

A sense of community

Coworking spaces offering a variety of perks crop up in the Richmond region

BY JOHN REID BLACKWELL
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Every Wednesday is cookie day at the Gather coworking space on East Broad Street in downtown Richmond.

It's a time for Gather's members — a blend of professionals and entrepreneurs in various lines of work — to get up from their desks around the office and gather in one of the building's many shared spaces for some refreshments.

"Our members know at 3 p.m. on Wednesday they get cookies, so they come out and connect," said Doug



D. White

White, co-owner of Gather Workspaces LLC, the company that designs, builds and operates collaborative workspaces since opening the first one in April 2014.

At Balance RVA, a coworking space on Patterson Avenue in Henrico County, members can attend regular yoga classes and cooking classes. New members get a free massage and a session with a personal trainer.

The Work & Friends coworking space on West Broad Street near the Virginia Commonwealth University's academic campus has regular "tea times" when members can get together and chat. The Novel coworking space in Shockoe Slip has a beer tap for late-day refreshment and socializing.

The growing number of coworking spaces in the Richmond area offer a variety of perks and amenities, and each space has a different look and vibe.

But members of the shared office spaces all describe some common factors that drew them to coworking: affordability, convenience, and, most of all, a sense of community.

"One of the things I like about this



JOHN REID BLACKWELL/TIMES-DISPATCH

Owner Juri Miller and others at Balance RVA watch Ginger Rucker teach a cooking class at the coworking space on Patterson Avenue in Henrico County.

place versus other offices is the environment," said Nicholas Simopoulos, a lawyer with a one-desk private



Simopoulos

office in the Novel coworking space on South 12th Street. His office door opens directly into a shared office space with a kitchen area and tables where other

Novel members are frequently having coffee and typing away on their laptop computers. "It is very high-energy," Simopoulos said. "You have a lot of entrepreneurs in here. That is contagious. It is infectious. That is the vibe I like."

In the past five years, more than half a dozen coworking businesses have emerged in the Richmond region, from the three Gather locations in the area, to Work & Friends, Novel, Balance RVA, Venture X and the shared space for craftsmen and inventors, Build, RVA.

Coworking "is a trend worldwide and nationwide," said White of Gather. "It is the way work is going. It started in the larger cities. We

are bringing it to cities the size of Richmond."

The coworking concept has recently faced some headwinds after the largest and fastest-growing company in the industry, New York-based WeWork, which has 527,000 members in 111 cities around the world, had to withdraw an initial public offering of stock and its CEO stepped down.

Investors were skeptical about the sustainability of WeWork's business model after the company revealed that, while its revenue has grown and reached \$1.8 billion in 2018, its losses also have mounted and hit \$1.6 billion last year.

Despite that, owners and members of local coworking spaces say they think the concept will continue to evolve and thrive.

"I'm very much bullish on the coworking marketplace," said Harry Vinson, the franchise owner of the Richmond location of Venture X, a coworking office that opened in May on Summit Avenue in Scott's Addition.

"It is a great option for people