

Livingston businesses explore different office spaces as needs change amid pandemic, remote working trend

[Jennifer Timar](#) Livingston Daily

CJ Chemicals went remote during the pandemic. Collaborative work moved completely online.

As they transition back to some in-person work, company co-founder Josh Lee said their workplace needs are changing.

Employees are using a new, small office in Howell. For the most part, they still work remotely.

"We get together here once a week to revitalize each other and just sit and work with each other for a day," Lee said.

Their workspace features one private office, one conference room and an entry way.

"We came to find out toward late last year Zoom wasn't cutting it. The team wasn't able to solidify itself enough," Lee said. "When people work remotely and you separate people, companies found out they are actually more productive, but there are ancillary problems with separation.

"The trend I'm seeing, a lot of companies are extremely scared of liability and aren't forcing people to come back," he said. "Most are allowing people to come back if they want. I think that will persist into the future."

Demand for smaller spaces

Livingston County real estate broker Geof Greeneisen said there is increased demand for smaller office spaces in the county.

"We're seeing multiple offers on existing office spaces," Greeneisen said.

"Businesses found out we can operate and run our businesses remotely, so we have options where we live and work."

He said some companies are opting for a couple hundred square feet with a couple offices and a shared conference room space.

"For some companies, they are taking a hub and spokes approach to office space. Instead of 50,000 square feet in Southfield, they might have 5,000 square feet in smaller markets, like Livingston County.

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"I think COVID might have put this under more of a magnifying glass," Greeneisen said. "They are drawn to little town hubs, like Brighton, Howell and Fowlerville, because people like what small towns have to offer and then they can live in the community and have office space nearby. I continue to see that as a trend. COVID exacerbated it."

Co-working spaces offer an alternative

Courtney Tarara said there has been an increase in people looking for office space at Frontal Lobe, a co-working space in Howell.

"Our waitlist for offices is ridiculous because there has been a shift," Tarara said.

"A lot of businesses are selling their buildings or getting out of their leases, and people are interested because they want to get out of their house. Everyone loved the idea of working from home in the beginning, but then they get squirrely. They want to get out of their homes and have a separate place."

A co-working space became a new base of operations for longtime Brighton florist Tracey Flanigan of Art in Bloom.

Flanigan operated Art in Bloom out of a brick-and-mortar store on Main Street for about 10 years.

After the pandemic hit, she stayed open for curbside pickup and delivery. Within a few months, she had discovered that she did not really need walk-in traffic. Most of her orders were made over the phone. She is booked through part of next year for wedding flowers, as couples reschedule.

"I closed the store in July and converted a three-car garage at my home into a floral studio," Flanigan said.

She also became a member at Grit & Lavender, where she sees clients who prefer to meet in person. She also uses the co-working space for pickups and drop-offs.

"I still needed a place where people could come. It gave me a street address still in Brighton," she said.

"Most of my orders are on the phone anyway, about 80%. The walk-in traffic was fun, but they were lookies, mostly. It was a community thing to have that storefront. I now see that I can have a quality of life, work less hours. I can work in the yard. I'm growing flowers here and finding time for my own artwork."

Grit & Lavender owner Natalie Miller said she has seen an uptick in inquiries.

"I'm seeing more small businesses and entrepreneurs. I'm also seeing more conference room rentals so they can bring the team together," Miller said.

She said she is also getting more inquiries from corporations who need a space on a temporary basis.

"This past week, I'm getting more corporate type requests. For example, they need a space for the next 30 days to train new hires or they are looking for a space for the next 30-90 days to host their meetings."

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