

PRODUCTIVITY ROAD TEST

Freelancer's home away from home

Sue White knuckles down in a co-working environment, where she meets sharing, caring 'colleagues'.

Office colleagues can make a tough day better or turn a good day into a tough one. But it seems that when they're not there, we miss them.

Those who have tried working from home soon realise that getting a set-up right takes time, energy and space. Enter: co-working, a way for entrepreneurs, sole traders or small businesses to work independently in a shared space.

It has taken off in Europe, parts of North America and, to a far lesser extent, Australia. I choose Fishburners in inner Sydney to test the reality. I arrive about 9.30am on a Tuesday to an environment that is tidy, clean and, frankly, far more stylish than my usual digs.

About 10 people, sitting at individual desks or a large communal table, work quietly on laptops. These are community members (aka occasional users) such as myself; more-established set-ups line the side of the room with those who have a permanent space.

Light streams in and I glance at a few comfy chairs on a rug – appealing, but not so big that I can imagine people lounging around on them. It's like working in a trendy library, except for the jet engine in the corner.

Just as I wonder if it's always humming, a friendly guy asks the jet-engine owner: "What is that doing?" I interpret this as code for, "My god,



Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

that thing is noisy, is it going to do that all day?" During a short, amicable exchange, he establishes that it's a fancy server doing something important and that the noise will stop in five minutes.

It seems typical of the approach to troubleshooting in a co-working environment. No one's saying we won't annoy each other, but we'll all do our best to stay friendly and support each other's need to get stuff done.

Within minutes, I'm plugged in and the laptop is on. I've come armed with a list of what I can achieve, not really knowing what to expect. Turns out I can do anything I can do at home. There's enough space to spread out a bit, a small kitchen down the hall, and a printer and meeting room that can be used by regulars on a "fair-use" basis. Of course, it's not utopia.

Co-working thrives when people are considerate and more or less friendly – qualities we would all like from our colleagues, regardless of

where we work. The downside is lack of privacy. You can hear everyone's phone calls and their conversations with colleagues. But I soon discover there's an upside to that: if you have a problem, people will help you.

On my list is a project that's only solvable with the help of others. It's a complicated task involving people, a camera and a meeting room. I come armed with none of the above and can't quite believe it when the co-working crew sorts me out.

I leave feeling I've just had an experience that mirrors not simply the environment of working with others, but of helpful, supportive colleagues (minus a boss getting in my way). What could be better than that?

Sue White is a freelance writer interested in productivity, working sustainably and getting out of her home office occasionally. Follow her on Twitter @suewhitewriter.