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## Coworking sites cater to the lonely self-employed

**The isolation of working from home has some entrepreneurs turning to shared work sites**

By Stevenson Swanson

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**NEW YORK —** The new way to work on your own is to work alone together.

Across the country, spaces are springing up to meet the demands of a new workforce, made up of self-employed entrepreneurs or part-time employees for whom the freedom of padding down the hallway to their home office in slippers and pajamas has turned into a home-based version of solitary confinement.

**It's called coworking,** and the places where it's happening are as flexible as the hours of the people who use them.

Whether it's a concierge suite at a Connecticut hotel, a small office on Chicago's Northwest Side or a Silicon Valley company that combines day care for children and work space for parents, these shared work sites allow people to have a desk and an Internet connection without having to shush the kids during a conference call or hunt for a power outlet at a coffee shop so they can plug in their laptops.

"In the winter time, I'd go for a week and not speak to anyone other than another voice on the telephone line," said Jeff Park, who runs a pharmaceutical exporting business and opened a coworking space in Chicago's Ravenswood neighborhood last year. "It was miserable. I had zero interaction with other people."

Park decided to rent a 1,600-square-foot space—far more than he needed for his business—and turn most of it into a coworking operation. Unlike most coworking sites, the space does not have a formal name, but Park says his co-workers have included computer programmers and Web site developers, road-warrior salesmen who need a quiet place to make sales calls, a graduate student writing his doctoral dissertation and even a woman who runs a dog-walking business.

That's a typically broad cross section of the people who use coworking sites, part of what author Daniel Pink calls "Free Agent Nation," the independent contractors and freelance workers who can work anywhere as long as they can plug in a laptop, use their cell phones and hook up to the Internet.



As an indication of how big that nation is becoming, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the number of single-person businesses increased from 16.5 million in 2000 to 20.4 million in 2005.

## Being lonely

But free agents or not, humans remain social animals. Founders and frequenters of coworking offices routinely say that they sought the refuge of shared work space because being alone made them, well, lonely. And seeking solace by setting up shop at Starbucks has its limitations.

"Sometimes that's great, but if you're on a business call and the cappuccino machine goes off in the background, it can be a distraction," said Jeff Kubarych, a Web site developer who helped found Soundview Coworking, which uses the concierge suite on the 16th floor of a Stamford, Conn., hotel after the guests have finished their morning muffins and juice.

Coworking sites first showed up in the San Francisco Bay area three years ago, and with its concentration of mobile, high-tech entrepreneurs, it remains a stronghold, with such coworking spaces as the Hat Factory, Citizen Space and Sandbox Suites. But now, there are at least 38 coworking spaces already open or preparing to launch in the U.S. and other countries, according to the Coworking Community Blog at [blog.coworking.info](http://blog.coworking.info).

Although the setups vary, the basic configuration of a coworking space is an open room with desks. Many include seating areas for informal meetings, conference rooms and amenities such as a kitchenette.

Charges vary. At Soundview Coworking, users pay a monthly fee of \$150. But Park has a two-tier plan at his Chicago site. For \$150 a month, you get to use a desk but have to be willing to float from desk to desk, based on availability. A dedicated desk costs \$285 a month.

Douglas Savitsky, who is working on a doctoral dissertation in sociology, has found that having a desk there has helped him focus on his work. Before, all of his research was piled up on the dining room table in his apartment, an overwhelming mass that made him feel guilty whenever he wasn't toiling away on it, despite the fact that he also works as a computer programmer and builds audio equipment.

## Having structure

"Breaking my time into time when I'm working on it and time when I'm not working on it has been very useful," said Savitsky, who spends an average of three hours at the coworking office a few times a week. "And I think for most people, structure helps you get down to work and focus."

Apart from the advantages of a work environment, coworking also provides a way for people who would otherwise be isolated to connect with like-minded souls. That's the case at Cubes & Crayons in Menlo Park, Calif., which combines an office with a day-care.

"We're finding that our members have really connected," said founder M. F. Chapman, a mother of two young daughters who has seen membership grow to 60 people since she opened the space in January. "Some are coming specifically at the same time so they can take coffee breaks together."

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