

Layout Requirements in Entrepreneurial Coworking Environments

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Stakeholder Descriptions

The primary stakeholder for these findings is the Startup Hall administration, specifically those who already have a deep knowledge of the member companies' experiences and requirements. The administration has an incentive to address the renters' needs in order to be more appealing to current and potential customers, and so far has been enthusiastic about facilitating my research.

While the space is already constructed, the use of the space has some flexibility, and the roles of the different areas could change (for example, a conference room could become a break room). Additionally, the research could have implications for the events and policies of Startup Hall.

More broadly, coworking spaces can take many forms and cater to many different professions (DeGuzman 74-76). Startup Hall states that it aims to “attract innovative, entrepreneurial activity into the neighborhood. (“Startup Hall Seattle - Startup Space Rental Information.”)” This research may better inform Startup Hall as to which niche it is filling for its member companies, and whether this aligns with their goal.

The Startup Hall administration will benefit both from an analysis of how Startup Hall is meeting its users needs as well as design implications drawn from this analysis.

Key Findings

These findings are the results of two studies of the Startup Hall member company community. The first study consisted of three 30-minute interviews. The second study was a survey study that received eleven responses (a response rate of approximately 50%).

The key findings have been incorporated into personas, which are included as Appendix I. These personas were based off of the data from the survey and interview

studies. These findings include the importance of quiet spaces, the nature of networking and collaboration, and potential for further community building.

Solitary Work and Quiet Spaces

Solitary work is very important to the Startup Hall workers. Although the emphasis of a coworking space is generally on teamwork, the ability to work quietly is equally important. In the previously conducted survey study, all participants recognized time working alone as important. Additionally, participants in the survey study stressed the importance of soundproof phone booths for taking quiet calls. In the interview study, participants expressed mixed feeling on the openness of the desks, with one stating that it sustains a positive “two-way communication” (Interview Study 7) and another noting that proximity to others could be disruptive. (Interview Study 7)

DeGuzman and Tang note in their work that this may be a fact of coworking life—“the whole point of a coworking space is the steady buzz of activity that you can see and hear.” (DeGuzman 58) While this may be true of smaller spaces less focused on productivity, sites with the opportunity to provide their users with quiet spaces should do so. While an open group atmosphere is the foundation of a coworking space, the option to seclude oneself from this atmosphere is a necessity, whether this means quiet spaces in the facility or that renters will do their quiet work offsite.

Nature of Networking

It’s clear that the variety in coworking spaces extends to the community occupying the spaces; target users can include artists, developers, entrepreneurs, or anything in between. In his study of Texas coworking spaces, Clay Spinuzzi found that these spaces were generally

oriented towards either parallel or collaborative work—the differentiator being whether direct collaboration was involved. (Spinuzzi 427) Those aiming for direct collaboration are generally entrepreneurs and freelancers (431) DeGuzman note that atmosphere should be a consideration, advising potential coworkers that finding a place where they have chemistry with the community is crucial to a having positive experience. (DeGuzman 60)

The findings of the interview and survey studies align with Spinuzzi’s findings. Startup Hall targets entrepreneurs with the goal of connecting them to the University of Washington campus. As postulated by Spinuzzi, the participants tended toward collaborative work rather than parallel work. In the surveys, “working with experts” and “collaborating with the Startup Hall community” was preferred to “networking with UW students/faculty” or “structured networking events.” (Survey Study 19) This suggests that purposeful collaborative relationships are more important to users than networking for the sake of networking.

Culture and Collaboration

In both interview and survey studies, participants expressed some disappointment in the lack of culture. One participant attached this to the physical layout, noting that “the environment here is pretty dry and minimalist... compared to other co-working spaces that focus on comfort and fun. (Interview Study 6)” Another participant felt that collaboration was “‘not natural’ and was something they had to seek out. (Interview Study 7)” Dissatisfaction was also conveyed concerning the lack of amenities and upkeep in both studies (Interview Study 20, Survey Study 6).

In “Coworking: Assessing the role of proximity in knowledge exchange”, Lucia Parrino found that proximity wasn’t enough to develop a collaborative atmosphere; an

“organizational platform” (i.e. an online platform, community activities, a physical welcome board, etc.) was necessary for coworkers to form collaborative relationships. (Parrino 6, 9-10) According to DeGuzman, one coworking environment approached the same challenge by expecting companies to contribute to the collaborative culture instead of charging fees. (DeGuzman 68)

Clearly, some organization beyond shared desk space is necessary for a community or culture to develop. A tight-knit community means a stronger social network for collaboration to take place. Whether this organization manifests itself subtly through events and services or is a condition of entry, some sort of community building is necessary.

Design Implications

Several design implications arose from the survey and interview results. Firstly, a space that offers both open spaces and quiet secluded spaces is a necessity. Secondly, in order to attract entrepreneurs, Startup Hall should maximize opportunities for members to connect with mentors and peers in the member companies’ fields. Thirdly, an “organizational platform” needs to be developed to foster a collaborative community.

Allowing for Quiet Spaces

There are several ways to incorporate quiet spaces into a coworking site. The most prominent restriction is space. Soundproof booths for phone calls are a requirement; these occupy little space, and few are needed to be effective. Quiet work areas should also be strongly considered. There are a variety of ways these could be integrated into the space—quiet areas or quiet hours could be enforced, or members could have the option to separate themselves from others with temporary screens or walls. In developing a quiet space,

designers should note that physical soundproofing is less important than allowing users to create a private space. Members can use soundproof headphones to block out noise—the more prominent issue is the need to focus without being disrupted.

