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It's not all bad: Finding the positives from the pandemic - by Tuni Schartner

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At the onset of COVID-19 with mandated shutdowns in place, my team at Venture Café & District Hall Providence shifted to remote programming to ensure we could continue to serve and connect our community. Now, seven months into the pandemic, while some strategies have remained the same, we're still evolving to meet our community's needs. We, like many organizations, have had to adapt and, in doing so, have discovered that some new ways of doing business will yield lasting benefits well-beyond the pandemic.

Maintaining distance while building community: The sudden shift to remote work brought with it many challenges. Whether it was multiple family members struggling for network bandwidth, not having the necessary resources at our fingertips, or overworking ourselves because the lines between work and home became so blurred, most of us had to overcome a series of hurdles to really get into the work-from-home groove. As the weeks and months passed, however, tech issues became more manageable and our cramped "offices" started to almost feel normal. That said, we're still faced with the reality that there is one obstacle that remains — we miss our coworkers, peers and friends!

A major perk of any office is the ability to collaborate with and bounce ideas off others. Collaborative workspaces exist for this very reason, giving people a chance to engage with others and benefit from fresh ideas that come from engaging in conversations with like-minded individuals. Today, as businesses across the country are re-evaluating their leases and the future of the dedicated office is up in the air, these types of communities are becoming more and more important.

And while District Hall Providence, a not-for-profit space in the epicenter of Rhode Island's Innovation and Design District, does indeed rent meeting and event spaces and provides open workspace for drop-in visitors, more importantly, it offers entrepreneurs and businesses networking and programming opportunities. Early into the pandemic, we realized that in order to continue to best serve our community, we needed to shift our programming to a virtual setting to adapt to the distributed workforce. We also understood, however, that too much screen time would lead to Zoom fatigue. So, in an effort to avoid this, we worked with our sister sites in Boston and Cambridge to

adjust programming times so our members could attend events virtually across multiple locations. This, along with our new ability to record, edit, and post these programs to our YouTube channel and website, allowed for participants to pick and choose a day and time that worked best for their schedule, making it more convenient and accessible for all our audiences.

Leveraging learnings to look ahead: With today's widely distributed workforce, companies are grappling with how best to retain talent, keep employees happy, and maintain company culture. One of the things that have guided us through this new normal is the idea that we can adapt as we continue to build community in the short term to better our business strategy in the long term. District Hall was built on the idea that "Innovation is for Everyone." Our mission is to connect anyone with an idea or a business to the resources they need to grow, either through physical (or virtual) spaces or programming. This has never been more important, especially as many individuals are between jobs or looking for their next opportunity. Harboring that sense of community allows for collaboration across the board.

As we move closer to a post-pandemic recovery, business leaders should think critically about the changes they were forced to make this year and ask themselves if any will benefit their organization in the future. For us, moving to virtual collaboration provided the opportunity to foster a broader community beyond the local regions we operate in — we were no longer constrained to just our local communities. By breaking out of our regional silo and collaborating with peers across the world, it showed us that even as we're physically apart, our global sense of community has emerged stronger than ever.

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