

Coworking spaces adapt for the post-Covid business model

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Stepping into the industrial chic spaces of B@Work in Westport, one is reminded of an urban artist loft more than a workspace on Post Road. Exposed beams original to the former mill building, convertible stand-up desks, clean-lined furniture: Every element is incorporated to create a productive and comfortable atmosphere for the variety of professionals who choose to rent space there.

“If you had asked a year ago, ‘Why don’t you think about working remotely rather than commuting to White Plains or the City?’, some might think, ‘No, I really need to be” in the office,” said Gerrard Bernacchia, owner of B@Work, which has a second location in Ridgefield.

“For the past 10 months, we’ve all been working remotely,” he continued, “and my gut tells me that when people are ready to get back out there, they’re going to wonder why they’re spending an hour or more in the car every day when it could be five minutes. It’s a market that we need to prepare for and we’re doing that.”

According to a study by Coworking Resources, the number of coworking spaces worldwide is projected to reach more than 40,000 by 2024, with almost 5 million people working from shared spaces. That represents an increase of over 158% from 2020.



Open area at B@Work Westport.

In Fairfield County, there are several players in the mix. In addition to B@Work, WerkSpace in Bridgeport, SONO Spaces in Norwalk and HAVYN in Darien are among those that have been riding out the ups and downs of the last year. Serendipity Labs has kept four locations

open throughout Fairfield and Westchester counties during the pandemic.

But it certainly hasn't been easy. B@Work opened in spring 2020, just before the shutdown kicked in. While not necessarily an essential business, it was able to keep the doors open because some members use the shared office as a business address, meaning mail continued to be delivered there.

The idea of sharing space, however, made some potential clients uncomfortable at first.

“There was a membership interest as soon as we opened, but shortly after that people stepped back because they just didn't want to sit with a lot of people. We had to adapt quickly,” Bernachia said. “We had put some private offices in to begin with, but added more. Everybody is required to wear masks when walking around.” Sanitation supplies are also on hand to be used by both members and staff.

Once members felt more comfortable, Bernachia said, they began using the space regularly. Clients range from small businesses just starting out to job seekers looking for a spot to conduct Zoom interviews without the interruptions that come with working from home — a topic Bernachia knows something about personally.

“I have twin five-year-old boys and an 18-month baby girl. Working at home is just not an option,” he said. “At the same time, I want to be close so if my wife is watching our toddler, I can get the boys from school or drop them off.”

Bernachia said his team has worked hard to make its space and membership options to be flexible. Rates run from \$30 for a day pass to \$300 per month for a flex desk (any open spot) to \$400 per month for a dedicated desk or \$1,200 per month for a private office.

Beyond the office clients, B@Work has accommodated members who needed everything from warehouse space to a pop-up shop location.

At HAVYN, a coworking hub in Darien, owner Felicia Rubenstein said that while shared spaces may have catered mainly to individuals like freelancers and entrepreneurs prior to the pandemic, the last 10 months have raised greater



Common area at HAVYN Darien

awareness of spaces like hers as an alternative to a daily commute or working full time at home.

“People are starting to see that it’s really easy to have that flex time, working two days in the office and three days at home,” she said. “It’s accelerated the thinking, and now it’s a proven case that people can work at home and be productive, to a point.”

According to a May 2020 Coworking Resources survey, 56% of professionals in the U.S. expect to work remotely at least part time, and businesses are embracing working with small remote teams regardless of their location.

“It’s the hub-and-spoke model, where there might be a corporate office in New York City, but people in Fairfield County want to work closer to home,” Rubenstein said. “But they don’t want to work at home, just near home.”

HAVYN members also benefit from safety measures that have been put into place, such as a mask mandate when walking around and cleaning supplies provided throughout the space. Though in-person gatherings are currently at a minimum, the membership calendar is packed with virtual events, webinars and outdoor happenings like a morning meditation and walk.

Membership rates start at \$75 per month for virtual and in-person events only, to \$360 per month for a floating desk, \$650 per month for a permanent desk, or private offices priced individually based on requirements.

Looking ahead, Coworking Resources says that in comparing data from February 2020 and May 2020 (pre- and post-lockdown), space utilization is beginning to recover and shift toward private offices as the type of space most commonly requested.

Longer-term contracts will likely be another shift, as demand is projected to come mainly from larger organizations looking to decentralize their workforces into smaller branch offices and remote teams into private flex offices.

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