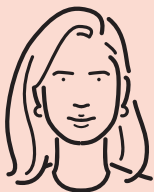


5

HANNAH PHILP
LONDON

An office for the neighbourhood

There's nothing like a pandemic to make you think about what you value. And for many of us that's turned out to be a better work-life balance and creating a closer sense of community – from the neighbours we got to know to the local shops we came to rely on. So to say our co-working business has been on a non-stop rollercoaster for the past five months would be something an understatement.

First, the dips. Launching a business was always going to be full of surprises. But no amount of contingency planning could have prepared us for entering nationwide lockdown a few weeks before we were scheduled to open our first co-working space in east London. From signing up customers to finishing the build, everything was put on hold – except for our rent. On top of that, moving forwards with the added burden of implementing social distancing in the workplace – not ideal.

But there are green shoots. The office is experiencing an existential crisis. Lockdown has left many employers and employees wondering just what they are really for.

Enter a new generation of remote workers who are seeking somewhere to park their laptop. Because lockdown hasn't just brought the purpose of the office into question – it's shattered the ideal of working happily from home. Fine if you have a designated study. But if you have a normal-sized house, flatmates, children, or simply like human company, it's not really fine. Which counts most of us, then.

While demand is high for a new kind of neighbourhood workplace, ordinary

remote workers need a third space. WeWork and other high-profile co-working spaces aren't the solution. Not only are their prices preclusive, but they may struggle to align their values with those of the post-pandemic audience.

Since we first started planning to launch ARC Club nearly two years ago, we've always wanted to offer a new kind of model for co-working. Our space is in a residential area, bringing some practical advantages. In an ideal world, would anyone ever take the tube again if they didn't have to? But more importantly, local co-working promises a powerful sense of community. Not based on particular interests or levels of income, but based on the simple idea of all belonging to the same place. We stock local suppliers, offer discounts to nearby businesses, provide workshops and meeting spaces for community organisations. We name our



Lockdown hasn't just brought the purpose of the office into question – it's shattered the ideal of working happily from home.



meeting rooms after businesses that used to exist in the area, too.

In this way, ARC Club's local co-working model isn't entirely new. In fact, we are proud to learn from the past: a time when people clocked on and off; a time when they knew their neighbours. As the way we work changes, we have an opportunity to find a fresh purpose for remote-working spaces in our cities; a new kind of digitally enabled real-world hub. We see an opportunity to rediscover some of the things we've lost.

• Hannah Philp is co-founder of ARC Club.