

“IndyViews”

Preliminary Findings

A Research Study Conducted in June 2011 by Valerie Wilcox
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Background

Indy Hall, a four year old Philadelphia coworking space has continued to gain significant momentum in membership and involvement. It has also attracted more and more public awareness in various local community segments. In addition, Indy Hall has been receiving international attention from press - Wired Magazine, PC Magazine, NY Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, and more, while other coworking spaces in their own various stages of development look to Indy Hall for Inspiration.

Indy Hall has been doing something right. But what was it? And most importantly, as Indy Hall continues to grow and evolve, how does it not lose sight of what makes it so special?

Mission

Indy Hall sought a better understanding of what their “secret sauce” was, in order to continue to foster a culture and atmosphere that made Indy Hall so unique, especially in its members’ eyes.

The hope is that these insights would help Indy Hall better articulate their collective identity, in order to be more findable. This was especially important for people looking for a kind of working environment that they didn’t know could exist. Secondly, being that a cornerstone of Indy Hall culture is collaboration, Indy Hall wanted to walk its own talk by sharing findings with other coworking spaces across the globe.

Approach

Indy Hall Member & qualitative research expert Valerie Wilcox conducted several 1-on-1 hour long interviews with various Indy Hall members representing a diverse spectrum of ages & genders, each at different stages of membership, and hailing from different industries. Beyond discovery of the perceptions of Indy Hall members about their chosen place to work, the interviews also explored the attitudes, behaviors, values, and cultural backgrounds of members for trends.

Preliminary Findings

Discovering Indy Hall

Many interviewees discovered Indy Hall through other members. These members were highly influential as they were perceived to be both smart and successful. To non-members, being “successful” wasn’t associated with money. To them being “successful” meant doing what they wanted to do. Influencers were not making a lot of money, but that wasn’t the point. They were making enough to allow them to pursue work that was personally rewarding and was important to them. Others learned about Indy Hall through blogs. Some heard of through PANMA or through a MeetUp. Internet search was another frequently used method with people searching “coworking”.

Indy Hall Work Environment

It was important to all interviewees that Indy Hall had a strong work culture. They cited the number one reason for being at Indy Hall was to work and to be able to get their work done (or at least feel like they were getting work done).

Interviewees cited that the structure Indy Hall provided and the sense of being productive was something very important. They felt that’s what was mostly missing when working from home and is what motivated them to want to make a move.

Interviewees frequently said at Indy Hall it didn’t matter if they personally didn’t produce something on any given day – they feed off energy that cool things are happening. It is a shared experience.

Although the main reason for working at Indy Hall is work, a close second is the stimulating social environment. Interviewees said, while it may have not been what they were looking for at the time when they signed up, it quickly came to be an important part of being there and acted as a strong ongoing sub-current.

Many said they loved that Indy Hall was a very trusting place. They could leave their things there and they had an overall sense of safety and well-being. For many of them Indy Hall is a “healthy” place to work i.e. no creepy members, physical atmosphere is light and airy, plants grow on windowsills, healthy food from local vendors, positive attitudes, yoga breaks, recycling etc.

They felt on the whole, that members shared a deep professional respect for each other.

Most Indy Hallers are not early morning people. They prefer to come in closer to 10:00am. They prefer working late into the night as opposed to coming in early in the morning.

All Indy Hall members love the way the kitchen and the accompanying items (cereal boxes, cups, coffee, toaster oven etc) make it feel like a “homey” hangout environment while still retaining a working atmosphere. They also liked the “café”

style set up because it allowed them to spontaneously gather and meet with other members to share ideas when they grabbed a bite to eat or when taking a work break.

“I rediscovered my love for illustration which evolved into a love for the craft of game design. I began collaborating on game design projects with a fellow Indy Haller which led to a partnership and then we started our first company. I believe they call that a winning streak.”

Indy Hall Culture

Across the board, interviewees said Indy Hall is a place where they could explore their dreams and discover what they wanted to do with their lives. Many said things like,

“You can do whatever you want”

“ You can try new things”

Members place a premium on the general openness of fellow Indy Hallers to collaborate with and learn from each other. Sharing information and resources is very important. Some of the things members ask each other about have to do with work-related issues such as contract expertise, health insurance, software suggestions, etc. They value being able to pull each other aside and go out on the balcony to bat ideas around or get advice.

