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The lure of the water cooler

By Ian Sanders



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Shared space: Stephanie Booth, above, who was looking for spontaneous interaction in Lausanne

Maria Popova could base herself just about anywhere that has a decent desk and quality WiFi. In fact, the curator and editor of the Brain Pickings website has chosen Studiomates – a Brooklyn co-working space inhabited by designers, illustrators, bloggers, writers and web developers – as her primary work space. “There’s something to be said for sharing a space, both physically and intellectually, with like-minded people,” she says, adding that there is “a kind of infusion of camaraderie that permeates your whole experience of your day, your work, your life.”

While many could be working alone at home or in, say, a coffee shop, it seems that small operations of one to a few people – whether start-ups, non-profits, consultants, independent contractors or freelancers – still opt to share an office space, even if it is with strangers.

Such “co-working spaces”, which provide a desk – usually in a communal space – WiFi and some basic services fill this need. Members sign up to use them as a full-time office or on a drop-in basis. An affordable alternative to rented or serviced offices, the emphasis at co-working spaces is on nurturing collaboration and community in a well designed environment for like-minded workers.

The attraction is more than just cheap office space, cost savings from shared facilities or combating isolation. The aim is for members to share ideas, exchange skills and benefit from serendipitous encounters by the water cooler or photocopier. However, trying to work in a space full of stimulating people can be a double-edged sword: Ms Popova admits she sometimes retreats to somewhere less busy to get things done.

Coffee shops may suit some people starting up a small business armed with a laptop and a smartphone, but co-working spaces provide a missing ingredient. Genevieve DeGuzman, San Francisco-based co-author of *Working in the UnOffice: A Guide to Coworking for Indie Workers, Small Businesses, and Nonprofits*, argues that co-working spaces deliver a quality of camaraderie lacking in a coffee shop.

Co-working guidelines: Dos and don'ts for starting out at a co- working space

- **Do acknowledge the energy of a group:** Harness your co-workers' collective brainpower to solve problems, recommend collaborators and to help make your business ideas happen

- **Do be friendly and helpful:** But recognise that most opportunities come from a friendly, no agenda, casual conversation rather than contrived meetings

- **Don't hide yourself away:** Base yourself among open desks instead of renting a private office. "There's a big debate about whether private offices and nooks in a coworking space defeat the purpose of achieving community and collaboration out of a motley group of people – get out there and ditch the office," says Genevieve DeGuzman

- **Don't leave good coffee around:** Gerry Newton says coffee is the fuel that keeps entrepreneurs like him going. "So leaving such a valuable

"It's a more structured, orderly environment than your random stool at the Starbucks counter, but it's less structured than, say, your typical business incubator. If you're looking for a community of fellow entrepreneurs to be around, it's the best place to work," she says.

To get maximum value from a shared workspace, co-workers need to treat the experience differently from standard office rental and be ready to explore the opportunities that come from collaboration and interaction with someone at a neighbouring desk.

"Having pockets of creativity [in a single co-working space] is great, but what you really want is spillover: start-ups sharing ideas, exchanging services and so on." Examples might include "the marketing company working with the literary magazine to build up a reading audience or the car-sharing app developer introducing the digital marketer to a group of freelance bloggers," says Ms DeGuzman.

Entrepreneur Jose Castillo set up SparkPlaza in his native Johnson City, Tennessee six years ago when he was looking for an office outside his own home, but admits that he soon envisaged a bigger entity. "What started as a desire for my own office has turned into a passion for bringing entrepreneurs, start-ups and contractors together," he says.

"Most of our members could work out of their homes or coffee shops but [here] they can chat across the aisle about

commodity lying around – definitely when it's the good stuff – will be consumed faster than you can shout 'seed investment'."

hot topics and even collaborate with others on projects," Mr Castillo says.

Stephanie Booth set up Eclau (Espace Coworking Lausanne) in the Swiss city in 2008 with similar motives when she realised she needed a separate place away from home to work. She wanted interaction with people to happen spontaneously at least as much as via organised social events. A video game entrepreneur and designer who are Eclau members have, for instance, collaborated on a magazine publishing venture.

As well as interaction, Ms Booth says a co-working space must also offer calm to enable concentration on work. "Some spaces have so much going on to feed the social interaction side that people end up not being able to work properly," she says.

TechHub is a London co-working space for technology companies that is supported by Google and Pearson, owner of the Financial Times. It offers resident companies the opportunity to network and learn through regular events and workshops. Located in London's Old Street area, which has been nicknamed "Silicon Roundabout", it offers start-ups a basic and affordable workspace.

Gerry Newton based his cycling-focused start-up Cyclr at TechHub because he thought immersing himself in an environment of innovation would give him a competitive edge.

Several TechHub resident start-ups have complementary skills and services that they can trade between each other informally through chance encounters. Mr Newton says Cyclr often swaps expertise with Koyoku, an app company sharing the same space within TechHub.

But, he adds, one of the biggest benefits from choosing this space came one Saturday morning when he and Tony Million, another entrepreneur, were the only people working there the day after a TechHub party. That led to Mr Million becoming the company's technology adviser.

"We ended up forming a relationship which has been incredibly beneficial, and could potentially be the difference between success and failure. Who would have thought that a simple hungover morning at the office would lead to such a relationship? That kind of thing doesn't occur at coffee shops, bedrooms or libraries," says Mr Newton.

The benefits of co-working spaces are about interaction rather than cost savings. Ms DeGuzman calls these "weak ties". Every business she spoke to for her book shared examples of where a chance encounter or conversation with another member at a co-working space had led on to something.

“The best leads come from acquaintances and colleagues, rather than close friends or people we know well. Co-working spaces are the best places to cultivate those so-called weak ties,” she says.

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