

February 20, 2008

They're Working on Their Own, Just Side by Side

By DAN FOST

SAN FRANCISCO

CONTEMPLATING his career path a couple of years ago, a young computer programmer named Brad Neuberg faced a modern predicament. “It seemed I could either have a job, which would give me structure and community,” he said, “or I could be freelance and have freedom and independence. Why couldn’t I have both?”

As someone used to hacking out solutions, Mr. Neuberg took action. He created a word — coworking, eliminating the hyphen — and rented space in a building, starting a movement.

While coworking has evolved since Mr. Neuberg’s epiphany in 2005, dozens of places around the country and increasingly around the world now offer such arrangements, where someone sets up an office and rents out desks, creating a community of people who have different jobs but who want to share ideas.

“It’s nourishing on a fundamental level,” said John Vlahides, the executive editor of 71miles.com, a travel site covering Northern California, who rents a desk for \$175 a month at one of Mr. Neuberg’s original sites, the Hat Factory. “And if you’re not nourished, how can you be creative?”

Coworking sites are up and running from Argentina to Australia and many places in between, although a wiki site on coworking shows that most are in the United States. While some have grown-up-sounding names, most seem connected somewhere between the communalism of the 1960s and the whimsy of the dot-com days of the ’90s, like the Hive Cooperative in Denver, Office Nomads in Seattle, Nutopia Workspace in Lower Manhattan and Independents Hall in Philadelphia.

The coworkers, armed with Wi-Fi laptops and cellphones, are in some ways offering a techie twist on the age-old practice of artists or writers teaming up to rent studio space.

Most coworkers say they were drawn to the spaces for the same reasons that inspired Mr. Neuberg: they like working independently, but they are less effective when sitting home alone.

“Even people who are antisocial feel a need to be around other people for at least part of the day while they’re working,” said Laura Forlano, a visiting fellow at the Information Society Project at Yale Law School who has studied people working in communal offices and cafes.

Coworking comes in many flavors. The Hat Factory in San Francisco is a live-work loft that’s home to three technology workers who open up during the day to other people. Some companies, like Citizen Agency, a San Francisco Internet consulting firm that has done the most to evangelize coworking, have an open-door policy, in which people rent desks but others are free to drop in and use the Wi-Fi or the conference room.

Some companies rent out desks to the nomadic workers, hoping some of their Internet mojo will rub off. Yet others have started coworking spaces as businesses unto themselves, like a community version of the corporate business centers operated by the Regus Group.

Tara Hunt, a co-owner of Citizen Agency, which calls its office Citizen Space, has listed (in a blog, of course) some principles of coworking. They include collaboration, openness, community, sustainability and accessibility.

Many of the ideas come from the open-source software movement, in which people share their work freely with little regard for financial gain. Taking a nod from that movement, the people involved in coworking share their experiences and ideas on a Web site, coworking.pbwiki.com.

Despite such ideals, the arrangement does not always work perfectly. Thor Muller, the chief executive of Get Satisfaction, a San Francisco start-up, said he had opened his offices to friends to come in and work. One day, a friend started aggressively recruiting Satisfaction's employees for his own start-up, and he was banned from the office.

"There should be honor among start-ups," Mr. Muller said, still rankled.

Ms. Hunt and Chris Messina, her partner in Citizen Agency, said they have had to make sure that people respect their space and leave it clean.

"Someone wanted to bring her dog in, and we had to say, 'That actually doesn't work for us,'" Ms. Hunt said. And Mr. Vlahides at the Hat Factory griped about "some humorless European guys" who sat at the common table and talked loudly on their cellphones instead of going outside.

Citizen Space lets people drop in without paying, but if someone uses the space regularly, the group asks the person to pay for a key. For \$350 a month, a worker can rent a desk and get a key to Citizen Space for 24-hour access. For \$250 a month, you get only a key. The space has seven desks, a large table for drop-ins, a private conference room, whiteboards and other office amenities — some less typical, like beer and wine.

Ms. Hunt and Mr. Messina say they don't make a profit on the space. "We could get our own office with 800 square feet and spend the same money," Mr. Messina said, "or we can be here, and have a space where people can come and work and have meet-ups that serve the community, and it gives us the opportunity to meet some fascinating people."

Mr. Messina and Ms. Hunt are so passionate about coworking that they even sell their technology customers on it. While consulting with a San Francisco bag maker, Timbuk2, they persuaded the company to create some coworking desks in its offices, attracting technology folks to help stimulate ideas.

Other coworking spaces are set up as businesses. Roman Gelfer, a former equities trader, and Sasha Vasilyuk, a writer, started Sandbox Suites in San Francisco last October, renting out 4,300 square feet on three floors. Their rates start at \$135 for a once-a-week drop-in slot and go up to \$495 a month for a private desk.

"If you build a space from the ground up for coworking and networking as well, you could do a better job, and I definitely believe it's a great business," Mr. Gelfer said.

Still, he allows free events in the space, like hackathons — weekends in which programmers get together and build, say, [Facebook](#) applications.

The Hat Factory has a more informal feel. One might call it messy. The lore is that the room, in an industrial loft, once belonged to a woman who made hats. It's now occupied by a Web video producer, a guy who runs a Web video start-up called Viddyou and a [Yahoo](#) employee. About seven others work in the space, which is open during daytime business hours.

The Hat Factory vibe is more like a dorm than an office, with Mr. Vlahides throwing candy across the floor to tease the resident cat, and colorful sheets of fabric hanging from the ceiling.

A coworking site in Brighton and Hove, England, called the Werks, is an example of how the networked world can spread an idea across borders. James McCarthy, a founder, had left his job in information technology at [American Express](#) and with a partner rented a 6,000-square-foot building that once belonged to [Barclays Bank](#).

They rent to artists, software developers and designers, among others, with hopes of someday being profitable but also allowing free drop-ins to spread the word.

Similarly, Fernando Maclen in Buenos Aires had read online accounts of Citizen Space and a coworking space in Vancouver, British Columbia, and for a college class wrote a paper about how he would create a coworking site.

“In less than three months, I made my business plan (based on the experiences posted by the coworking group) and asked my parents for financial support,” he said in an e-mail message.

Mr. Maclen's space in Buenos Aires is now half full with eight workers, but he said that his own small design studio had benefited “200 percent” from the arrangement.

“We, as a design firm, have our own projects, but we outsource parts of them, very often to designers inside the coworking space,” he said. “They do the same with us. We complement each other. The speed is incredible. We don't waste time with endless phone calls or IM chats, we simply walk to the office next door and there they are.”

The coworking wiki page lists many countries where people would like to start sites, or work in one if someone else would get it going.

People who are coworking feel a bond to other coworkers.

One day last month, a technology worker from Montreal, Duncan Ward, set up his laptop at Citizen Space in San Francisco. “I just came to town for a week to do some networking for my start-up,” he said. He had heard of the site from a friend who was setting up a coworking site in Montreal.

As for Mr. Neuberg, who started the movement, he is no longer coworking, although he still promotes it. Like many other talented programmers, he took a job at [Google](#).

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