

# Coffee on tap as workspace-cafes conquer Montreal

Sitting on sofas with laptops balanced awkwardly on their knees as they sip from bottomless cups of tea and coffee, customers have turned an off-the-beaten-path cafe in Montreal into their personal workspace. And the owners couldn't be happier.

"Here, you are at home," said Anti Caf  manager David Chevrier, talking up the new breed of coffee shop that charges customers by the hour, not by the cup, and has proven hugely popular with students, entrepreneurs and the self-employed.

Chevrier points to a box of slippers at the door that patrons can borrow. More than 100 customers pack the downtown Montreal workspace-caf , nibbling on free cookies as they type away or studiously flip through documents—some in groups, some by themselves.

## Homey space

One of them brought lunch from home and gets up to warm it in the shop's microwave. Another appears to feel comfortable enough to take a short nap. They will pay for the number of hours spent at the caf  when they are ready to leave, rather than for the food and drink they've consumed.

The space is homey. Its walls are decorated with paintings and drawings by local artists. An eclectic collection of old furniture, including a threadbare couch, give it the feel of a college dorm room. "The owners, Philip and Victor, imported the concept from Russia," Chevrier told AFP. A hip Russian chain called Ziferblat pioneered the concept of charging by the minute in its cafes—which it calls "tree houses for adults" — with a branch also open in London.

The idea was to build on the spread and huge success of coffee shops to create a multi-purpose space away from home for use as an office, or a student reading room, or whatever the customer requires, at a relatively affordable rate—compared to an office lease, for example.

Across town in a bustling high-tech neighborhood where a number of video game makers have offices, the Gab caf  also offers entrepreneurs a table, Internet access and the use of a printer, touts co-owner Gabriel Dancause. Gourmet coffee and snacks, however, cost extra here.

## The new office

It costs an average of two to three dollars (Canadian) per hour to use these facilities. Some

offer monthly rates of up to Can\$270, which is similar to commercial rates for a cubicle in a shared office, but without a lease obligation.

Filling a niche between traditional coffee shop hangout (where owners try to discourage long stays in order to boost turnover and profits) and shared offices (which typically require a longer term commitment), the workspace-caf  allows flexibility and convenience, says Frederic Moreau, an entrepreneur and Gab customer. "I pay for two or three hours, I don't pay for a six-month lease on an office that will sit empty most of the time," he explains.

At Gab, there's also the benefit of mingling with other entrepreneurs who might share some of their own business acumen, and potential customers, says Matthieu Vasseux, a French designer who recently moved to Montreal.

Around the main table at Gab, ideas fuse. Two young designers are working on the launch of their first clothing line. Next to them, an artist scratches a notepad with his pencil, and a business networking group rubs shoulders and shares new ideas. The emergence of work cafes coincides with a jump in the number of Canadians who are now self-employed — 15 percent according to the latest government jobs figures.

While the number of private or public sector employees remained stagnant over the past year, the number of self-employed rose 3.4 percent or by about 90,000 people, said Statistics Canada. "It's a trend that started in the late 90s," said Sid Ahmed Soussi, a sociologist at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM). "Most companies outsourced a lot of the work they used to do themselves in-house to smaller outside firms," he explained.

Meanwhile, traditional coffee shops—their turnover stymied by a growing number of people who would buy a single latte and linger all day long, taking up space—have started thwarting freeloaders. "Some people would come in just for the free Internet, so we unplugged the wifi last year," said Tobin Ngo, manager of one such Art's Caf . Yet another reason for the rise of its new-style rivals. — AFP



A new kind of coffee shop is trending in Montreal: they charge customers by the hour for hanging out rather than by the cup, which has proven to be very popular with students, entrepreneurs and the self-employed. — AFP photos