There is a sense that Indy Hall is more than just a place to work. It was a place to stimulate each other and a place of constant change. Many cited they liked the way that Indy Hall was always changing organically and the way that change came from within. They felt Indy Hall was Indy Hall because it was co-created by those who worked there.

Many of the members expressed a kind of pride in their association with Indy Hall and liked to be able to show it by buying jackets or putting the Indy Hall decal on their computers.

A number of members said that they had a strong sense that while they had their own pursuits, they were all in some way pursuing the same thing. They felt that what they found at Indy Hall was a whole new way of working that was validated and acceptable. Indy Hall gave them a kind of credibility because as a whole, Indy Hall and the people from Indy Hall were gaining a reputation of being on the forefront of innovation, creative thinking and doing cool things in the community. To interviewees it was important to them that they be accepted and respected as professionals in their work.

Members also expressed a strong need to work alongside others and that working alone was too lonely and insulating. One member cited an Indy Hall T-shirt that said it best “Because Working Alone Sucks”.

“Never know what’s going to be going on. I enjoy walking in the door and maybe there will be a World Cup soccer tournament, a white-boarding session, or a show and tell”

“Love that there’s a Turtle!”

“Everyone is so genuine here”

“If people just worked here and ignored each other it would be weird.”

“There’s a sense of camaraderie”

Preconceptions of Indy Hall

Although some didn’t really know what to expect, others did have some preconceived notions of what they thought Indy Hall would be like. They expected that Indy Hall would have smart people working there. Some thought that when they walked in they would see a beehive of activity, ideas up on boards, invention in progress etc. They were surprised when people were quietly working or if it was a quiet day and there weren’t a lot of people around. This didn’t discourage them from joining, and soon found that the activity at Indy Hall ebbs and flows every day.

Transitioning to Indy Hall

Some started out at a flexible membership level (Basic or Lite) to try the space out, usually about 4 – 6 months. Once they had a chance to experience Indy Hall life and liked it, they often bumped up to the next level (Lite or Full). For some members, a trial time allowed them to learn from other members and envision how they might be able to leave their jobs to freelance or embark on a start-up.

Full-time members play a big role in encouraging Basic and Lite members to go independent by having done it themselves and showing them how to go about it. For those who wanted to leave the traditional work setting, once they could see that it was possible to quit their jobs they got the courage to do it. They would try going it on their own either by freelancing or starting their own business.

A number of Indy Hallers were already independent but had been working from home. At first they struggled with the value of a coworking space. They enjoyed being able to work in PJs and the ability to just get out of bed and be at work. For them, they had to work on site a few weeks to experience the value of coworking.

Many of the interviewees did not know what to expect when they first started working at Indy Hall. They had to get used to the notion that Indy Hall doesn't tell members how to behave or define a work experience. It took them a few weeks to realize the environment and experience is co-created and they were part of that creation. Some were slightly intimidated by a perceived "techy" atmosphere and the perception that extraordinary smart people worked there. However once they started working and current members were friendly towards them they became comfortable.

Indy Hall Location

Members love where Indy Hall is located. The fact that parking is difficult is not an issue because they prefer to walk, take public transportation or ride bikes. Many Indy Hallers prefer not to own a car if they don't have to. They love being close to coffee shops, cafes, pubs (National Mechanics), delis and art galleries. They like being able to take a break, get take out, meet for beer after working or before returning to work.. None of the members preferred the suburbs and were glad Indy Hall wasn't located there.

A number of members said they had a strong dislike for driving, not as a judgment, but as an experience. They preferred walking as way to connect with and experience their surroundings.

“Great to be able to take a mental break and take a little spin around Old City”

“Like being so close to creative culture like the galleries - can see what other people are doing and creating”

“I love walking to work and experiencing all the places I would ordinarily just drive by if I was in a car”

Growth of Indy Hall

Members who have been with Indy Hall for over two years feel that it has really matured and the move from the previous location on Strawberry Street played a hand. Although they liked Strawberry Street, they felt the new space was more conducive to the momentum. They felt that the new space allowed for more members and more diversity.

While they liked that the old space was “a place for tech nerds”, they preferred that more people with different backgrounds and ages that were getting added to the mix in the new space. Some members wanted to believe that Indy Hall was becoming a kind of think tank and that it was more about being a collective than a just a working space.

