



Out-of-office workers: Noah Lichenstein, left, Si Katara, Amanda Oudin, Mikayla Connell and Lilly Ghahremani do business at The Grove in San Francisco.

By Fred Mertz for USA TODAY

Working out of a 'third place'

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CAFE ETIQUETTE

A teleworker "touchdown" spot is any place with wireless access that isn't a home or office. Most folks, however, gravitate toward local or chain eateries, which provide both real and social nourishment. As with any public setting, rules do apply, even if they are largely unspoken:

- **Tip big and eat often.** Think of those hourly lattes or scones as rent for your table, payment of which is critical for the survival of any business welcoming busy squatters.
- **Take it outside.** Keep cellphones and PDAs on vibrate, and when they do buzz, head straight for the door.
- **Don't be a hog.** It's fine to keep your things piled on a table when you step out for a breath of fresh air, but not if you plan to be away a while.
- **Careful who you trust.** Because thieves and hackers work fast, take important hardware and documents with you for anything but a quick run to the sugar-and-napkin station.
- **Keep your eyes to yourself.** Resist the temptation to sneak a look at neighboring laptops with this crowd, it's considered as egregious as stealing company secrets.
- **Cords get right of way.** All electrical outlets are fair game, so expect to accommodate the odd power chord as it snakes past your dominion.
- **Look for the high sign.** Even though mere inches can separate you from a fellow teleworker, realize that only when both parties issue a mutual greeting is it OK to invade those

By Marco R. della Cava, USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — The fall morning is mercifully fog-free, which puts a spring in the step of Mordy Karsch as he rolls into work. In short order, he fires up the computer, turns on his cellphone and orders breakfast.

Though he has toiled on these premises for two years, he doesn't know anyone here well except for Angel Pinto, who brings him his hot coffee. That's because Karsch, 34, works out of The Grove, a bohemian eatery in this city's hip Marina district that caters to a growing army of office-less employees.

"Working from a place like this is less stressful than being in an office, and I find I get a lot more done," says Karsch, general manager of Spanish Sales Force, a Spanish-language marketing consultancy. "If you can make this work for you, you'll love it."

Call The Grove the office of the future, except the future is here.

An estimated 30 million Americans, or roughly one-fifth of the nation's workforce, are part of the so-called Kinko's generation, employees who spend significant hours each month working outside of a traditional office.

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This rootless army is growing 10% annually, according to Gartner Dataquest research. The reason? Corporations are increasingly supportive of teleworking for reasons that range from saving money on office space to needing a backup in the event of a natural disaster or terror attack.

"With technology what it is, it's far easier to bring the work to the people than the people to the work," says Jim Ware of the Future of Work, a Bay Area enterprise that helps large companies such as Boeing



Enlarge By Fred Mertz for USA TODAY

Keith Thesing, left, and Jeff Stecyk, of Virginia-based software company Managed Objects, revel in their freedom. "There are no office politics to deal with. It's just all about the work," Thesing says.

LOOKING FOR A HOTSPOT?

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old-fashioned school desk.

But the real lure are stiff wooden benches, behind which are tucked dozens of precious outlets.

"This is coveted real estate," says Justin Dock, 34, who is, in fact, a real estate consultant. He's here closing a deal with client Howard Epstein, 48. Dock is a regular at The Grove. It's his antidote to the "claustrophobic feeling I can get when I work from home."

He says waiters here don't hover. Instead, "there's an understanding that for every hour or so you're here, you'll buy something."

That arrangement works just fine for Keir Beadling, 38, who, when he isn't snacking, keeps the iced teas and coffees coming. As head of a company that markets Mavericks, an area big-wave surfing competition, Beadling has an office nearby. It's just that he finds he can't get any work done there.

"Here, I get the stimulation of being with others who are working, but not the distraction," he says.

That's because teleworkers tend to be exceedingly possessive of their space. Mariette Frey, 29, a regional sales representative for computer hardware and software reseller CDW, says she typically "will tell the people around me that I'll be meeting with someone and apologize in advance so we don't have to move" midmeeting.

For Frey, the odd headache — parking tickets when she forgets to feed the meter or nosy neighbors who appear to be listening in on her calls — are outweighed by the benefits of the cafe office.

"I can be here, finish a document and e-mail it to a nearby Kinko's, then pick it up on the way to the next meeting," she says. "Sitting in this spot, I have everything I need."

Ron Shaich adores the Mariette Freys of the world. They've fueled the growth of Panera Bread to 1,000 locations that court the office-less worker with living room-style seating, free Wi-Fi and Mediterranean-style food.

