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Working Alone, Together

By ALEX WILLIAMS

Whitney Tingle, a New York entrepreneur, once had the common fantasy of ditching the 9-to-5 world, starting her own business and working in the serenity of her home. It did not quite work out as planned.

A year after cofounding Sakara Life, an organic-meal delivery company, she discovered that "there was no beginning or end to work," said Ms. Tingle, 27. "I would get distracted by dust bunnies under the desk and end up vacuuming in the middle of the day, or look at myself in the mirror at 7 p.m. and realize I was still in pajamas." And though health food was her business, she could not stay away from her boyfriend's pretzel supply. "They would stare at me from the perch above the fridge," Ms. Tingle said plaintively.

Concerned about her sanity and waistline, she and her business partner, Danielle DuBoise, in August applied to NeueHouse, a new "co-working" space near Madison Square that has fashioned itself as a private club. The work space has a lavish industrial-chic interior, courtesy of the designer David Rockwell; charter members that include Chris Blackwell, the Island Records founder, and Jefferson Hack, of the British magazine Dazed & Confused; and yearly fees that can reach five figures.

In just a few months, Ms. Tingle said, her mood has brightened, and her company has doubled its revenues through the contacts she has made there. "It's impossible to get that sort of thing at a Starbucks," she said.

This was supposed to be the age of the mobile (a k a nonexistent) office, with "solopreneurs" telecommuting from home or the beach in elastic-waist pants. But many who work independently are discovering alienation lurking behind the home-office fantasy, and an increasing number are joining a new generation of co-working organizations, like Grind, Fueled Collective and NeueHouse — some more exclusive than others. There are work spaces for writers (the Brooklyn Writers Space); for design types and bloggers (Studiomates, in Dumbo); and scores for tech entrepreneurs, including ones that double as continuing-ed campuses (General Assembly, which opened in New York in 2011, offers classes on subjects like "back-end Web development").

Though there were grumbles when the Yahoo chief Marissa Mayer did away with her employees' work-from-home arrangements, maybe she was on to something: many workers are saying they need a hive to be happy and productive.

One is Rebekah Epstein, who used to run a public relations agency out of her home in Austin, Tex., with only her dachshund, Dixie, whose barking once forced Ms. Epstein into a dark coat closet as she carried out a sensitive negotiation by phone with a client. Frustrated, she joined a local space called Link Coworking, which offers birthday drinks, mixers and potluck dinners to members, as well as colleagues to look presentable for. “It seems like a small thing,” Ms. Epstein said. “But getting dressed for work makes a huge difference.”

Ivory Chafin-Blanchard, a Web producer in Brooklyn who similarly wearied of working in a bathrobe and sunglasses on her sun-drenched terrace, had another complaint.

“When you don’t have to commute, and you’ve got a demanding workload, it is very hard to switch off,” said Ms. Chafin-Blanchard, 32. At home, she added, “if I wasn’t working, I felt guilty.”

She spent so many hours “on” that she tried to make her home office physically uncomfortable — installing a hard, upright chair and a glass desk — to keep her from spending too many hours there. “I had to depersonalize my house,” she said.

Last September, she gave up and joined Grind, a so-called “work space for free-range humans,” a “22nd century platform” on Park Avenue South that opened with a minimalist-chic interior in 2011, promising to “help talent collaborate in a new way: outside the system.” (Or in front of the vending machine, where Ms. Chafin-Blanchard said she met someone who is now a partner in her business.)

Ever since the futurist Alvin Toffler painted utopian images of the “electronic cottage” in his 1980 book, “The Third Wave,” professionals have imagined trading committee meetings and soul-crushing commutes for a life of self-directed fulfillment. The percentage of American workers who work exclusively from home, while still small, grew by 37 percent between 1997 and 2010, to 6.6 percent, according to one Census Bureau survey. While estimates vary widely on the number of millions who make up Freelance Nation, as of 2009, more than 15 million workers in the United States listed themselves as self-employed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But it seems the work-from-home dream was not all it was cracked up to be. There are now nearly 800 commercial co-working facilities in the United States, up from a little more than 300 only two years ago, and about 40 in 2008, according to an annual survey by Deskmag, an online magazine that covers the co-working industry.

Surely it wasn’t the fluorescent lights and office politics they were missing? But Tierney O’Dea Booker, 37, who ran a media consultancy out of her home in Austin before joining Link, pointed out that there can be a positive side to the latter. “The workplace is essentially gameified, with points and obstacles, rewards, pitfalls and allies,” she said. “When you’re alone, you have to make up your own system to self-propel. It’s easy to set the bar at the wrong level for yourself on a daily basis, either by not pushing yourself hard enough or too hard, trying to reach an unrealistic goal

and feeling inadequate as a result."

Offices can also be compelling sources of personal narrative, as evinced by the success of television shows like "Mad Men," "30 Rock," "The Good Wife" and, naturally, "The Office."

