

Coworking Space for Midlife Entrepreneurs - Wave of the Future?

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Question: Are business co-working spaces for midlife entrepreneurs taking off? Answer: Not yet. But... stay tuned.

Here's why: In Washington, D.C., something called the [H Street Greenhouse](https://www.taurusdev.com/h-st-greenhouse) (https://www.taurusdev.com/h-st-greenhouse) is developing a model boutique co-working space for [midlife entrepreneurs](https://www.nextavenue.org/secrets-of-success-from-midlife-entrepreneurs/) (https://www.nextavenue.org/secrets-of-success-from-midlife-entrepreneurs/) that offers a tantalizing alternative to co-working spaces that ooze masculine youth with a fraternity house vibe.

It also offers The Experience Lab at H Street Greenhouse, an educational component to help them launch and run their businesses successfully through a speakers' series focused on startup issues, with future workshops geared for this cohort of budding business owners. In essence, it's an incubator.

There are, of course, thousands of co-working spaces around the country, from the national brands like WeWork to smaller ones such as The Riveter, a female-centric co-working space launched in Seattle; Coalition in Boston; HackerLab in Sacramento; The Hive 44 in St. Louis and Collective Agency in Portland, Ore.

But based on my reporting, H Street Greenhouse is the only one rolling out the welcome mat for Gen X and

boomer entrepreneurs specifically.

There are also some buzzy longevity-market startup incubators and accelerators seeking to attract an intergenerational mix of entrepreneurs developing pioneering products and services catering to the aging population. These include Upward Labs in Hartford, Conn., AGENCY in Cambridge, Mass. and AARP's Innovation Lab, known as The Hatchery, in Washington, D.C. The focus of these incubators, however, is a deeper drill offering support from mentoring to design, test-marketing and legal counsel — mostly in collaborative co-working spaces.

The Experience Lab at H Street Greenhouse is more of a hybrid of these two kinds of co-workspace efforts.

For now, Greenhouse is largely courting the over 45-entrepreneur looking for a shared, affordable co-workspace to launch or run a small venture before moving on to a more formal setting, or even a full-blown bells-and-whistles lab similar to the ones above.

Think of it as an incubator-lite at this stage, more co-working than intensive lab platform for attracting venture capital money to make a splash. The concept is, in my mind, more democratic and open arms for the typical entrepreneur at midlife.

For Jennifer Thompkins, 47, founder of the consulting and management firm The Verlyn Group, the H Street Greenhouse's camaraderie and idea sharing with other business owners like her is a big attraction.

"It's almost like a close-knit family," said Thompkins. "Everybody tries to work together and help others out if they can. Plus, it's fun to learn about other businesses."

The Experience Lab at H Street Greenhouse was launched last year by Gail Montplaisir, 66, founder and CEO of the Taurus Development Group, as an alternative to those workspaces catering to a younger crowd. "Older people are not as comfortable in those



environments and they come to us for a quiet, brighter space,” said Montplaisir.

Cost: From \$50 a Month to \$350 a Month

For \$50 a month, you might just opt to rent the professional H Street Greenhouse address to get mail while continuing to work from home. Or you can shell out \$350 a month to rent a dedicated desk where you can leave your belongings.

The driving idea is to provide an environment where entrepreneurs can collaborate with others. “One of the ways to achieve our dreams is to collaborate with people who are like-minded and may have more bandwidth for particular areas where we need expert insight — say marketing or legal questions,” Montplaisir said.

I was struck on my recent visit how well-lit the workspace was without being garishly bright. The tone of the atmosphere was somewhat serious, without feeling stuffy. The red brick walls and coffee aroma wafting through the air made me feel comfortable. And while there was a gentle buzz coming from the glassed-in conference room where a meeting was underway, it wasn't distracting.

Helping Make Washington, D.C. an Age-Friendly City

The Greenhouse concept is right in line with Washington, D.C.'s focus on creating an age-friendly city, as I [wrote about for The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/washington-the-ideal-place-to-grow-older.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/washington-the-ideal-place-to-grow-older.html>) . D.C. is one of the cities highlighted in the recent Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging report, [Age-Forward Cities for 2030](http://milkeninstitute.org/centers/center-for-the-future-of-aging) (<http://milkeninstitute.org/centers/center-for-the-future-of-aging>) , as my Next Avenue colleague Richard Eisenberg discussed in his blog post, [“Age-Forward Cities for 2030: The Big Challenge](https://www.nextavenue.org/age-forward-cities/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/age-forward-cities/>) .”

A co-working space, of course, is appealing for new entrepreneurs of all ages. It's practical for owners on a tight startup budget who want to surround themselves with other creative small business types. But for those who want a more tranquil setting, the Greenhouse model is a win-win.

