

Co-working hubs thriving as a mall community

- **This** article by the Malaysia Shopping Malls Association is on how the growth of co-working is having a positive impact on shopping malls

Several factors are at work in reshaping today's office and mall environment. These have given birth to co-working arrangements, especially in prime locations in the cities and at shopping malls with emphasis on collaboration and innovation.

This development can be attributed partly to the advances in technology and the increasing demand among the younger generation for a more flexible working culture.

Additionally, some mall operators choose to optimise the use of their retail space by offering service-driven businesses like mobile working arrangements.

This has given rise to hubs like Common Ground, Worq and Co-labs Coworking which are operating in malls around the Klang Valley. Most of them have earned industry accolades for their services in the last two years, proving to be relatively successful.

Worq at Glo Damansara was not only voted the best co-working space at the Malaysia Rice Bowl Startup Awards 2017 but its facilities also had the honour of hosting the Prince of Wales during his visit to Malaysia in November 2017.

The following year it won the Coworker Members' Choice Awards 2018 for Kuala Lumpur, says Stephanie Ping, Worq's co-founder.

June Lim, the Malaysian country head for ARA Asset Management Ltd at CITTA Mall, notes that the concept of co-working spaces is not new, having been around for at least a decade.

ARA is a premier global integrated real assets fund manager with a presence in 62 cities across 20 countries.

"It is only recently that we are witnessing a boom in space providers in Malaysia, in direct response to the rise in start-ups and independent freelancers who yearn to work in an environment that does not seem restrictive to them," she says.

"We realised that most of them are part of our captive pool of shoppers. It makes sense therefore to transform a section of CITTA Mall, which is managed by us, into Common Ground, a space where our shoppers can fully integrate and assimilate their work and lifestyles.

"A big advantage of being in a mall is the convenience such as



Co-labs Coworking offers flexi-fixed desks at Utopolis Marketplace

ample parking, accessibility, plentiful amenities and abundance of food choices.

"Over the past year, we have welcomed a handful of dining tenants that operate late, beyond regular hours, especially nearing the weekends, and this is much appreciated by our Common Ground members who work flexi hours and late into the night.

"We also have more parking spaces than a typical office or shop lot," quips Lim.

Easily accessible

Another plus point of co-working hubs housed in malls is that they are usually in easily accessible locations either by car or public transportation.

CITTA Mall in Petaling Jaya is near a light rail transit station while Worq at Glo Damansara at Taman Tun Dr Ismail in KL can be accessed via a mass rapid transit station.

Paramount Property Development Sdn Bhd CEO Benjamin Teo points out that a major difference in co-working hubs housed in malls is the availability of a vast number of food and beverage (F&B) choices and other conveniences such as a supermarket for easy grocery shopping to various types of stores to help meet the lifestyle needs of a co-working community.

Lim and Ping could not agree

more with him on the ready access to a variety of eateries, shopping, grooming and recreational activities that malls offer.

Lim says, "At CITTA Mall, we have a plethora of eateries to suit every palate and budget, and amenities ranging from pharmacy, Do It Yourself shops to gymnasium and services such as dry cleaning.

"Our co-working space members can do their groceries after work when it is less crowded. This helps our Common Ground members to manage their time and enjoy more leisure time during the weekends."

Teo, also the Co-labs Coworking director who operates co-working spaces at two malls - Utopolis Marketplace in Shah Alam and The Starling in Damansara Uptown - describes the latter as a "matured business address" where its busy members can access amenities such as banks, postal services, grocery outlets, pharmacies and clinics in between business hours without the hassle to commute.

He says, "Being located in a mall also ensures abundant parking space and opportunities to partner with mall tenants to add value to our membership packages.

"Our members from both co-working spaces enjoy perks and special promotions from tenants in the mall and the vicinity. It is all

about thriving together as a community.

"We have partnered with Chi Fitness to offer free fitness memberships to our members besides hosting regular movie nights at MBO Cinemas. We even offer discounts at many of the 400+ eateries in The Starling and Damansara Uptown."

As for Co-labs Coworking at Utopolis, Teo remarks, "We have an upperhand as there is no co-working space operating in a mall in this area. The nearest competitor housed in a mall is more than 10 km away.

"Furthermore, we have created an ecosystem of first-class business amenities such as meeting rooms, business-class printers, breakout spaces, nap pods, nursing rooms, a photo studio and even a recreational room for our members to let off some steam."

Distinguishing features

On what distinguishes one co-working hub from another, Lim replies, "One of our unique selling points at our 22,000 sq ft Common Ground is that we have a partner - a child care centre. This appeals to working mothers or families with young children."

In the case of the 13,045 sq ft Worq at Glo Damansara, which opened in November 2016, Ping describes it as a "hyper localised community space," which can be likened to a rukun tetangga.

"Hence, the people in our space and the wider community always offer help when needed and know each other well.

"This community space, with all its interactions, events and gatherings, makes it an ideal hub for happenings and collaborations," she says.

"Worq makes possibilities happen for the community, which in turn helps our members become more successful. In short, we drive productivity, connectivity and the community."

Ping adds, "Glo Damansara also offers cheaper parking rates compared to many other malls in

the vicinity. Our amenities include Pos Malaysia, a grooming parlour and even a daycare centre

"More importantly, we help activate the local community by engaging them. It makes the mall more vibrant with Worq at Glo Damansara serving more like a local community centre."

Ping continues, "We organise events, talks and seminars that revolve around the community, including tech meet ups such as Hackathon in the likes of Amazon and Google.

"We host workshops benefiting entrepreneurs, businesses, SMEs and non-governmental organisations and have also indirectly helped other vendors in the mall like the dental clinics and fitness centres located on the same floor, where some of our customers have become their customers.

"Worq works together with the landlord to bring footfall to the mall."

To date, Glo Damansara has attracted Jaya Grocer, Fashion Valet, Lessohomes, NEM Block Chain Foundation and other tenants.

"Worq has always been the tenant that the mall showcases as an activity attraction. We are happy to work together with them to bring the community into their space." Ping announces.

She is optimistic that the trend of having co-working hubs in malls would pick up as more people see the convenience and the unique selling proposition that a mall has to offer compared to a shophouse or an office block.

As for the 4,000 sq ft Utopolis' Co-labs Coworking, which opened in May 2017, Teo says, "Our DNA of sustainability - from the furniture we use like the 200-year-old chengal wood table to our mentorship programme - are all part of the unique offerings of our co-working space.

"Currently, we enjoy 60% occupancy. Our tenants include Shakma Production, HIWIN and Fundaztic."

Meanwhile, its occupancy at The Starling's Co-Labs has reached 95% as of March 2019, four months after its opening in November 2018.

"We offer workspace solutions for the entire value chain of business from freelancers to startups and even corporates.

"Our anchor tenant is a world-renowned advertising firm while the SMEs are from wide-ranging industries such as fintech, public relations and technology. Production houses, property agents and venture builders are also our members."

Lim believes that as malls continue to transform and adapt, it is not surprising to see other malls following suit in opening up more such co-working spaces.

"Having Common Ground at CITTA Mall is like providing an additional service that is relevant to our shoppers, thus securing its success and hopefully its longevity," she says.

"Currently, our occupancy at Common Ground is 87%. There are certainly opportunities for growth.

"Like any other tenant, an enterprise is only successful if it remains relevant to the customers it serves." FocusM



Common Ground occupies a section at CITTA Mall