

MESH

Co-owners
Tabari Brannon
and Scott Burton

It's True. The Future of the
Workplace is Changing

SPACES

By Mandy Wallace

The digital technologies we already take for granted, like email and online video conferencing, mean more workers are opting out of the morning commute in favor of the home office. It's great in theory.

Working from a home office means no traffic. Fewer zeroes on the gas budget. And pants? Optional.

But when you hit the inevitable project snag, who do you ask for help? How do you network? Where do you find inspiration? And when dirty dishes vie with the kids for attention, where can you go to get away and just work? For many freelancers and entrepreneurs, the answer is coworking spaces.

In the traditional office, where businesses section off into private suites, workers typically don't mingle with other businesses. But coworking spaces maintain the freedom and flexibility of working whenever and wherever you want, while offering the chance to collaborate with people from other industries in an open environment of interconnected offices and shared spaces.

At MESH cowork in downtown Bakersfield, for example, software developers work alongside marketers and insurance agents. With so many different perspectives and expertise in one downtown Bakersfield space, MESH cowork creates a culture that makes it easy to get ideas and get things done. It isn't unheard of for a business in a coworking space to vet a new product idea with the consultant down the hall, check in on insurance requirements with the agent across the table, get the app into production with the software developer at the next desk, and have documents registered with the resident notary—all without leaving the office.

"We're intentional about creating those connections," said **Tabari Brannon**, co-owner of MESH cowork in Bakersfield. "In the coworking industry, we call it accelerated serendipity."

Brannon co-founded MESH cowork with **Scott Burton**. It's one of just a handful of coworking spaces in Bakersfield. In a city that isn't yet known for its tech scene, it makes sense that the coworking

industry is just taking off here. That doesn't scare Burton and Brannon. They suspected from the start that Bakersfield had an underground tech culture that wasn't yet being served. But it was a risk to be one of the first coworking businesses to draw them out. Newer ventures like this one take a particularly forward thinking outlook. So of course launching it came with its challenges.

When they first started MESH, one of the greatest challenges Burton and Brannon faced was finding time to run it. Both still worked full-time for other companies—Brannon as a hospital chaplain with an education in IT and Burton as a freelance software developer. But the freelancing and entrepreneurial clients they serve need a space that's as flexible as their schedules, one that's available at a moment's notice for drop-ins and projects that run late. It seemed like an impossible challenge. So Burton and Brannon did what any tech-savvy entrepreneurs would do. They threw technology at the problem. >>



Risktakers

"We did our best from the beginning to make the space mostly self-running," said Burton.

That's why the membership system at MESH is all self-service. Clients select the plan they want—open seating, permanent desk, or semi-private office—all online. Clients pick up hourly passes, reserve conference rooms, and purchase seats for in-person courses the same way. Brannon or Burton could unlock the entrance to MESH remotely, for those times clients needed to access the space and neither of the guys could be there. Now, members get a key code for the door. Executive tasks are easier too since they keep the company's accounting and management software in the cloud where either can hop in to work between demands from full-time jobs.

Like many new entrepreneurs, Burton and Brannon launched MESH before they fully understood the industry. This wasn't for lack of preparation or passion for their idea. They'd both put in

"In the coworking industry, we call it accelerated serendipity." —*Tabari Brannon*

their share of research. They'd attended coworking conferences, toured thriving coworking spaces in New York, Sacramento, and Los Angeles, hired consultants, planned their business structure around best practices, and otherwise immersed themselves into the industry. But research can't provide the real life experience an entrepreneur needs to launch and run a business.

"When we were thinking about getting started I had all these questions that were unanswered," Brannon said.

Unanswered questions like these can lead an entrepreneur to question their ability to run a business. It's a limbo state that paralyzes many into permanent inaction. But Brannon recognized the trap for the pre-launch jitters they were.

"As soon as I took action and we signed the lease and we actually opened the space it was like all of that vanished," Brannon said. "I think a lot of times with new entrepreneurs when you stay in your head and you fantasize about entrepreneurship, everything seems so challenging. But when you step out there and take action everything becomes clear."

That lease he mentioned posed another challenge. When Burton and Brannon dreamed up their ideal MESH cowork, it was an upscale design packed with amenities like an onsite kitchen, sound-



MESH's coworking space gives locals who work from home a place to collaborate together.

proof phone call station, conference rooms, and a variety of collaborative and more private workspaces across an impressive four thousand square foot space. Many of the features, they learned, came at a prohibitive cost. For a lot of would-be entrepreneurs, this is where the dream dies. Instead, Burton and Brannon decided to scale down and launch anyway.

For MESH, that meant starting out in a four hundred square foot space instead of the four thousand. It meant bringing early clients into the space to get feedback on additions clients actually wanted and were willing to pay for. MESH's inaugural location is this smaller version, its conference room and minimal seating gave Burton and Brannon the chance to test their idea. And it worked.

"Now we are nearly five times the size and looking to expand even further," Burton said.

They're in lease negotiations for MESH's next location. It's closer to their initial ideal concept, including the larger footprint and fuller amenities. The challenge MESH faces now, according to Burton and Brannon, is how to scale up.

They're working next to secure investors, which they hope will help them expand MESH into multiple locations across the San Joaquin Valley. That's good news for Bakersfield, since more coworking spaces will make it easier to meet the future of business and its changing needs.

"It is getting easier and easier to work for companies in other cities, even other countries," said Burton.

More workers conducting business remotely means more people can opt to enjoy the higher quality of life with a home in Bakersfield even while they work for companies in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or around the world. And the guys have a few ideas about where technology in Bakersfield is headed.

"We're a heavily resource dependent region," said Brannon. "Capitalizing on our strengths as a county, technology is a huge opportunity for us. With the possibility that the high speed rail brings, it'll really transform the way business is done."

These challenges aren't far away for Bakersfield. And businesses like MESH cowork are smart to find ways to both support and cash in on this future.

"Before we know it, we will be full of high rises and satellite companies for big firms," said Burton.

For now, though, MESH is sticking with what they do best. Besides their selection of flexible and permanent desks for remote workers and small businesses, they offer conference rooms for business meetings, virtual mail services, technology classes, entrepreneurship coaching, and game and software development courses.

Pants may not be optional, but at MESH work is never boring. ❖

