

How shared workspaces can help startups fight the good fight in a new-normal world

Huckletree is a pioneer of co-working in the UK and has experienced continuous growth since its opening in 2014. With COVID-19 being the latest threat to an industry notoriously plagued with concerns, Gabriela Hersham, Co-Founder and CEO shares her insight and expertise about how workspaces can best support and stimulate UK tech startups following the coronavirus pandemic.

10 years ago, if you had asked me what 2020 would look like, I would not have dreamed of being an entrepreneur or CEO surviving through one of the toughest economic climates of our age – let alone one that is reliant on and in support of other startups.

Because 10 years ago, if you were to suggest sharing an office with other people, you would have seen a few raised eyebrows and a lot of scepticism about privacy, trust and productivity. Fast forward 5 years and co-working spaces and co-living concepts became the hot topic on startup stages and panels as the more creative and cost-effective way to engage a mobile

millennial workforce and where new founders can get their ideas moving.

But today, and right now in this critical moment in time, they serve a new purpose altogether. For Huckletree, they are not spaces where you simply show up, log on, and appear to 'hustle' – they are in many ways the home, neighbourhood and safety net where companies can take risks and drive business edge, distinction and innovation. They are the places where you go into battle with your team, where you win the client pitch or make that new VC connection. Since we opened in 2014, 600 diverse, disruptive startups, scale-ups and innovation teams have used our workspaces and accelerator programmes. Our member businesses have been acquired, had successful exits, taken risks, left us, come back to us, some have failed in their pursuit to change the game, and our community have been there to help them get back up again. There's a karmic element, that goes well beyond a chair, lamp or frosted windows.

Time to rebuild, quickly but deliberately

From our position as one of the businesses at the heart of the UK's tech and innovation ecosystem, we've seen up close how the pandemic is impacting our members and we've had to move quickly, for us and for them. We've had to rethink the very model of our business, to consider the role of physical spaces in a COVID world of work, as places to come together, to places that drive culture, empathy, feelings of safety, and true productivity. We've been proud to support the tech ecosystem during this challenging period as Founding Partners of CrowdCube's Save our Startups campaign, which gave tech startups a platform to demand government support to stop them from falling through the cracks.

There will be no return to normal

While we wouldn't wish this crisis on anyone, there's a lesson here for all of us. As lockdown restrictions ease and we see more teams re-enter office doors, we aren't expecting things to return to 'normal', and that's a good thing. When has 'normal' ever been the ambition for creatives, challengers and entrepreneurs? Before COVID-19 hit, the shared office and HQ model was losing its edge, and ironically flexible providers were focusing too much on where you work versus how you work. We're seeing this as a chance for us to rethink what 'physical space' and 'community' mean into 2021, and that's been the most exciting silver lining to come out of the last 13 weeks.

Startups are ready to bounce back

Huckletree saw new memberships applications fall by 86% at the end of March, but double month on month since as businesses and startups begin the long road to recovery from COVID-19. We've had interest from healthtech, consultancies, VCs, SaaS and even product businesses. We think startups aren't just preparing to bounce back, they're ready to charge through the market cycle – being brave, opportunistic and focusing on the upside within their industry.

Read also

Uncertain advice on 'returning to the office' is destined to fail

So how can shared workspaces ensure their businesses are primed to best support entrepreneurs?

Coming out of the pandemic, startups will be looking to shared workspaces, incubators and accelerators to provide:

Personalisation

Startups now want flexibility based around how you work, not where you work from – after months of working from home, many tech entrepreneurs will need a dependable second space to work from, but at their own discretion, on their terms and close to home. We've noticed some of our members who had previously taken space in one of our designated hubs have now spread out across several of our locations in London, so their team don't have to travel as far.

A place to collaborate

Two thirds of our members report that they've collaborated with another business, and we know a hidden loss of working from home is incidental meetings and collaboration. With fewer face to face meetings and social

gatherings, companies have been deprived of social collaboration opportunities, stimulating conversations and new perspectives – the effects of which may not be fully felt for some time. Shared workspaces will provide this much needed opportunity to collaborate safely, and create new ideas.

A community that understand them

Entrepreneurs want us to reconnect them to valuable investor and talent networks, and many are looking for a community that is reflective of the new values of the post-pandemic era. Values like volunteerism and social consciousness matter to our customers, and they matter to us. We can't rely on building culture and landing deals via Zoom calls.

Upskilling

As entrepreneurs prepare for the inevitable economic decline created by the pandemic, shared workspaces and accelerators will play an important role in providing skills education to bolster them against an uncertain future. We've doubled our virtual programming to give greater global access to entrepreneurs itching to learn but staying at home, we've launched our first Renegade Academy for new founders in April that sold out in 24 hours, and we've kept our 12 week in-house accelerator going throughout lockdown (pro-bono for underrepresented founders) which has helped those starting off on their entrepreneurship journey access to the tools and mentorship they would otherwise have received in our workspaces.

Quality and curation

With the world more open, there is more noise, and more distraction. Smaller, concentrated, curated networks will have better long-term productive impacts. No-one wants a characterless, generic or soulless workspace that distracts you with games and gimmicks rather than substance and ideas.

Access to the right investment

Entrepreneurs need the right introductions and the right capital, especially now. We've never seen ourselves as building desks, but as building (or in this case now, rebuilding) the ecosystem, and that means being a connector and a filter for the brightest talent and big players in the industry. If startups can plug into our network (we've now celebrated 85 Ambassadors and 105 investors into the network) they can get more than just fast wifi, they can get an advisory helping hand.

The needs of entrepreneurs won't be the same coming out the pandemic

There's a responsibility on shared workspaces like ours to recognise this and to adapt fast and accordingly. We must be prepared to question and reimagine almost everything we do to help startups not just bounce back, but have the space, support and energy to go back into battle and redefine normal altogether.

Gabriela Hersham, Co-Founder and CEO of [Huckletree](#) is a passionate advocate for diversity in the UK's startup community, and has just led Huckletree in its fifth year of continued growth, at a time when the coworking industry is plagued with concerns. Huckletree is now one of London and Dublin's fastest growing coworking communities.

[Discover Huckletree](#)

Read also

[COVID-19: Interview with Lee Vanessa Butz, CEO and founder of District Tech](#)

Article by GABRIELA HERSHAM