Enabling Collaborative Networks

The Startup Hall administration should continue providing members with access to mentors. Additionally, the administration should recognize common areas of collaboration, (such as software, business strategy, or fundraising) and enable communication on these areas. This could be in the form of an online forum or discussions centered around these topics specifically. User input should be strongly considered in developing these types of networks to optimize their impact. As Startup Hall caters to entrepreneurs with a need for collaborative partnerships, this will allow users to make purposeful connections.

Developing a Culture

There are many possible avenues for developing a culture in Startup Hall. The administration should pay special attention to the image they want to project and use this to add to the current décor. If maintaining a professional atmosphere is a concern, more private areas (such as the kitchen or game room) could be furnished to a greater extent than the desks, conference rooms, and lobby. Giving attention to small details, such as the coffee area, will also increase member satisfaction. Several study participants noted that informal collaboration occurs frequently in the coffee or kitchen areas. (Interview Study 8, Survey Study 6)

Community development doesn't have to be restricted to the physical aspects of the layout, however. As mentioned in Parrino's work, a variety of tools can be used to build a

collaborative atmosphere. Startup Hall may consider an online forum or social network to make the community members more visible to each other. This could focus on the individuals or on the skillsets offered. Additionally, group events would build the group identity and culture of Startup Hall—in the form of both professional and casual events. In these events as well, Startup Hall should consider who its target users are and cater to their needs.

The administration should not expect collaboration to happen on its own, or expect the environment to always be collaborative. A collaborative atmosphere will not be one-size-fits-all, and members should be enabled to find their own balance. Startup Hall can make the workspace more productive by allowing users to create a quiet space when needed, and by enabling collaborative partnerships and community building.

Opportunities for Future Research (300 words)

There are many areas to learn more. Firstly, a better understanding of the users' backgrounds and self-identified needs would help inform future design. More specifically, researchers should build on how Startup Hall is a part of the users' days—i.e. whether it's their location for solitary work, for meeting with team members, or for making use of the Startup Hall community. Additionally a better idea of what sort of collaboration is desired among members would help the administration facilitate collaboration. Further survey or interview studies focused on users' day-to-day use of Startup Hall will lead to better understanding of the site's purpose.

Secondly learning more about how users best collaborate could help Startup Hall better enable collaborative networks. Surveys or interviews would allow users to express which tools and environments they find most conducive to collaboration. Researchers

should explore both online tools and the physical layout of the space. Additionally, field studies of informal collaboration in the kitchen or coffee areas could help the administration improve these areas.

Finally, research should be conducted on how other sites have developed a culture. Learning more about events, policies, and décor that influence the atmosphere will aid the administration in finding a culture that works for them. Looking into online resources used for community building may be beneficial as well, especially as many of the Startup Hall renters are technology-focused. Online platforms that are focused more on sharing experiences among the community and less on projecting an image may build trust and collaboration within the member companies. Field studies at other coworking sites may better inform culture building at Startup Hall.

Works Cited

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Appendix I: Personas



Alice

Alice had been working with their business partners for several months before they decided to join the Startup Hall community. They had been running a startup from their homes and found the environment to be lacking energy. They appreciate having neighbors at Startup Hall and generally enjoy the atmosphere. They feel that they can approach others whenever they have a question.

“There’s a nice synergy in the space —nice collaboration, no competition.”

“If there is a specific need, the participant will walk up to their desks. They feel it is ok to approach people; it is a 2-way communication. ...The space is pretty good —good coffee, lots of socialization.”



Luisa

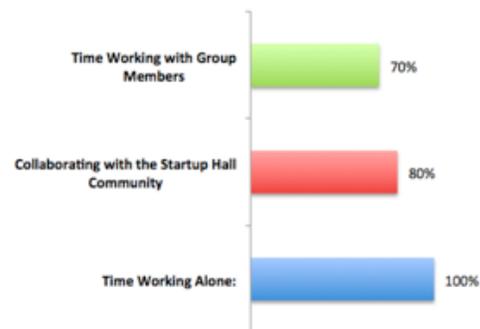
Luisa left a job at a large company to be a part of a tech Startup. Although she enjoys the independence of being a part of a Startup, she misses the privacy of having her own office.

She is often distracted by team members or other people approaching her desk, and often has to go offsite to work quietly. She is frustrated by the lack of quiet space for solitary work.

What is important for your work at Startup Hall?

"Quiet atmosphere, working kitchen, fast Internet"

"Which of the following is important to you?"



"It's hard to focus and get things done, especially if they're in a hurry, so the participant sometimes works in a coffee shop."

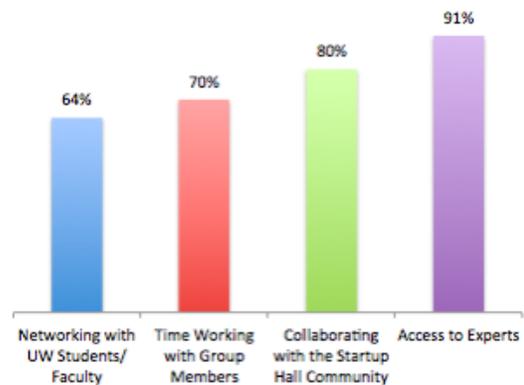


Rohit

Rohit considered several other coworking environments before coming to Startup Hall, and ultimately chose Startup Hall because of the cost. He enjoys the space, but finds the atmosphere to be too minimalist. He frequently attends seminars and networking events, but feels that the space is lacking in culture. He wishes there were more collaboration happening outside of his company.

“the environment here is pretty dry and minimalist. Likely because it's not full yet but it doesn't seem a fulfilling place to be compared to other co-working spaces that focus on comfort and fun. Startup Hall provides the basic office necessities but very few perks and very little culture”

Which of the following are important to you?



Appendix II: Summary of Results

