

Coworking spaces free small businesses from office troubleshooting

Amenities such as shared equipment, event and meeting spaces, are a step up from coffee shops for the self-employed.



Adrian Wong of Workplace One, stands inside one of the meeting rooms his firm rents out at the King St. location. Workplace One provides clients with communal rental offices that the users say has the flexibility and price that start-ups need. (BERNARD WEIL / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By [TESS KALINOWSKI](#) Real Estate Reporter

Sat., Oct. 1, 2016

A broken printer is the kind of mundane problem that can sap the energy of the most motivated entrepreneur.

But tech troubleshooting isn't in the job description of financial consultant Shannon Simmons. Even though she runs her own small business, she doesn't worry about a lot of administrative duties that might otherwise fall on her shoulders.

Her company, The New School of Finance, shares space in one of a growing number of coworking facilities in Toronto. In addition to a small, enclosed office, her rent covers vital amenities such as furniture, technology and access to board rooms where she can run workshops.

The office is found in one of 80 coworking locations in Toronto, run by 39 companies, according to a study released this week by commercial real estate firm Colliers International.

Shawn Gilligan, the Colliers analyst behind the report, admits he was surprised by how many coworking operations have moved into the city in the last two to five years, providing an alternative to traditional rent or lease arrangements based on square footage.

He found the highest concentration, about 15 per cent, in neighbourhoods just east or west of the financial core.

Gilligan said he initially figured coworking was a trend that might die out. But he changed his mind after looking more closely at how the companies in such places work, and who is attracted to the spaces.

"With traditional office rates increasing to such a high extent, (coworking) is an attractive option," he said.



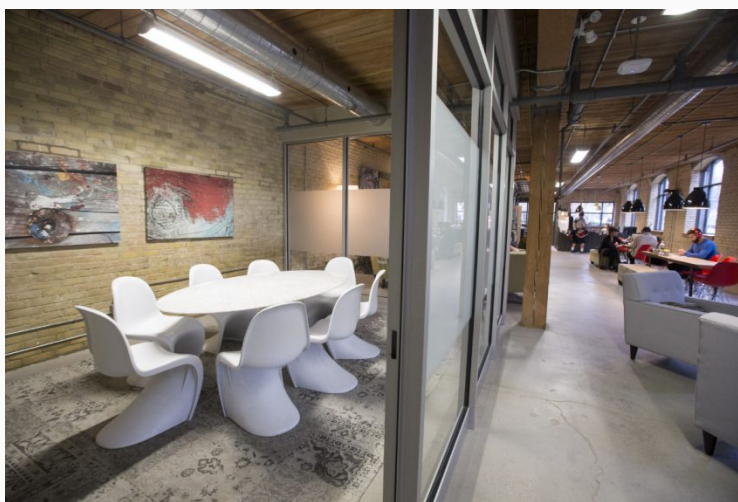
A common area and meeting room inside Workplace One location on Wolsely St. (BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

Coworking offices like the one where Simmons rents can provide a range of options, depending on what a business needs.

An enterprise that simply needs a mailing address can sign on for virtual office services. Freelancers, tired of sitting in coffee shops with their laptops, can rent communal “hot desks” for as little as \$25 a day on a drop-in, first-come-first-served basis.

There are also proprietary desks that come with locked drawers and lockers all the way up to private, walled off offices.

Some coworking spaces are geared to specific sectors, such as the arts or technology, but many put diverse jobs in close quarters. A graphic designer at Workplace One’s Wolsely office works next door to a French wine representative. Down the hall, there’s an office that’s part of Toronto Star columnist and Quebec celebrity chef Ricardo Larrivé’s business.



A common area and meeting room inside Workplace One location on Wolsely St. Coworking spaces can have a graphic designer in one of the offices and a French wine representative in the other. (BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

Coworking is also a way for larger companies or institutions to test the Toronto market, or create a presence in the city.

The Colliers research showed that neighbourhood is key to coworking renters, who want to be close to the residential neighbourhoods that attract young, educated workers. They’re often walkable and have good transit access.

“It’s a combination of available space within a good price,” said Gilligan.

For Simmons, location was key when she chose to locate in a building operated by coworking company Workplace One near Bathurst and Queen streets.

“I chose the Queen St. location because it’s where I live as well. It’s also where a lot of my clientele lives. It’s perfect. I can bike to work and it’s accessible,” she said, adding that there is also parking available.

Having an office with a door was huge, because she needs privacy to discuss her clients’ financial information. Many other spaces she considered were “hot desk” arrangements, shared surfaces where various users come and go.

Simmons’ office is tiny but it lives large, with a receptionist, common areas and a kitchenette at the end of the hall.

All the amenities are overseen by an office manager Mary-Lynn Sinclair.

“She’s half the reason I stay,” said Simmons.

The Wolseley St. location was the first of three offices Workplace One has opened in Toronto since 2011. The company operates another in Kitchener.



The Wolseley St. location was the first of three offices Workplace One has opened in Toronto since 2011. (BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

The gritty feel of plank floors and exposed brick aren’t for every client, however, said Workplace One director of leasing and operations Adrian Wong.

“People like the character of a brick-and-beam building but if they are looking for silence this is not for them,” he said of the Wolseley office.

Workplace One does not own its buildings. It runs offices that are typically 85 to 95 per cent full, said Wong. “The only thing we cannot do is your work,” he tells clients, who are referred to as “members”.

Those clients get 24/7 access to the office and a range of facilities and services, including a shuttle from Union Station to the King St. location near Strachan Ave. during the morning and afternoon rush.

Other coworking companies might provide telephone reception or more traditional business environments.

“It’s a crowded market and part of my job is educating” clients, said Wong, who greets by name virtually every member he encounters through a tour of two Workplace One locations.

The firm’s King St. office is a more polished contemporary space, all smooth surfaces. The exposed brick of the Wolseley boardrooms gives way to rich wall murals and chandeliers in the King St. meeting spaces.



Andrew Carty, Simon Craig and J.P. Gravina works in one of the offices at the King St. location of Workplace One. (BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

When Andrew Carty and his partners in marketing and advertising agency send+receive began looking for offices, they weren’t really sure what they needed.

They considered about eight coworking spaces and some permanent offices before renting a private office with three desks at Workplace One's 4th floor King St. space.

"When you don't know what you need, this is a good solution," said Carty.

"This is a little bit of a Goldilocks solution for us," he added. "There were some places that were a little more funky that didn't feel right, and there were places that were certainly much more kind of cubicle-corporate that didn't feel right either," he said.



Interior of a common area at Workplace One at their King St. location, which provides clients with turnkey infrastructure like good internet, printers and office furniture. (BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

A major attribute of coworking is flexibility, said Carty. The agency's team grows and shrinks according to the work it's handling. They can rent more space as needed.

"Being able to start the business with less commitment to overhead is a real benefit for us. It would have been more daunting to start an agency if we had to sign a 10-year lease," said Carty, although he concedes that a more proprietary design might appeal down the road.



Office space inside Workplace One location on Wolsely St. According to a study released this week by Colliers International, there are 80 coworking locations in Toronto, run by 39 companies. (BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR)

You pay a little bit for the flexibility, but when it comes to the ability to scale up if they need to and the fact that they didn't have to invest in printers, furniture all those other things, the upside outweighed the downside, he said.

The opportunity to meet people working in other fields at the coffee pot is a bonus, say coworking office users.

"It's given us access to some coders and developers that we are looking to partner up on projects with because we need some of that," said Carty.

"There's some vibrancy with a lot of different people in the space."