

A Co-Work Space Policy for Small Towns.

The Working from Home “Bargain”. The post-pandemic environment for many employees, especially office workers, includes an element of working from home. This new environment takes many forms from complete dedication to remote working to occasional days or hours spent working out of the office. The “bargain” between employees and employers requires extensive use of communication skills and equipment, subtle management skills on the part of both parties to establish and maintain a trusting relationship and a productive system.

Requirements. Working From Home [WFH] requires sophisticated technology and personal skills on the parts of both the employees and the employers. The “bargain” benefits from a clear understanding of who pays for what and who is responsible for the various activities and obligations associated with each party. Factors to consider:

- Employer funding or financing for home equipment will be necessary for many.
- Better, more ubiquitous high-speed broadband internet service will be required.
- Financial advice could be provided by employers to employees for tax deductions for home office space and expenses.
- Employee benefits and learning opportunities need clarification, especially if work is part-time or contract.
- The number of in-office times required or available needs to be established.

Co-Work Space Facilities and Services. In most cases, co-work spaces prove a work surface with chair, desk and connections to electrical and internet services. They may provide coffee, limited food and beverage offerings and a space for meetings. The atmosphere is much like “hot desking” in a corporate setting. Reserved spaces are usually required.

Providers of Co-Work Spaces. There are three available providers of co-work space.

- **Businesses**, especially businesses with many employees, can provide suburban centers for their employees to work remotely all the time or occasionally. It may be like “hot desking” at a suburban location. In this situation, all the people in the co-working space have the same employers.
- **Entrepreneurs** may build or rent space fitted-out as a co-work space. The setting is the same as the business provided option, but the users of the space may work for themselves or many different employers.
- **Small cities and towns** may provide co-work space as a profit center enterprise or a free resource to city residents. Under-utilized community centers, libraries or other buildings can be re-purposed as a co-work space. Some management is required. Such a space can be leased to a private operator. The economic development plans and activities of cities can use co-work spaces to: enhance local businesses; entice “start-ups” to locate in the town or to enable small businesses to survive in down times. However provided, local co-work spaces make sense.

City Policy Options. People may choose to reside in a small town for its many benefits but worry about the need to commute into the big city for employment. Remote work, or working from home, solves some of this problem. The question is where the remote worker actually works, what physical space meets her needs? Working in the home has many distractions and may not have sufficient internet access for large systems work. Working in the coffee shop also has limitations, especially for continuous use. The suburban co-work space offers a good alternative.

City programs and policies that facilitate co-work space in town are:

- Local code adjustments for home occupations and offices may be required.
- Surplus lands or buildings may be suitable for re-purposing as a co-work space to be developed and managed by the city or a private operator.
- Taxes and fees may be prohibitive for the sustained function of a city's vision-consistent co-work space. Options such as incentives, grants or other civic support may be required initially or continuously.
- Cities or employers may opt to pay the employees' fees for using the co-work space to encourage employees to work remote and reduce their commutes and demand for office space.
- Coordination and possible co-location of civic or private co-work spaces with public libraries, schools, colleges or other local institutions may make sense.
- Co-work spaces on the second floor of ground floor retail may fill too often vacant space and provide for the need. Spaces on the ground floor of apartments offer the same benefit and challenge. City tax and fee policies can be sensitive to the service being provided.

Benefits to the Community are many.

1. There will be more pandemics. Thomas Friedman in his own idiosyncratic way says we are now in a biological pandemic, but we have recently seen an economic pandemic and a terrorism pandemic...a pandemic being a catastrophe that affects whole populations. Each pandemic disturbs the economy and its work flow.
2. Paul Krugman also believes that suburban towns and small cities will benefit from full or hybrid remote work options to full-time return to the office. His reasoning is persuasive. **LINK:** <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/02/opinion/cities-remote-work-economy.html>
3. WFH, full time or part time, will stick for some of the time with employees and employers.
4. The closeness of work and home offers many advantages, a major one being the better opportunity for child care closer to the work site.
5. Socialization in a work environment is important; some virtual job sites can occasionally be supplemented with visits, required or not, to actual physical offices.
6. A suburban co-work space can be a "third place". Suburban and small city co-work places offer a safe and functional place to work that is not home and not the main office.

Co-work space is an opportunity for small cities and towns to provide a work site that fits with contemporary employee and employer needs. The benefits to the community are significant and warrant the attention and maybe resources of the city.