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Tech jobs

Tech jobs: 'Cowork' spaces gaining exposure, popularity and potential

Premium content from Tampa Bay Business Journal - by Eric Sturm, Special to the Business Journal

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There might be a new home for nomadic tribes of tech entrepreneurs.

'Cowork' spaces — already successful in Baltimore, Orlando, and Austin, Texas, and many other cities — are shared working environments for freelancers, self-employed, road warriors and any of the work forces who do not normally work in offices. They offer a social gathering for collaboration and connectivity with value stemming from the informal, self-directed and self-filtering of the nomad-workers community.

"Coworking connects the doers and the dreamers," said **Ken Evans**, co-founder at Ideafield in Ybor City. Coworking is a collaborative, open, self-directed resource for the tech community offering common ground and equality on interactions between all levels of businesspeople, he said.

The concept is getting a close look from economic development organizations in several locally focused studies.

One, the Locational Assessment and Recommended Strategic Plan for Economic Growth, a study by the New York and New Jersey firm Biggins Lacy Shapiro & Co., was released in October 2010 and contains detailed recommendations on 'cowork' spaces. They include establishing such spaces as a way to foster entrepreneurship within emerging clusters such as electronic health records, medical devices, business analytics and information technology.

The Tampa Hillsborough Economic Development Corp. led the study and is seeking input from a range of government and private sources before making any policy or comments. Economic development executives stressed that this currently is a consultant's study and not adopted or digested fully at this point.

The Hillsborough County Economic Stimulus Task Force also is recommending the study and review of the plan in partnership with the Tampa Hillsborough Economic Development Corp. and the cities of Tampa, Temple Terrace and Plant City.

Proponents of the concept such as Evans believe there's a need for diversification in economic development efforts beyond company relocation.

"We need an overall multi-level strategy to economic development that does not leverage one to many but helps people at the early stage to assist business growth without public money fueling growth," he said. "Coworking can be a part of a broad strategy with mixed tools affecting every level of business."

It is grassroots and organic, he said. "It then serves the needs of the tech community because it is themselves directing the interaction and agenda."

Coworking for economic development is the opportunity to create many companies using a single piece of real estate and minimal resources.

One space could be used for a legal office creating 20 jobs. As a coworking facility, the same property can act as a wealth multiplier by repetitively launching businesses that expand and leave the facility. The cowork facility is a fertile ground from which companies grow, and like farming a crop is harvested and replanted regularly, proponents of the method said.

There are proven projects around the country of cooperative collaboration between government business and education to create and encourage coworking, said **Joseph**

Warren, co-founder of the CoCreativ Entrepreneurial Café, which is planning to open this year in Tampa.

"Coworking is leveraging each others strengths," Warren said. "Economic development can and should be part of that collaborative effort."

At the core of coworking is the experience, knowledge and training all being transferred up and down the levels of business, Warren said.

"The economic development groups and governments are a valuable contributing partner to that complimentary exchange," he said. "They can leverage their influence to connect us with investors and resources as a connector and promoter; it is a good return on investment for job creation that does not need government funding — only influence and promotion."

As elected officials mull the concept, Ideafield's Evans suggests governments and institutions do not seek to over-help or control the idea, but support the emerging clusters by encouraging the students and staff of schools to interface with coworking facilities through interaction, not control. Cooperative work with the institutions, governments and schools offering their staffs' expertise within the coworking environments on a rotating basis could accomplish the same values for the schools.

"Coworking is not brick and mortar," Evans said. "It is people and relationships made at the facility. Products and companies are not brick and mortar. They are real time of the community talent we can tap and tie together."