



At Café Caffeine, a group of telecommuters meets at the coffee shop once a week to network and gain some human interaction.

BRETT BUCHANAN | ABJ

OUT OF THE OFFICE

Growing number of Austinites working from home, coffee shops

MARY HOOPER | STAFF WRITER

The number of employees and entrepreneurs telecommuting is growing fast, and while the setup provides substantial freedom, the solitude prompts many to seek professional companionship.

Brian Massey left his office job a year and a half ago to be a freelance conversion specialist, helping businesses change Web traffic into leads or sales.

Almost immediately, he started working from coffee shops instead of his home, and informally “coworking” — meeting up with self-employed friends to keep each other company while they worked on independent projects.

Now, Massey teams with other work-from-home individuals at coffee shops around Austin in a floating event called Jelly. The informal gathering “gels” just about every week somewhere in Austin.

Massey says he finds great value in the coworking meetings. When he wants to share an idea with others, he has an instant focus group, and there’s a possibility that someone in the group will have a fresh idea or perspective.

Massey’s part of a growing segment of workers taking advantage of the conven-

iences of technology by communicating with clients and coworkers remotely. In 2006, 12.4 million Americans were allowed by their employers to work from home, and 16.2 million were self-employed teleworkers. By 2015, it is estimated that 20 to 25 percent of all employment will be shifted into the home, according to Living in The U.S.A. — 2000 to 2020, a report compiled by futurist David Pearce Snyder.

Jelly started in New York at the apartment of Amit Gupta and Luke Crawford, who missed the watercooler conversation and camaraderie that comes with an office.

They invited friends to work from their home for a day, and other chapters quickly began forming across the country shortly after. Anyone can start a Jelly. A community Web site, called a wiki, hosts information for each chapter.

Dusty Reagan, an independent technology consultant, is the founder of the Austin Jelly, which started in November. Originally workdays were held twice a month, but are now happening weekly at coffee shops in Austin.

An average of 10 people show up to each Jelly, Reagan says. They are often newcomers, though Reagan says the group is start-

ing to get some regulars. Workers may stake out a spot with their laptops and cell phones to work for the entire day, or just stop by to chat for a bit.

There is more than good company during working hours, says Reagan. Coworking allows independent workers to network with each other, and Reagan says Jelly provides him a way to form valuable business connections.

“If I want to get clients, I can’t sit at home,” he says.

He and four fellow entrepreneurs and Jelly participants are currently creating a business plan to form a company, allowing each of them to continue with their freelance work while taking advantage of a group brand.

In addition to coworking groups such as Jelly, coworking spaces are emerging for independent workers who need office amenities. Austin’s first coworking space, LaunchPad Coworking, is set to open July 1, at 800 Brazos St. downtown.

Julie Gommol, president of LaunchPad Coworking, has been an entrepreneur for 20 years, and is familiar with the challenges of working from home.

“I love the flexibility to work when and how I want, but it’s really isolating,” she

says.

Working with friends at a coffee shop would relieve the loneliness, she says, but the environment is not suitable for client meetings or presentations. So Gommol and the LaunchPad team planned their dream coworking space, LaunchPad Coworking.

The cafe and workspace will have 25 to 30 desks and six meeting rooms available for rent by the hour.

“This isn’t designed to be your personal office,” she says. “It’s for people who want to work around other independent workers.”

Though coworking spaces are opening around the country, Gommol says this is the only space she knows of that combines a cafe with meeting rooms.

“We want to bring in community and synergy between the coffee shop and coworking space,” Gommol says.

Being able to order from the cafe at your desk is an added perk, she says.

Those already in the coworking fold say LaunchPad will meet a serious need among independent workers.

Massey says a space like LaunchPad would allow him to bring in customers and do seminars, while spending money on marketing efforts instead of office space.