



Work From Home, Just Not Alone and Not in Your Own Home

The Scandinavian startup Hoffice aims to bring rigor and productivity to the concept of home-based co-working spaces.

FEARGUS O'SULLIVAN |  @FeargusOSull | Feb 2, 2015 |  6 Comments



Amrit Forss/Hoffice

Apartment by night, office by day. That's the concept behind a Scandinavian startup that's helping city residents turn their homes into co-working spaces from 9 to 5. Calling itself [Hoffice](#), the Stockholm-based project connects telecommuters into groups who then meet in a participant's house or apartment to spend the working day together. By teaming up like this, freelancers get the looseness and freedom of homeworking but without the supposed productivity-sapping isolation that comes attached.

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Home-based co-working spaces have been around for a while, of course. What makes Hoffice different is that it attempts to mold a co-working group into a shared enterprise, creating a specific, collectively observed structure to the workday designed to keep everyone focused. As each Hoffice session begins, everyone in the group shares what they plan to do with their day, also outlining what they think might get in the way of reaching that goal. The day is then split into 45-minute sessions, interspersed with short breaks taken together. Swedish journalist Agneta Lagercrantz [outlines](#) how it works, and makes it all sound a little cult-ish:

For 45 minutes at a time, we only hear the wall clock – tick-tock, tick-tock – and laptop key sounds. Or how someone suddenly gets up, and whispering disappears with the mobile phone. Then comes the alarm signal. It is time for the ten-minute break with stretching, meditation – or, why not, disco dancing?

Add the fact that during lunch breaks “the idea is to avoid too superficial subjects in order to build trust between the participants” and the concept starts to look a little groupthink-y. Still, none of Hoffice’s growing roster of participants has a gun to their backs, so it must work for them.

The concept has another layer of significance beyond its refashioning of freelance work: it's being promoted as part of a Nordic-wide startup acceleration program run by think tank [Demos Helsinki](#), whose purpose is dreaming up better ways of using urban space. Demos Helsinki itself frames Hoffice as an exploration of this issue, noting in a statement that “Stockholm is struggling with a severe housing shortage and its entrepreneurs are finding innovative ways around the problem.”

The idea looks like it has legs—there are now five Hoffice groups in Sweden, and one apiece in Helsinki and Copenhagen. In its current form, it's still not likely to become the Airbnb of offices anytime soon, thanks to Hoffice's determination to keep the process free. Participants contribute voluntarily to expenses, but no fee as such is levied. This sounds like good news. As the idea stands—framed with the well-paid freelance worker in mind—it seems sensible enough. If you know you're going to be working in an apartment all day, why not reduce utility costs by making sure that the apartment in question isn't always your own? If you're going to work for yourself, why not reduce your isolation and boost productivity by creating your own impromptu workplace, complete with its own rituals?

Taking this further as a business model, however, could easily ring alarm bells that go off more than every 45 minutes. Were a fee-paying version of a project like this to truly take off, potential profits from daytime apartment sublets would no doubt end up stirring the same types of regulatory controversies that have haunted Airbnb. Plus, as things stand, many apartments are already sold as "live/work spaces" simply because they have space for a desk. If cities are to plan for and protect decent living conditions, there's surely a case to made for protecting the idea of what "home" means. That's admittedly a strong reaction to a kitchen-full of laptop-tapping Swedes chipping in for a communal cookie jar— but I guess I was never one for dancing at the office.

About the Author



Feargus O'Sullivan covers Europe for CityLab.

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