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My office, my cafe

Inspired by bustling cafe society, and enabled by the Internet and wireless technology, a new breed of 'teleworker' is leaving the traditional office behind and colonizing Princeton-area coffee shops.

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By Kristin Boyd, Staff Writer



Michael Usher's part-time office, where he spends about two hours each day, is tucked inside the Starbucks on Nassau Street. He orders a black coffee, plugs in his laptop and gets to work, usually reading academic papers.

Here, booths and window seats are prime real estate. Lounge-style seating with oversized couches and wooden tables are makeshift cubicles; strangers sub as co-workers.

The order counter replaces the water cooler, and the steady whirl of machines sounds like gossiping. And the boss, if there even is one, is a cyberlink away.

Drawn by cool vibes and high-speed Internet connections, a growing number of residents are now working their 9-to-5s out of alternative places like Starbucks and Small World Coffee in downtown Princeton, instead of traditional and home offices.

"I can do research anytime, wherever I want, so I like coming here," says Mr. Usher, a Plainsboro resident and math instructor at Princeton University. "It's easier for me to focus when there is background noise."

With computers, podcasts and conference calls now commonplace, technology is spurring the evolution of teleworking and making it a viable option.

Sharon McHugh, a Princeton architect, an adjunct professor at Temple University and U.S. correspondent for two international design publications, enjoys the atmosphere at Small World Coffee on Witherspoon Street.

"It's a really nice environment," she says. "There are world-renowned architects, as well as Noble Prize winners, people at the top of their field, and they come in unassuming and just begin talking. It's all so interesting."

Ms. McHugh, who visits the coffee shop three times a day, likes to write and grade papers during her morning stop between 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. She buys a cup of coffee, typically a double cappuccino, and vies for the booth in the back, where the light is good.

Rich Feldmann, a cartoonist and the co-advisor for a new green building initiative, splits his time between Princeton and Brooklyn, N.Y. Like Ms. McHugh, he feeds off the energy and vibe at Small World Coffee.

"This place is full of life. People like to be here," says Mr. Feldmann, a former Wall Street investment consultant. "It's such a neat environment, with all the artists and writers just doing their work. It's a breeding ground for creativity."

Mr. Feldmann spends between three and five hours each weekend at Small World, where he usually nurses two regular coffees and also vies for the booth in the back. He prefers drawing here because ideas are always swirling around him. Occasionally, he'll also read reports or do research for his company.

"It's bringing work to people, instead of bringing people to work," says Chuck Wilsker, executive director of the Telework Coalition, based in Washington, D.C. "It's neat because (it's like) you have an office on every corner. You can go anywhere, open up your laptop and be able to work."

The idea of teleworking has been around for decades, but the term was first coined in the 1970s, when an influx of corporate employees began completing work from home, Mr. Wilsker says.

Today, due to lifestyle changes, environmental concerns, rising fuel costs, longer commutes and the desire for a flexible schedule, more Americans are opting to telework — either full time or a few days per week.

"People realize, 'Oh, I don't have to sit in traffic,' so not only is it good for the environment, I'm not wasting time or fuel," Mr. Wilsker says. "Is it necessary to work at home? No. But, boy, isn't it nice to not have to commute two hours? Or to be available when the cable guy is coming? Yes."

Depending on who you ask, some experts say teleworking and telecommuting are interchangeable, while others believe they're two distinct terms.

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Teleworking is working independent of location, Mr. Wilsker says. For example, he says, he recently teleworked while traveling to New York.

"I worked from my hotel room; I wasn't telecommuting to work," he says. "With teleworking, it doesn't matter where you are. It's planes, trains and automobiles."

Telecommuting, he says, is typically done on an occasional basis to eliminate a drive to work or maintain a flexible schedule. "It's usually done by someone who has an office, but instead of commuting, (he or she) uses technology to commute," he says.