"Those shows are popular because they're about a community," said Ms. Booker, who worked at 30 Rockefeller Plaza as a news producer before moving to Austin. "You have friends, feedback, drama, comedy," she said. "Working by yourself, you lose out on that."

This is not to say that working remotely has been disappointing for all. An oft-cited 2007 Pennsylvania State University meta-analysis of 46 studies on telecommuting found that working from home for people employed by traditional companies can have "small but favorable effects on perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, job satisfaction and performance."

But "high-intensity" telecommuters at home more than three days a week and fulltime freelancers risk feeling alienated, said Ravi S. Gajendran, an author of the study who is now an assistant professor of business at the University of Illinois. "The need to feel socially connected is a fundamental human need," Dr. Gajendran said.

A Google search on "freelance lonely," for example, yielded 3.6 million results. For many, the "electronic cottage" has become an "electronic tiger cage," said Paul Saffo, the Silicon Valley technology forecaster.

"We went through our work-from-home-in-your-bunny-slippers phase and discovered it was lonely," Mr. Saffo said.

No wonder some work spaces are playing up their party atmosphere. Link holds "Mad Men"-themed holiday soirees. Indy Hall in Philadelphia, which opened six years ago, members organize after-hours jams and art shows in their mural-covered space, all in line with a quasi-communitarian dogma espoused by Alex Hillman, a founder of Indy Hall.

"People aren't going back to the office for the office," Mr. Hillman said. "They're going back to the office to be around people again." With its emphasis on fun, Fueled Collective, a new 18,000-square-foot work space in SoHo, feels more like a frat house, with a whiskey room, carts with free ice cream and Ping-Pong tables.

And at Grind (which has a waiting list of 200, according to a founder, Benjamin Dyett, and is expanding to the garment district and to Chicago), members are encouraged to sit next to someone new every day.

No co-working space, however, has debuted with the same social aspirations as NeueHouse. With its exposed plywood, cast-iron chandeliers and concrete floors, the 50,000-square-foot interior suggests the Ace Hotel crossed with a Las Vegas mega-club. Its founders — Joshua Abram and

Alan Murray, both veteran tech entrepreneurs in their 40s, along with Oberon Sinclair, a partner — are targeting globe-trotting creative professionals, the Monocle magazine types who consider it strategically crucial that Neuehouse plans outposts in far-flung locales starting with Los Angeles, London and Shanghai, and do not flinch at the cost ($600 a month to work in the main "gallery" downstairs, starting at $4,000 for the private studios upstairs). The work space features a screening room, broadcast studio and recording studio.

"We have members, not tenants," Mr. Abram said. Membership, by application, is "curated" by a board that includes Michelle Grey, a former gatekeeper at Soho House, the London-based chain of private clubs, and Tracey Ryans, a former collaborator with Serge Becker at velvet-rope night spots like the Box. Early members include Frieze Art Fair and Blue Bottle Coffee.

Not that snobbery is condoned. NeueHouse's organizers say they are looking for nothing more than a diverse set of skills from its members, so that they might come together organically to form the blockbuster start-ups of tomorrow.

"It's an ecosystem," Mr. Ryans said. "A lot of places focus on creating an environment where it's like a lake, you've got four species of fish. We think we're the Great Barrier Reef."

The very layout of Neuehouse is meant to suggest that work nowadays, at least for entrepreneurs, is a glorified version of hanging out. The main, gallery space, which opens next month (its upstairs studios opened last spring), is a collection of spaces meant to bring people together: there are retro-style library tables, kilim-covered cushions on a grand staircase designed for lounging, and conversation nooks with coffee tables and leather sofas.

"The design strategy is a typology that looks at accidental encounters, as much as organizational clarity or efficiency," Mr. Rockwell said.

It's an office designed for the interactive, serendipitous manner in which creative professionals work today, in a supposed ideas economy where corner offices and in-boxes feel like relics. "We've gone from a task-oriented office culture to a cafe culture," Mr. Murray said. Such lofty talk may help sell memberships, but even such new-model offices eventually start to feel a bit like regular offices, said Po Bronson, the writer who co-founded the San Francisco Writers' Grotto 19 years ago. Meaning: Competition, gossip, envy and ego as well as collaboration.

"It's like in school; you want to go to a school with other good students, but you don't help them with their homework," Mr. Bronson said. "You compare yourself with them. You don't want to be the loser."

Besides, not every freelancer these days wants to enjoy a college-housing-co-op level of intimacy with a bunch of strangers.

Milano Buckley, a former advertising copywriter, rented a sleek, glass-walled office at We Work in SoHo when she left a fashion label to work on a memoir. The guys next to her used to bring their dogs to work, and the dogs were cute. But sometimes, you can have too much of a good thing, even "community."

"It was a little bit of a fishbowl feeling," Ms. Buckley, 33, said. "People want to know what you do, so that communal culture lends itself to, 'What are you working on, awesome, high five.' But for some kinds of work, you don't necessarily want to share it."

But at least co-working spaces have one advantage over regular offices, said Ms. Booker, of Austin: You're there by choice.

"If anyone is annoying you," she said, "You just move."