history PhD student and a proficient operator of the slotted, plastic bag-taper machine in the Coop’s bulk department.