

NetworkWorldFusion

When you can't work from home, Part 4 Intelligent Office offers a fresh take on a stale model.

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Telework Beat

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Readers know my interest in third places to work (office, home, x) stems from my failure to master work/life balance. Isn't the idea to offer a more nurturing home life, to be a better parent? During the week, I don't start making dinner until one of my boys comes looking for dinner. And even then, West Coast vendors often catch me cooking, full of apologies for forgetting I'm back east. But do I let the phone ring? Do I tell them, hey, this can wait until tomorrow? No. I assure them by saying, no, it's fine, I can stir with one hand. Then I burn something.

Weekends are no better. The boys, relieved not to have to catch the 7 a.m. school bus, entrench, full of home and hearth. They're like, "Hey, Mom, let's hang out." But I'm like, "Hey, are you crazy? I have to get out of here. Wanna come?" They're like, "No." So I'm like, "Well, then I'll see you Sunday night. Got my cell - stew in the crock pot."

Another company providing third places to work is Intelligent Office, out of Boulder, Colo. Launched in 1995, the firm offers 5,000-square-foot facilities, mainly for drop-in work. Services include a business address, mailbox, dedicated phone number, calling and forwarding features, Internet access, (Wi-Fi to come), private offices and conference rooms. The company will provide customers dedicated space like HQ and Regus, even though "that's the no-profit, dead zone of the industry," company spokesperson Greg Brooks says.

Intelligent Office differs from the incumbents in lots of other ways, too. For one, you can have your calls answered by a "live-answer" executive assistant, who will forward them anywhere in the world (so you can work in your pajamas, blah, blah.) But this assistant can also handle a range of support tasks, everything from faxing and mailing to complex call center tasks such as order taking and light customer service.

Rather than contract for a set number of hours at a particular desk in a particular facility, you sign up for membership in Intelligent Office network. This means you can use any of the facilities — or all of them — whenever you like. But membership also means you can designate any of these offices as a business address, or presence. Say you're a music producer living in L.A. You sign up with Intelligent Office, and instantly you have offices in New York, Chicago, Atlanta,

etc. You print up your business cards and all your calls are forwarded accordingly. A client calls your New York "office" and the receptionist at your "main office" answers, "Yes, this is the New York office." You can instruct her to handle the call any way you want; put it through, say you're not there and take a message, kick it into voicemail, say you're traveling today, etc.

Pricing is affordable, based on what services you need. For \$50 per month, you get the address, mailbox, 24/7 access to all buildings and unlimited outbound calling. For \$75 per month, you get a dedicated phone number and electronic answering. For \$250, you get full business-hours support from an executive assistant. The company boasts that the full suite of services costs only \$1 an hour.

Of course, as it scales, the model becomes evermore attractive. Four years ago, the company launched a franchise operation. Today there are 24 offices, with eight to open within six months. The company will open a new office each month for the next year and a half; franchisees are buying "territories" where they plan to open multiple offices. In the D.C. area, there are three offices; someone's looking to put 10 in the L.A. area, another wants to put three in the Redbank, N.J. area, Brooks says.

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