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Workers move out of home and into the office Freelancers escape isolation; ; ;

BY VALERIE BERENYI, CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 21, 2009

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Jeff Gibson and Nik Thierry are looking for other creative types to share office space in the southeast area of Inglewood.
Photograph by: Grant Black, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

The idea of working for yourself at home sounds idyllic: no commute, no brown-bag lunches, no boss. But after four years of toiling out of his house, Jeffrey Gibson was going stir-crazy.

"It's hard to network, and it's really hard to stay creative when you're at home," said the freelance graphic designer. "A couple of times I had to remind myself, 'I'm talking to my clients, not to my friends' because I hadn't talked to anyone that day. I was starting to natter."

To escape the isolation, Gibson recently banded together with like-minded freelancers Nik Thierry and Quinton Rafuse to open a "co-working" office called CoWorkYYC. They're looking for other creative types to rent a desk for \$450 a month and join them in sharing a boardroom, kitchen, high-speed Internet and a printer, with the opportunity to network and collaborate.

Co-working is a new wrinkle on the business centre that has traditionally provided small independents with a locked office, shared amenities and a receptionist.

"This is about exchanging ideas, which you don't get at home or at a business centre where you get an office with a door. It's expensive and you come and go," said Gibson. "This is an affordable option for people who are keen to know about what others are doing. We're trying to foster a sense of community between different creative fields."

Finding small, cheap digs isn't easy, said Thierry, even though Calgary is awash in office space, with a projected vacancy rate of 16.2 per cent for December 2010.

A freelance web designer who moved to Calgary in March, Thierry said his native London is full of co-working spaces. He found just one company here, Prefontaine Financial Corp., willing to rent him desk space.

"It was perfect, but they moved 10 miles away and I need to be within walking distance," said Thierry. With a toddler and a newborn, he couldn't afford to be sidetracked by the "massive amounts of distractions" at home.

Working from home is fine for a day here or there and it's free, he said, but you miss out on the small, incidental conversations that connect you to what's happening and the quick brainstorming sessions that generate ideas or job leads.

"When you can get out of the house and establish a routine with your work in an office, it pushes everything along really."

The three founders of Co-WorkYYC have rented four desks thus far, with six others pending. The 2,500-square-foot, open concept space in Ramsey Design Centre can accommodate 15 to 25, Thierry said.

It may become a model as more people become their own boss. The number of self-employed in Calgary increased by 9.7 per cent between 2004 and 2008. Last year, there were 109,400 self-employed workers in Calgary, representing 15.5 per cent of the employed workforce, according to Calgary Economic Development.

As an office leasing specialist with MaxComm Realty, Mark Kolke said he's seen the SOHO --small office, home office-- segment continue to expand in Calgary as people go out on their own, either by choice or due to recessionary job cuts.

"With today's technology, people can start up in their homes, garages or even the front seat of their car," Kolke said. "The cost of setting up a website and buying a telephone answering machine is minimal. It's the next step that's often prohibitive. Very often they can't make the leap to go lease 1,000 square feet of office space and sign a five-year lease, then furnish it and equip it."

One stepping stone is getting a virtual office at a business centre.

"That gives you a downtown office address, a live person answering the phones for you, which is pretty important for a lot of businesses, a place to meet, whether it's to interact and meet other users, or to meet clients," said Kolke, who uses a virtual office himself through a business centre because "there's an energy and a buzz that comes from being around people."

Depending on the business centre, a virtual office typically costs \$150 to \$300 a month. A fully furnished office downtown with a package of services in a business centre ranges from \$1,000 to \$3,000 a month and up.

Neither working from home nor joining a business centre "with a collection of strangers thrown together" was quite the right fit for him, said Adam Pekarsky, a lawyer who left a big firm to work as an independent consultant.

Instead, Pekarsky leased the "perfect" office space in a heritage building on Stephen Avenue. But because it's too big for his present needs, he's trying to set up a different sort of co-working situation with his community of peers.

He describes it as "almost like a co-op of like-minded people travelling in the same circles who can leverage off of each other, and share a mutual benefit and some camaraderie."

Right now, there's just Pekarsky and one employee and "it's really quiet in there. I'm really looking forward to having more buzz and more energy."

Gibson, who worked in high-octane advertising agencies before he became his own boss, is loving his new setup.

"I really missed that creative collaboration that happens when you've got other people around."

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