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FINANCE

ToffeeTribe: a community oriented startup supporting remote workers in Nairobi

By **Federica Bressan** May 30, 2021

Freelance workers constitute a growing slice of the labour force. Used to independent and flexible work, they have always been the number one customers of coworking spaces. Up until the pandemic: COVID-19 has revolutionized the work environment by introducing remote working regular employees and other types of workers who used to commute to an office or institution workplace.

Working from home is not an option for everybody. Some like it, some don't – some can't: child chores, remote working spouses may interfere with our productivity. This is where ToffeeTribe comes to the rescue: a new startup based in Nairobi, Kenya, is repurposing fancy restaurants

spaces to accommodate flexible workers who need a quiet place to work and don't mind bottomless coffee and a discount on their meals.

Nginda Nganga and Karambu Mathai are two entrepreneur friends who started ToffeeTribe in January 2020, not long before the first COVID-19 lockdown. The concept of ToffeeTribe is unique on the African continent, and despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic the community has been growing slowly but steadily, and Nganga and Mathai plan to expand to other cities in Kenya. But how does it work?

ToffeeTribe concept

ToffeeTribe is not your usual coworking space. A coworking space is designed to be only that, a coworking space. With ToffeeTribe, any fancy restaurant in town that meets certain criteria can be repurposed to accommodate flexible workers for the day, providing internet connection, menu discounts, and a number of other perks including bottomless coffee and community connectivity. But there is definitely more: ToffeeTribe members can go and work in any location that joined the startup project, allowing for a change of scenery which has proven to have a positive impact on your mental well-being and creativity.

The win-win for both restaurants and workers is that restaurants increase their steady clientele, stay busier on slow days and hours; workers, on the other hand, benefit from a drop-in work space where they can get their work done or connect with fellow ToffeeTribe members.

ToffeeTribe counts four locations in Nairobi, and more are expected to join soon. ToffeeTribe works with restaurants better than coffee shops, because coffee shops do not offer a quiet working environment, which the Tribe members seek. In order to become a member, it is necessary to register on the website (<https://www.toffeetribes.com>) and choose a plan: daily, weekly, or monthly. Via the ToffeeTribe app, members can check available spots in all the locations, and reserve a spot. They just show up at the location. There is a check-in procedure which is instantly taken care of by the staff using a tablet with a QR code that is unique for that location. And voilà, you are set for the day, enjoy the restaurant with your favourite décor, bottomless coffee, and most importantly other Tribe members to network with.



Building a community

It is important to understand that ToffeeTribe is much more than creating workspaces in restaurants, which it may seem at first glance. Besides the careful selection of the locations performed by Nganga and Mathai, which includes high-profile restaurants rather than Starbucks-like cafés, the biggest added value of the Tribe membership is the community. Each ToffeeTribe member is automatically subscribed to a Slack group and a WhatsApp group, where information who's hiring and funding opportunities is always circulated. Nganga and Mathai organize a bi-monthly event called Toffee4Breakfast where members get to meet in one location (rotating), breakfast, and network.

The community includes about 300 members to date, of which 60 to 80 active members (check in one of the locations daily or weekly). Who are the members? Freelance workers from design developers, students, the expat community, and digital nomads.

The startup and COVID

Nganga and Mathai launched ToffeeTribe in January 2020. It wasn't hard to get the first members onboard, thanks to a wise pre-launch campaign on social media and a landing page where people could learn about the new opportunity was coming to them. So, a small community started forming even before the official inauguration of the startup.

Little did Nganga and Mathai know that a few short weeks later the country would shut down because of COVID-19. Many businesses including restaurants had to shut their doors. This may have slowed down the growth of ToffeeTribe, but it didn't kill it because of the most important keyword in the startup name: Tribe, the community. Here is where it is clear that ToffeeTribe is not only a coworking space.

solution, it is a lively community that interacts on Slack and social media, meets online and discusses business regardless of location. This made the ToffeeTribe project resilient to COVID

Of course, as soon as it was possible to meet in person again, restaurants opened up and Toffee members re-took possession of their beloved restaurant shared space.



Boosting the world's economy

To join ToffeeTribe there is no membership fee, you only pay for the desired plan (daily, weekly, monthly) which has a very reasonable pricing. Founders Nganga and Mathai share part of the revenue from the plan payments with the restaurants, which in addition benefit from an increased clientele for the meals. Nganga and Mathai believe in a steady long-term growth: the aim is to establish themselves as the go-to place for anything remote work related. After all, remote and flexible work has been a reality across the world, very common in large metropolises like Los Angeles and Tokyo, and COVID only increased this trend. Remote and flexible work is the future, and that takes nothing away from the importance of connecting with other people and networking. It is not necessary to see the same colleagues at the same workplace anymore.

By supporting the growing flexible and independent workforce, Nganga and Mathai are giving a contribution to boosting the economy of their city, their country, even of their continent – and ultimately of the world, shaping a borderless community-based future.