Some members suggested that at Indy Hall they were in the company of people who were as smart or probably smarter than themselves. There was a general feeling that Indy Hall’s roots would always be in tech, but that it would branch out to encompass diverse businesses, organizations, and causes.

“People doing and making cool stuff”

“It makes Indy Hall more interesting and allows for a broader range of ideas”

Returning to Indy Hall

Some members have left and returned. No members left because of dissatisfaction, but instead because of life change such as a job offer, relocation growth/success of their business, or temporary work opportunity. Members who left because their enterprise had grown, although they missed Indy Hall, were enjoying the next phase. They did often keep a Basic membership in order to maintain contact and be a part of Indy Hall. Members who left for a traditional working opportunity, were generally miserable and if possible, returned to Indy Hall to work independently again.

Relationships

Relationships are considered the most valuable part of the Indy Hall experience, and makes Indy Hall more than a place to work. While most interviewees didn’t know all the members, the average interviewee said they know roughly a third of members. A number of interviewees said they thought the people who worked at Indy Hall were also looking to enrich and be enriched.

One of the interviewees cited that “a fellow Indy Haller could be “crazy smart”, but would still be curious and interested in you.” Interviewees thought there is no intellectual snobbery at Indy Hall. Many said at Indy Hall they appreciated the sense that everyone had a curiosity, appreciation, and respect for each other.

A number of interviewees expressed that people at Indy Hall are perceived to be generous. Someone who is accomplished will take another member under his or her wing and offer advice or encouragement.

Spirit of Indy Hall

Overall people who are part of Indy Hall consider themselves to be highly independent. Above all else they value the preservation and protection of the independent creative spirit. Some consider themselves to be “mavericks” and strongly identify with songs like “My Way”.

Indy Hallers don't like to be told what to do in terms of what they can personally accomplish in their lives.

Interviewees self-described themselves to be at their core “law abiding” and see the need for a mutually agreed upon codes of conduct. They are willing to follow rules as long as they make sense, are fair and not about control. They see rules as being appropriate when they allow something to be able to function and create an environment of growth.

However all interviewees shared the sentiment that when rules get in the way of something being able to flourish then they need to be changed. Most said that if they don't agree with a rule, instead of breaking it, they would just leave and go where they can do things their way.

Mature Indy Hallers

Members who were 55 and over were starting to address aging concerns. While they still considered themselves to be smart, energetic and professionally vibrant, they were beginning to think about the effects of aging on their minds. For them Indy Hall was an important way to keep their minds exposed to new thoughts, ideas and ways of doing things. It was a way to stay mentally vibrant, energized, and informed so they could continue to make a contribution back to society.

Current Work Status and Work History

All Full-Time interviewee current work status consists of self-employed and freelance, though that is not representative of Indy Hall's entire membership. When they were Basic/Lite members, many of them had part time jobs, or even full time jobs so they would come to Indy Hall in the evenings.

Basic/Lite members tend to be working part time at another work environment and use Indy Hall either to augment their current work experience or have an idea for their own business and are in the process of moving towards being Independent.

Basic members that had recently signed on were really liking the experience and thinking they would move up in membership when it was appropriate.

One interesting aspect of Indy Hall are the members for whom Indy Hall was a launching pad. These were Full-time members who went on to start their own business, however they didn't want to entirely leave Indy Hall. Instead they would move down to Basic Membership so they could still be a part of the Indy Hall experience.

All have at one time or another worked in a traditional work environment. A couple had worked in a corporate structure in the area of communications/PR.

Attitude Toward Work

All interviewees shared a need and a love for work. They had a very strong work ethic and the idea of “not working” was foreign. Virtually all members grew up working in high school. For many, financial resources were tight. They quickly learned that if they wanted something outside of what the family was able to afford they had to work for it. They self-actualized and created their own way.

For all the interviewees, working is a rewarding experience. They get pleasure from being productive and being paid for what they do. They also had a deep need for work that had to be about something they cared about. They struggled with the idea of just working for a paycheck. When it came to projects however, they would take a project they didn't really want to do if it gave them the opportunity to work on something they could get excited about.

The idea of retirement doesn't register. Work is seen as healthy and rewarding.

“I have no intentions of retiring.”

“Work is important. Result of what I do with my talents and time.”

“My mind will turn to mush if I don't work. Keeps my mind active.”

“Not work? Why would I do that?”