The arrival of a co-working space geared to an older entrepreneur doesn't surprise me. As I wrote in my book, [Never Too Old To Get Rich: The Entrepreneurs Guide to Starting a Business at Midlife](https://amzn.to/33MKmgg), (<https://amzn.to/33MKmgg>) this is a hot demographic of entrepreneurs, who often have different needs and interests than their younger counterparts.

Time to Make a Move

Before working out of Greenhouse, Kim Greenfield Alfonso, 61, had been using her kitchen as her office for months to grow Results One, the workplace training and website consulting firm for people with disabilities she co-founded.

“My husband finally asked: ‘At what point is this going to change?’” said Alfonso.

She knew she had to make a move. “When I checked out WeWork, I felt like a grandma,” she said. “And I thought, ‘Ooh, I don't know if I can do this, trying to go downtown to an office like that.’”

She recognized she wanted a quiet office, surrounded by peers with whom she could connect over work — not over happy-hour drinks. For now, Alfonso primarily uses her Greenhouse space for client meetings in the conference room. “I don't want strangers coming into my house,” she said.

Although H Street Greenhouse was originally marketed as a space for the 50+ set, “our members have told us that they prefer we leave the age out and be inclusive for a broad cohort of entrepreneurs,” Montplaisir told me when I recently visited her there. That said, its members range from age 45 to 65+; they run the gamut from architects to attorneys to real estate agents.

Expansion Ahead for H Street Greenhouse

The 2,000-square-foot Greenhouse space, which can now accommodate 30 members, is set to expand more than five-fold to 11,000-square-feet next year. At that point, it will have room to bump up membership to 200. The retrofitted space will have private phone booths, whiteboard enclaves, smart TVs, space to hold events and an outdoor courtyard.

And, with a nod to its clientele, Greenhouse will be age-friendly — with an elevator, and grab bars in the restroom, as well as accommodations for the hearing-

impaired. There will also be a small, ground-floor retail space for entrepreneurs who might want to test a pop-up bricks-and-mortars storefront.

This year, a partnership with The Juanita C. Grant Foundation — a nonprofit dedicated to supporting working adults age 50 and up find employment and financial security — was instrumental in honing the Greenhouse mission to another level.

A Speakers' Series for Business Owners

Together with the foundation's founder and Greenhouse member S. Orlene Grant, 66, Montplaisir has added an educational component to the space. An Open MIC (which stands for Motivate, Inspire, Connect) speakers' series brought together intimate gatherings of experts and midlife entrepreneurs sharing their experience and expertise. (Full disclosure: In September, I presented there on launching a successful business midlife, along with one of the entrepreneurs I profiled in my book, Mike Kravinsky of NextNik Films, and work coach Patricia DiVecchio.)

Other speakers for the series, which will continue in 2020, included local bankers who doled out wisdom on raising capital; a federal contracting expert who discussed ways to tap into government work opportunities; a branding and communication specialist and an attorney reviewing legal aspects of starting and running a small business.

And the Greenhouse's Experience Lab at H Street incubator has begun assisting entrepreneurs, too.

"We want to help our members grow their businesses while they're here," Montplaisir said. "Everybody who is a part of these events is an experienced entrepreneur who wants to share their knowledge with other people who are trying to break into business or who are already there and want help to move forward," she said. "It's a generosity of spirit in the older entrepreneur."

I asked Grant what attracted her to sign up as a member. "The Foundation doesn't need full bricks and mortar, but we didn't want to be by ourselves," she said. H Street Greenhouse, she added, "is a rich environment with people around who you can bounce ideas off and hold meetings in a calm atmosphere."

A 24/7 Co-Working Space

And there's the time flexibility. Members have access to the space 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which is not the norm for most co-working spaces.

Said Greenhouse member Michael Schaeffer, 62, a retail entrepreneur and associate broker at Coldwell Banker: "It's good to have another place to go to take your hat off and work in the early morning. I can shift gears here and get into a different mindset." And Grant told me: "We have had board meetings at 8 p.m. and late Saturday afternoons."

The open-all-hours policy is especially appealing to [sidepreneurs](https://www.nextavenue.org/sidepreneurship-trend-for-women/) (https://www.nextavenue.org/sidepreneurship-trend-for-women/) who are still working a primary day job — a burgeoning segment of female entrepreneurs as I recently wrote for my Next Avenue blog.

Schaeffer said he sees a real trend for future workspaces like Greenhouse in the city. "I sell a lot of properties on Capitol Hill, which is nearby, to people over 50 who are moving to the city to be closer to their families. A lot of them are entrepreneurial or have a consulting practice and are the kind of person interested in working in a space like this."

There's currently talk of opening similar Greenhouse concepts in other D.C.-area neighborhoods, such as in Bethesda, Md. The development group is also on the verge of opening a second location in Syracuse, N.Y.

"But it is really important that this one perform strongly, before we roll out a larger expansion plan for the next five years," Montplaisir said.