Telecommuting is widely used nationwide, but teleworking is becoming a more popular phrase, says Gil Gordon, owner of Gil Gordon Associates, a Monmouth Junction-based company that helps employers set up and maintain telework programs.

"The debate over the word is a distraction," he says. "I don't care what you call it, as long as you do it. Not everyone has to be in the same place at the same time to do their work."

The U.S. Census Bureau reports on residents who work from home, which includes teleworkers and the self-employed; however, there are no statistics about alternative work locations, such as coffee shops and Internet cafés.

In the United States, 3.9 percent of Americans work from home, according to the bureau's 2006 American Community Survey. Montana has the highest percentage with 6.7; Mississippi has the lowest with 2.1.

In New Jersey, 3.2 percent of residents work from home — up from 2.7 percent in 2000. The percentage jumps slightly to 3.4 percent in Mercer and Somerset counties, and drops to 2.8 percent in Middlesex County.

"This is really a prime area for telecommuting," Mr. Gordon says. "The job mix here, all the offices up and down Nassau Street and along Route 1, are for the most part knowledge-intensive. People don't have to be in an office to do that."

Of the state's at-home workers, 50.6 percent are women, while 49.4 percent are men. The majority are between ages 30 and 59, with the highest percentages in the 35-to-39 and 40-to-44 age ranges, according to the Census Bureau's statistics.

"It's certainly not for every job or every worker," Mr. Gordon says. "Someone who is going to work well outside the office is someone who has shown to be a pretty good worker in the office. They've got to be the kind of person who can get their work done and meet deadlines without someone looking over their shoulder."

For many teleworkers, the lure of coffee shops over traditional and home offices is rooted in the need for socialization and creative stimulation, Mr. Gordon says.

"Sometimes you just have a need to go somewhere," he says, "maybe for a change of scenery or just to talk to someone."

At Small World Coffee Ms. McHugh soaks in the hubbub —the clanking silverware, rustling paper, jingling keys, heavy sighs. It's far better, she says, than the ringing phone she hears while working in her home office.

"I have my laptop there, and I'm able to work with all these different conversations going on around me," she says. "I get into the zone, and it doesn't distract me at all. I'm able to concentrate, and if I get stuck, I can just read the New York Times."

"People here say incredibly funny things," says Mr. Feldmann, who recently had an exhibit of his visual work at Small World and hopes to one day have his cartoons published in The New Yorker. "This has become my meeting place. People like to be here because it's not so sterile and corporate, or bland."



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Mr. Wilsker says more companies are now supporting teleworking because it can cut office costs, increase productivity and help retain top-quality employees.

"You can have people working remotely and be efficient," he says. "It eliminates cubicles, offices, parking. (Companies) can even save on toilet paper, water and heat."

Teleworking also helps companies maintain business continuity in case of a strike, disaster or pandemic. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks put teleworking in perspective, particularly in this area, Mr. Wilsker says.

Mr. Gordon adds, "We understand that telework is never going to replace the office; it's just an adjunct to the office. But certainly in the right circumstances and with the right job, it's a good alternative."

Back at Starbucks, Mr. Usher gets comfortable in his "office." He sits on a barstool by the front window, his yellow book bag at his feet and his laptop connected to an outlet in the ceiling.

The sweet smell of pastries permeates the coffee shop, and employees in green aprons hustle behind the counter, filling orders. The lunch crowd files in. Tourists and parents pushing strollers come and go. The world whizzes by outside.

But Mr. Usher barely notices. He's too busy working.



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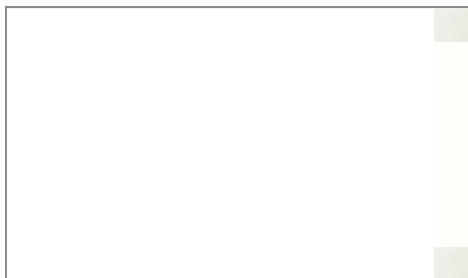


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