“...working allows me to make something that didn't exist before real”

“Working makes me happy. I like feeling productive and that I'm doing something that is somehow adding my value to the world”

*“Working is self discovery.
I want to be able to discover what I am capable of doing”*

Attitudes Towards Traditional Work Environment

However, as much as they love to work, all interviewees who had worked in a traditional setting were glad to be out of it and did not want to go back. They all found the traditional work environment to be stifling and resented that they were being monitored.

All members cited “bureaucracy” as being the number one thing they dislike about the traditional work setting.

Other dislikes were feeling that career growth wasn’t supported and that they weren’t able to push or challenge themselves.

Some interviewees felt that people were treated more professionally and were more respected at Indy Hall than at traditional workplaces. They also found that the traditional/corporate work environment was generally not conducive to creativity.

“Felt I wouldn’t be able to flourish there”

“Have to do things a certain way, dress a certain way”

“Don’t have floating boss over my shoulder monitoring me and keeping track of my hours”

Role of Money

For many Indy Hallers, money is seen as a tool, but does not define who they are. They have an appreciation for money in that they know they need it to survive, pay their bills, and it allows them to do the things they want to do such as fund a new business or project. They want to be financially stable and none had the starving artist mentality.

Across the interviews they wanted to live comfortable and be able save for the future.

However, many interviewees were all careful to point out that money was not the end-all-be-all. It was not a status symbol and living at a comfortable level meant one that was modest, not living to excess.

Many interviewees said they wanted to be able to do something they care about so they will take on work they don’t really like but pays well in order to take on projects that have no budget but have meaning.

Money is seen as “freedom” and plays heavily into the strong desire to be independent.

“If you have money you will be in control of you own life.”

When asked what they would do if they didn’t need to make money common answers were variations of the following.

“I would be a full time artist”

“I would do things for community”

“I would write a book”

“I would travel to interesting places (Morocco, India, Africa etc.)”

“I would keep doing what I’m doing”

Learning and Education

Virtually all interviewees are highly interested in learning or education through classes, workshops, meet-ups, and conferences. Learning to them is a top priority and they love to learn. They frequently said are always learning and feel a need to always be learning, whether it be professional (business related workshops/classes) or personal (cooking/yoga/music) or spiritual (Buddhism).

They are voracious readers – mostly blogs and websites: Smashing Magazine, Politico, Popular Science, BBC, Overheard in Philly, Study Hacks, Open Government, Sepia Mutiny, Net Tuts.

For them, Indy Hall was also a place to learn.

“It’s where I learned about Vizthink”

“I learned how to write a contract”

“I’m always having interesting conversations like today we were talking about the new quantum theory that just came out this morning”

Community/Organization Involvement

Interestingly enough, many of the interviewees were not very involved in community/organizations in high school or college. They said they were “nerds” “geeks” “bookish” and pretty much kept to themselves.

A number of them said Indy Hall was like a spark that ignited interest in getting involved with other groups such as Philadelphia Tech and Arts organizations. According to one member “I came to Indy Hall and saw the power of community. I was awestruck by it and I loved it”.

Certain members felt compelled to fill an “Ambassador” role and took it upon themselves to become involved in day-to-day operations, supporting activities, sharing information, encouraging discussion, and creating a presence outside Indy Hall doors through venues such as Meetups, Technically Philly and Open Access Philly.

Other organization involvement includes Little Berlin, DesignPhiladelphia, BarCamp,PhillyCHI, and Young Involved Philadelphia.

Organizations and events of interest to interviewees include: Vox Populi, Space Flux, Space 126, TED, SXSW, and extra extra.

Attitudes Towards Philadelphia

Many thought the value of Philadelphia was in the people, and not the city.

They felt Philadelphia has changed over last 5 years and see a potential for being a center for innovative bubbles in urban living, technology, mobile development art and entertainment. There was a strong sentiment that the people who live here were the engines driving the surge in the creative community, support for the local economy, and the internet/new media environment.

All interviewees expressed an excitement at their perception that Philadelphia is becoming a huge creative capitol, but feel that this environment is being created by the people who live in Philadelphia , and not the people who run Philadelphia i.e. the government or city.

There also is a strong sentiment that Philadelphia does not do a very good job of supporting education. Many of the interviewees thought that sometimes the city got in the way and was too entrenched in the old ways of doing things.