

MIX AND MINGLE

Forget about working solo in coffee shops – entrepreneurs are looking for collaboration at coworking offices **By Shepherd Laughlin**

As China's economy grew in the 1990s and technological advances made it easier to work from anywhere, a new class of small entrepreneurs was born: *SOHO* *zu*, or "small office/home office tribe." But more than a decade later, today's urban workers are finding that while independence offers perks, so does a community. And increasingly, they don't have to choose one or the other.

Chen Xu, co-founder of the Shanghai coworking office space Xindanwei, said that while a home office may be a cheap solution, it keeps entrepreneurs isolated. "You can work in your pajamas all day long in front of your computer and lose contact with the real world easily," she said.

"We believe that SOHO is no longer a preferable way of working for creative individuals under the new economy, where the power of collaboration is driving the future."

Coworking offices, which began appearing in Europe and North America around 2005, allow solopreneurs to rent a desk or designated area in a shared office. The concept is only just gaining a foothold in China. Xindanwei, for example, opened in 2009, and predates similar efforts in Hong Kong and Beijing. The Shanghai office space has been attracting people from various industries, and focuses on fostering creative collaboration between artists and tech professionals.

A common space

A new coworking space, SZteam, launched in Shenzhen in July and focuses on providing a space for tech workers. "We feel targeting a specific niche helps keep the space focused and maximizes relevant collaboration opportunities," said Gareth Jones, co-founder of SZteam.

Although coworking offices often target different communities of inde-



CATCHING ON: Coworking offices like Shanghai's Xindanwei are starting to pop up in China

pendent workers, they have a lot in common: Each space promises a similar blend of shared facilities, community events, serendipitous meetings between like-minded professionals – and, of course, coffee and a reliable Wi-Fi connection. Xindanwei, for example, caters to two types of workers, said co-founder Liu Yan: "Some people come here to work, because it's a nice environment and nice community," she said, and another group that she calls "digital nomads" come mainly to socialize.

Housed in a six-story 1930s French Concession building with art deco accents and original flooring, Xindanwei devotes three floors to dedicated office space, which stays relatively quiet. The lower floors facilitate socializing and collaboration.

Coworking offers certain advantages for expatriates. "Knowledge transfers, in addition to things like community, are critical in a place like China, where even the simplest task can be difficult if you don't know the language and culture," said Jones of SZteam.

It's a harder sell for Chinese natives, who have little experience with the concept. Most Chinese entrepreneurs feel

like they need the "face" of having their own company office, or would rather work from home and save money, said Jones.

Chen of Xindanwei agreed. "The idea of 'sharing' is a very different story in China," she said. "People usually judge an office space by whether it is decent, with full services, and so on, but not by its social offerings."

To address this need, Xindanwei eventually hired a community coordinator, in part to meet Chinese clients' requests for more facility support. The operation has gone from 90% foreign clients, to about half and half. "It's a good sign of market awareness and acceptance, I hope," Chen says.

Start-up offices

It's unclear whether coworking offices can spread throughout China – even in Beijing, nothing like Xindanwei is available yet. Lu Dahuang, who until recently operated a small coworking space as part of his Beijing business, 798 Library, said it would be difficult to replicate the Xindanwei project in Beijing. The capital's creative community is largely centered in the 798 Art Zone, while

tech hubs are a long commute away in Zhongguancun and Wudaokou, Lu said.

Those with experience setting up coworking spaces stress that the right community has to already be in place. "If you build it, they will come" doesn't seem to apply in China; some cities are clearly more ready for the concept than others.

Even in Shanghai, the Xindanwei organizers spent several years hosting meet-up events before they were convinced the concept would work.

"There are so many start-ups in Shenzhen," said Jones. "A co-working environment can provide some of these start-ups with crucial networking opportunities, events, space and presence that is otherwise unattainable."

It's unlikely that coworking communities will rise from the construction dust of second-tier cities like Qingdao, Chongqing and Xi'an in the near future. But that's not to say existing spaces aren't hatching expansion plans. "As for Guangzhou, it could certainly be next on the list if everything goes smoothly with Shenzhen," said Jones, "as there's also a need there, too." ■

More coworking spaces

BootHK

BootHK's organizers, who took their inspiration from the Xindanwei project in Shanghai, "want to ignite Hong Kong's entrepreneurial community by giving people a social place where they can work and meet up." Although most events focus on tech start-ups and hacker culture, BootHK's long-term plan is to create a network throughout China for artists, entrepreneurs and technologists. The Wan Chai space also hosts a weekly Monday meeting for start-up entrepreneurs. Coworkers can drop in for the day (HK\$100) or choose from a range of monthly plans (HK\$500-2,500).

www.boot.hk

Buro.asia

This new space in Beijing's central business district offers a basic co-working experience that emphasizes cleanliness, coffee and quiet. There's little in the way of a social mission or

community focus here, but the space appeals to those who are tired of their coffee shop routine. Rates accommodate everyone from the occasional drop in (RMB15 per hour) to "beginners" (RMB750 per month) and those who want a dedicated desk and a registered address (RMB2,000 per month).

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