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An Eye on West Africa

As with all trending topics, there is the tendency to look around and see where we stand compared to others.

Just when we thought we had just about everything thinkable in terms of business ideas related to the sharing economy, up springs co-working spaces. We shared cars with Uber, our homes with Airbnb, and now we work together.

Co-working simply put is sharing a work space and facilities with others. From work tables and consoles to restrooms and bars. Not one for the reclusive, but Nirvana for the millennial crowd that this idea seems to attract most. It boggles my mind to imagine a stuffy old accountant sitting elbow-to-elbow with a 20-year-old entrepreneur wearing ripped jeans and donning Bose headphones while nursing a bottle of cold beer.

WeWork is now the biggest co-working company in the world, valued at \$20 billion, which provides workspaces that attract start-ups, freelancers and small businesses. Effectively, 'dorm living for adults'.

We spoke about the sceptics some time back and how many thought West Africa wasn't ready to participate in the sharing economy. Now its welcoming co-working spaces. WeWork hasn't made it to Africa yet, but a home-grown example of the concept is WorkStation, a tech-enabled shared space that supports businesses in Nigeria. Imagine working in an air-conditioned bubble without worries about the generator, gate security, maintenance, rent and levies, furniture...all the things people doing business here have to contend with.

What exactly do you find in these creative hubs of humanity? Free wi-fi is one big one, a given these days; a cool and hippy environment which includes a great design, easy décor, room to move and socialise...and of course an endless supply of fuel (food and drink). These are the hallmarks of hospitality service, anyway, so why not take advantage of what you already do and brand it!

This is a trend that the hospitality industry would be foolhardy to ignore. And true to form, the idea of co-working spaces in hotels is here already. A recent article in *Architectural Digest* featured the top 10 hotels with co-working spaces – The Montrose West Hollywood, the Venetian Las Vegas, and Publica Isrotel in Israel are just some of the high-end hotels that have bought into the concept. Sheraton too is introducing co-working spaces across the board, and in fact can be seen as a bit of a pioneer with their Link@Sheraton facility. In Lagos it is right in the middle of the lobby, with computers and tables for people to meet and chat, and if you are staying at the hotel the internet is free. Actually, it is largely meant for residents of the hotel, but the new trend is to use spaces in hotels as an additional revenue source, attracting in people not staying overnight.

In Dubai, the Wyndham Tryp hotel has its 'NEST'

concept – an "urban co-working space where Dubai's most innovative, creative and entrepreneurial communities collide. NEST is one of the world's first fully integrated co-working spaces within a major internationally-branded hotel" (hotel website).

I'm not sure about the concept of 'colliding', but I do know that this is one of the most exciting opportunities for product extension since the advent of bathrooms in every bedroom. If these under-used spaces can offer the same hospitality that the hotel provides to its overnight guests, then why not convert them to co-working spaces – look at those huge lobbies that really do nothing to increase the revenue (I'm thinking of the Mövenpick Accra, the former InterContinental Hotel in Lagos). Take advantage of them and see them as revenue-earning spaces. The comfort, hassle-free environment is just what is needed to support the disruptive thinkers who are the future of this business. And whilst you're about it, get rid of those 'business centres' that are nothing of the sort.

I was in the Latitude 15 Hotel in Lusaka recently and thought...wow! Now this is co-working in a hotel setting that blows your mind away. The décor is just so progressive and yet at the same time, you get a sense of being in your own space – in fact the facilities range from shared desk space to small offices, for day or long-term use. A 32-room boutique hotel, Latitude offers co-working facilities amid lovely artwork, all of which makes it a beautiful but functional space. And what's more, just a few yards from you is the gym, the spa, the pool and of course the bar! I think those guys have got it right.

So, in effect, we have a higher volume of traffic into the hotel but not only that, revenue-generating traffic. Of course, there are security issues that need to be worked around, but when is security never a problem? And we might also have to contend with the regular hotel guests who feel uncomfortable with all these 'co-workers' around the place. It is all about achieving a balance of concepts.

The laid-back millennial look and feel of co-working spaces would probably fit best into a young, edgy and vibrant hotel brand like the Radisson Reds, Alofts and Hyatt Centrics of this world, but I'm struggling to see it work in the Ritz Carlton. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it will.

I really do see the opportunity for hotels in West Africa to adopt this concept, make their product more appealing to us, and by doing so earn more revenue. ■

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