

The Business Brain

Social links essential for good work

Monday, November 15, 2010

SUSAN PINKER

A recent working trip to Europe convinced me that the travel industry gets only half marks for providing what business travellers need. Wireless access is now assured until your plane takes off, and outlets integrated into the seats mean there's less worry about battery life for your high-tech gadgets.

What's missing, however, is some facsimile of collegiality once you touch down. Connecting to a printer or scanner is relatively simple while you're on the road, but connecting to a sentient being? Not so easy.

That's why co-working spaces, which have surfaced in major cities around the globe in recent years, are proving popular, especially for the growing remote-service economy - such as software developers, design startups, solo professionals.

These rental spaces offer everything from desks, phones, meeting rooms, and mail service to support staff, IT help and even cafés. In short, they create a home-away-from-home for mobile workers and business travellers tired of dropping room-service crumbs into their laptop.

More importantly, such spaces provide a collegial, collaborative working environment and the all-important social interactions that help humans do their best work.

A new study by Charlice Hurst, an assistant professor of organizational behaviour at the University of Western Ontario's Richard Ivey School of Business, demonstrates that something as simple as sharing a bit of good news with a colleague and receiving an encouraging response can boost productivity.

"We tend to look at conversations among co-workers as wasted time if they're not task-oriented," she says, but social interaction "can boost people's happiness and benefit the organization."

The frisson that comes from a collegial setting, even among people who are working independently on unconnected business, was evident at Betahaus, a four-storey co-working building in the trendy Kreuzberg section of Berlin, where I set up shop on my recent trip.

Launched in March, 2009, by a group of thirtysomethings who needed offices for their independent projects, Betahaus is now the largest co-working space in the world.

About 150 people, involved in a wide range of creative and knowledge sectors, see the building not only as a place to recharge their laptops but also as an idea incubator and collaborative work environment. Like me, they're looking for more than just a desk. (And Betahaus was a welcome alternative from my hotel's "business centre," which consisted of a single round table in the lobby, with a scanner-printer-fax machine as a centrepiece.)

When I needed solitude at Betahaus, I could plug my equipment into one of the dangling sockets in a quiet room. And when I wanted social contact, there were interesting people around, not just at adjacent desks but at weekly breakfasts and at "pitch" nights, where business initiatives are work-shopped.

"We have lots of startups and lots of investors who come here looking for new ideas," noted Madeleine von Mohl, one of the Betahaus founders.

While some of the users need an office for their own independent work, others are full-time employees for companies based in other European cities.

"We provide everything they need - from someone to say good morning, to someone to fix their computers, [to social events] which work as a real marketplace," Ms. von Mohl said. Still, "social connection is why people come here."

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*