

# Coworking cafes help working moms <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The notion of coworking space isn't new. Cropping up all over North American cities and urban centers, coworking cafes aim to provide a quiet, productive place to work, often with a heavy dose of caffeine. The latest iterations now offer an additional bonus — on-site daycare. These aren't only gaining in popularity, they might just be the solution for which working mothers have been searching.

Parentology spoke with two owners of these specialized coworking cafes: Donna-Rae Crooks, founder and CEO of Brain Snacks in Regina, Saskatchewan, and Amanda Munday, CEO and founder of The Workaround in Toronto Ontario. We discussed their business models, the need for working spaces that focus on women, and the simultaneous, yet conflicting, challenges of working and parenting. According to these savvy entrepreneurs, necessity is truly the mother of invention.

### Gender Gaps in the Workforce

Crooks stands firm on the crowd she caters to. "Our space is actually for men and women. It takes both men and women to work toward a future that includes everybody."

She emphasizes, "That being said, we're a women-led business designed to close the gender gap. We're not apologetic if our branding and decor are designed for women."

Brain Snacks was born out of equal parts frustration at the ever-increasing gender gap and Crooks own experiences as a working mom on maternity leave. When visualizing her business, Crooks said she wanted to "support women who were trying to live a more integrated life. Brain Snacks Co. was the result of that ideation."

"The gender gap affects all women, and it's not only about the difference in wages," Crooks says. "It's also about the gap that exists in opportunities, scope of influence, access to leaders and corporate sponsorship, to name a few."

When she took her first maternity leave, Crooks realized the first year of motherhood is daunting and polarizing. "Should I stay at home with my newborn or engage in work outside of the home?" she remembers. "There were financial and familial consequences for these choices that didn't work in my favor. I couldn't find a way to be at home, involved in work and generating an income while on maternity leave."

Munday echoes this frustration. After each of her two maternity leaves, she became aware of certain biases toward her as a working mother. "I noticed a conscious and unconscious bias against parents that work from home, or have to rework their schedules due to doctor's appointments, calls from the school, or parenting-related absences," Munday, who had a lucrative job in the tech sector, says. "People were accommodating to a point, but I definitely met with resistance."

Attempts to reconcile managing family and work life continue to push larger numbers of women out of the workforce. According to Statistics Canada, a 2018 study found that 15% of women left their jobs and remain out of the labor force due to personal or family reasons. Comparatively, only 3% of men left their jobs for the same reason.

### Missed Opportunities

The second challenge Munday faced was finding consistent, affordable daycare in Toronto. "I knew I'd be spending a huge chunk of my salary paying for childcare," Munday says. Indeed, the average annual daycare costs in Ontario stand at about \$21,000. "And yet I couldn't ignore the gender bias: Why is my earning potential the one that has to be harmed if I'm stepping out of the workforce to raise my kids?"

Crooks says there's no shortage of disadvantages when women leave the workplace. "Women are hired based on their past performance, rather than their potential," she says. "They're less frequently given opportunities to enter management."

Crooks continues, "These key career steps are often happening at a time when a woman may be starting a family. The cognitive biases that lead to women being excluded in the workplace are compounded by their time away on maternity leave, resulting in lost wages, lost earning potential and missed opportunities."

Managing a family and career prospects can be even bleaker if you're a member of an underserved community. "I worked in a sector that has a lot of privileges, and I started to wonder 'What happens when you're a visible minority, or a parent with fewer options and greater obstacles?'" Munday, says.

The boiling point came when Munday appealed to her former employer. "I never planned to quit my job," she says. "I tried to work with them and build a business case: I suggested working from home, adjusting my schedule to accommodate pick-up and drop-off daycare hours, etc. I would be more loyal, more productive and I'd work harder as a result." The response? "It wasn't received well."

Crooks concurs. "Although many households are two-income, women continue to carry the majority of the workload in household chores and caring for children. This added burden reduces the capacity for women to pursue stretch assignments and career opportunities in the workplace."

Emma Braham, senior economist at the Labor Market Information Council in Ottawa, Ontario, says women's participation in the labor force stands at about 8% lower than men. "If we were able to raise female participation to that of men, we could add over 1.3 million people to Canada's labour force," Braham says.

"We know companies do better with diversity and more women in leadership," Crooks says. Yet it remains difficult, if not impossible, for employers to reconcile the notion of flexible work policies.

Munday says detractors of companies that support their parent staff are creating problems where none need exist. "A common refrain is 'if you give parents extra time off, you'll need to give it to everyone.'" Her solution: "So give it to everyone!"

"First off, giving everyone a work from home day or an additional sick day is way cheaper than staff socials and beer nights," Munday says. "Secondly, when you support your staff, everyone wins. They'll work harder, there's less transition, less turnover, more institutional knowledge... the list goes on."

The assumption that people will leave because that's the future of work doesn't hold weight and lacks evidence. Statistically, staff leave because work is precarious, "not because 'that's just the future of work'," Munday says. "Employees go where the higher salaries and better benefits are."

### The Response So Far

When asked what surprised her most about the reaction to her business model, Munday says, "I thought we'd see freelancers and entrepreneurs, but it's actually 50/50 remote workers and freelancers. They're paying out of pocket to be here because working from home is so unproductive."

As for the clientele that comprises Brain Snacks Co., Crooks says they're mostly "Moms who are studying, moms with both toddlers and newborns and who need childcare so they can work. We also have moms who leave their little ones with us while they run errands or go to an appointment."

In rare cases, Munday says her clients' employers pay for the workspace. "Ideally, we'd like them to also pay for daycare, or at least subsidize it for their employees." She laments that her business was meant to be a stop-gap solution. "We're expanding our daycare spots from 10 to 15," Munday says. "From a sales perspective, we're doing well, but originally, I wanted the number of people who need us to decrease; I wanted people to need us less. Unfortunately, that's not the case."

Spaces like The Workaround and Brain Snacks Co are there to support working parents' endeavors. "I wanted to prove that we can share daycare and execute high-quality work," Munday says. "I wanted to demonstrate how productive parents are. They have to do more with less. You can definitely work remotely and do a good job."

Perhaps Crooks sums it up best. "Every time a woman is able to gain a stronghold on her future by incorporating Brain Snacks Co. into her routine, we celebrate. We know exactly how it feels when you're more in control of your day."

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**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

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