"We now live in a society where cubicles are considered the corporate equivalent of a tenement," says CEO Shaich. "What's most efficient for business and employee alike is a measure of flexibility."

But some question the permanence of such work. "It remains to be seen if this is a cultural breakthrough or a generational artifact," says Lee Rainie of the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

"The obstacles remain those bosses who insist on face time and bean counters who equate being outside the office with wasted time," he says. But the reality is "most businesses run on 24-hour work cycles that follow the sun around the globe. That means it's not where you are that matters, but what you're doing."

anticipate workplace trends.

Ware says working out of a "third place" — neither home nor office, it's anything from Starbucks to the local library — does raise "a host of human resources issues related to keeping track of people you don't see much."

But in the end, "employers are realizing that it's about the work, not about the hours in an office."

You've surely seen this crowd while popping in for that morning macchiato. They claim prime tabletops and battle for electrical outlets, all with the zombie-like gaze of people who physically are there but mentally are engaged with phantoms at the other end of a wireless signal.

Just who *are* these people, and what are they so tuned into? Some e-mail new clients, others process incoming orders. A few surf the Web. Occasionally, there's a game of Solitaire. All in all, a wild array of mostly 40-and-under folks working in an impressive range of fields.

The Grove is open from 7 a.m.-11 p.m., but the teleworker crowd typically logs bankers' hours.

As work environments go, this place resembles a diner that has crashed into a flea market. Its wide wooden-plank floors look ripped from a working barn. The walls sprout antique sleds, oars and fishing nets. The furniture ranges from a bolted-down ski-lift chair to an

Even the federal government is pushing hard to see that one-quarter of its mammoth workforce has the option to occasionally telework.

"Government agencies usually aren't early adopters, but they are very pro this idea," says Stephen O'Keeffe, executive director of the Telework Exchange, a public/private partnership that studies this phenomenon. "In Washington, people spend more time commuting than on vacation."

The unspoken teleworker/waiter code is that you give up your table if the place starts hopping.

But it's 3 p.m., and the lunch crowd has long since left The Grove. Now it's caffeine-fueled crunch time. Nearly 20 laptops are whirring away in various parts of the cafe, both indoors and out. For all this energy, you can hear an espresso spoon drop. Silent focus radiates off the faces of the cultural rainbow assembled here.

Facing each other with open laptops like two guys playing Battleship, Jeff Stecyk, 35, and Keith Thesing, 40, confer over a presentation. As a West Coast sales duo for Virginia-based software company Managed Objects, the pair revel in their freedom.

"Between Wi-Fi, a conference call on our cellphones and two beers that no one knows about, we just go out and get the job done," Thesing says with a smile. "There are no office politics to deal with. It's just all about the work."

As it is for the studious type sitting across the way. Akiba Lerner, 35, is the son of *Tikkun* magazine editor Rabbi Michael Lerner and a Stanford doctoral candidate working on his dissertation on religious philosophy. Although there's an Internet cafe close to his house, he makes the 20-minute trek here for "the good lighting, the right chair and the vibe of the people."

Like most of the intense folks here, Lerner tends to soak up that vibe, yet infrequently makes the leap to talk to tablemates.

An exception is Noah Lichtenstein, 23, founder of MasterCPR.com, which provides one-stop shopping for corporate first aid and disaster-planning needs.

Lichtenstein is quick to make new friends at The Grove and likens the atmosphere to that of "a cool little alcove in the Stanford library where my friends and I would hang out and study."

While his growing company now has offices, he still prefers to return here, the place where his brainchild took wing. "We'd joke that The Grove was our international headquarters," says Lichtenstein. "What I love is that you can dial into the white noise here and focus on work, or pull your head up and people-watch. Right, Si?"

A chair away, Si Katara, 28, is lost in a haze of data-entry and headphone-delivered tunes. Only a hand waved in front of his face brings him back to the real world.

"It's an energy issue," says Katara, founder of Pavia Systems, a company that provides online training programs. He has a home office but prefers to work here exclusively. "At home, I'm isolated. This, it's sort of a surrogate coworker environment."

Not to mention a gold mine: Two Grove customers became backers.

And sometimes, you get even more. Like a phone number.

Mordy Karsch usually doesn't stop his stare-a-thon with his computer to marvel at the sights. But today he can't help but talk to Nicole Chetaud, 33, a designer for California Closets who comes to The Grove regularly to draw up dream storage for strangers.

Karsch admits he's often tongue-tied in clubs. But here, "there's a commonality that makes chatting easy." Chetaud agrees. They swap business cards and smiles.

"I love this place," says Chetaud, looking out at the eclectic restaurant and its workaholic regulars. "I love everything about it.

"Except for the \$5 orange juices."

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