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Creative spaces

Office Sharing

Valerie Berenyi, Canwest News Service
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Grant Black, Canwest News Service
Jeff Gibson and Nik Thierry have opened a "co-working" office called CoWorkYYC.

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, Mr. 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," Mr. Gibson said. "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 Mr. Thierry, even though Calgary is awash in office space, with a projected vacancy rate of 16.2% for December 2010.

A freelance web designer who moved to Calgary in March, Mr. 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," he said. 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.

The founders of Co-WorkYYC have rented four desks thus far, with six others pending. The 2,500-square-foot, open-concept space can accommodate 15 to 25 people, Mr. 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% between 2004 and 2008.

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.

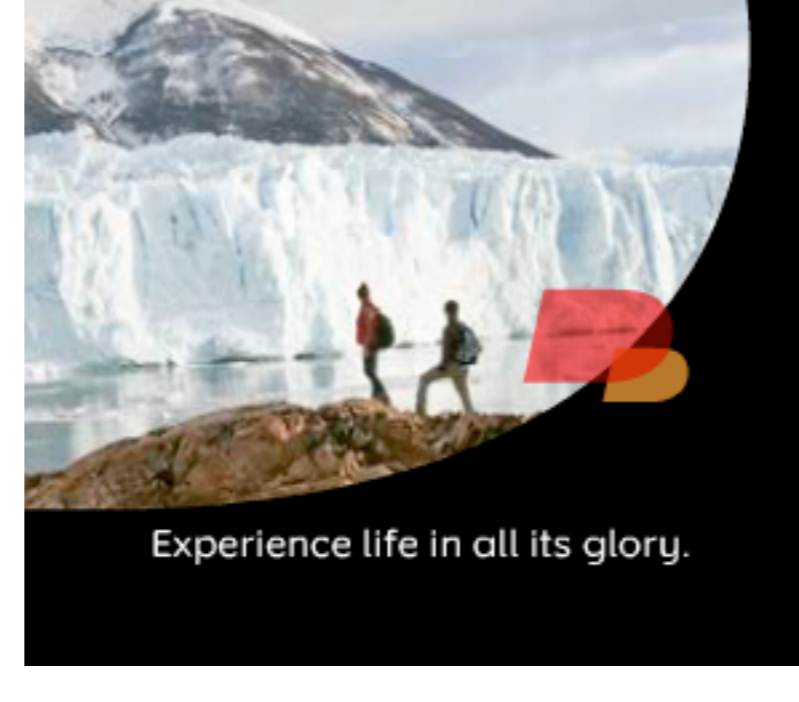
"The cost of setting up a website and buying a telephone answering machine is minimal," he said. "It's the next step that's often prohibitive. Very often they can't make the leap to go lease 1,000 square feet of office space and sign a five-year lease, then furnish it and equip it."

Getting a virtual office at a business centre can be a stepping stone. "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 Mr. Kolke, who uses a virtual office through a business centre because "there's an energy and a buzz that comes from being around people."

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