

From Workplace to WorkSpace: The next-generation office

By Belinda Bruce

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The face of the workplace is changing.

Email, the Internet, cellphones, laptops and wireless communications have redefined the business landscape of the twenty-first century, giving rise to a network of home offices, telecommuters and mobile professionals. But, as attractive as it sounds at the outset, working from a home office or a wireless-enabled café has certain drawbacks—notably noise, distractions and a lack of private meeting space and sense of community.

However, for the independent professional looking for a bit more structure and social interaction, the prospect of finding affordable small-office space in any major Canadian city is slim.

In downtown Vancouver, according to a report issued by Cushman & Wakefield LePage in November of last year, the overall vacancy rate of commercial office space is less than four percent and is expected to diminish in the years leading up to the 2010 Olympics.

“Office space is in high demand and the vacancy rate is very low,” says Eugen Klein, a director at the Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver and Chairman of the BC Commercial Council.

While some companies offer desks or single offices for rent within a larger office, lease rates are generally higher than the freelance professional can afford.

Enter WorkSpace, a revolutionary business in downtown Vancouver that is rushing to fill the gap between workplace, café and home office.

Far removed from impersonal workplace environments filled with multi-stall “cube farms” or offices that double as a broom closets, WorkSpace is a light-filled Gastown loft providing a collective of small-business and independent professionals with an affordable, professional facility.

Motivated by the trend of working in cafés, the 5,000-square-foot, downtown corner loft with picture windows overlooking the North Shore Mountains is funky, professional and inexpensive. Decorated with original art, creamy white walls, lots of exposed brick and silver pots filled with ivy hanging over the reception area, WorkSpace has a warm and friendly atmosphere. Features include glassed-in meeting rooms, a lounge and a café surrounding a beautiful open-concept work environment with sleek workstations, wireless Internet and printing, scanning and fax services. Rather than signing a lease, WorkSpace asks clients to join as members and offers variable plans to suit individual needs.

Shortly after it opened last fall, *The Vancouver Sun* dubbed WorkSpace “the office of the future”. Avoiding the term “office” altogether, WorkSpace opts for the more communal idea of a “shared work environment.”

“I was always interested in doing a different ‘third space’ in Vancouver,” says WorkSpace founder Bill MacEwen. “A place that is not home, not work and not a restaurant, where you can be social and feel at home.”

Inspired by a Prince Edward Island cooperative called Queen Street Commons—the facility that broke the concept in Canada—MacEwen set out to find a suitable place in Vancouver to realize his dream. After a six-month search, he found the ideal spot at 21 Water Street.

Operated more like a club than an office, WorkSpace removes the hassles of leases and landlords, and all the ‘small details’ like making coffee and emptying the garbage. And like a country club, beverages and pastries and certain services such as fax, printing and long-distance calls are added to a client’s tab and invoiced monthly.

“We’re similar to a concierge,” says MacEwen. “We try to facilitate our clients so that they can just do their work. We make coffee and tea and serve pastries, clean up their dishes, recommend restaurants, book hotel rooms—all that little stuff, including some administration tasks.”

Membership packages are flexible with rates ranging from \$95 to \$495 per month, depending on the number of days clients want to use the space. The lowest-priced option allows access in off-business hours (any hours except nine-to-five on weekdays) and adding one business day to that basic package costs \$125 per month—you pick the day. The full package costs \$495 per month and includes 24/7 access. All packages include evenings and weekends and an appropriate amount of meeting time. Use of meeting space that exceeds your package is charged at a rate of between \$10-\$20 per hour. You can book for as short a term as one month. And for the true nomadic worker the Driftable option enables you to adjust your days on the fly for just \$50. The Shareable option allows you to share a membership with an associate for \$75.

It’s not a very tough sell. With very little advertising, WorkSpace is already at half capacity, attracting people from various professions including web developers, graphic designers, bookkeepers, lawyers, authors, journalists and entrepreneurs. Clients praise the professionalism, the social and collaborative environment, and best of all, the fantastic coffee at WorkSpace.

The co-op-style office and the concept of “co-working” is catching on in cities like San Francisco, New York and Toronto, where similar businesses have opened. MacEwen anticipates opening another facility in Vancouver and possibly Calgary in the near future. WorkSpace fulfills all the needs of a professional office—for work, meeting and social space, and it’s cheap. “Being able to come here, offer a colleague a latte and sit in the lounge in this larger space that you call your office, which is quite a beautiful space, is very advantageous,” says MacEwen. “And it’s cheaper than some yoga memberships.”