

Coffee shops take a hit in Silicon Valley – Intermediate worksheet

1 Warmer

- a. Look at the pictures of the two meetings. In pairs, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of these types of meetings.



2 Key words and expressions

- a. Write the words or phrases from the box next to the definitions below.

density diminish hub irritate low-key
monopoly nerdy networking plunge start-up

1. a small business that is just beginning _____
2. meeting people to talk about work or interests _____
3. to make someone feel annoyed or impatient _____
4. a negative way to describe people interested in technical or scientific subjects

5. without much activity or reaction _____
6. somewhere that is seen as the centre of a particular activity _____
7. the amount of something in a place compared to its size _____
8. to become less _____
9. if an amount or level does this, it becomes much lower extremely quickly _____
10. complete control over something by one organization or person _____

What the death of coffee shops tells us about Silicon Valley

THE TECH COMMUNITY NEEDS PHYSICAL PLACES TO MEET, PROGRAM, PITCH, MAKE DEALS AND BRAINSTORM

TIM BRADSHAW SEPTEMBER 8 2020

- 1 The Creamery never had particularly good coffee. What it did have was a perfect location at one of the technology industry's most valuable intersections. The ramshackle café was in the start-up friendly SoMa district of San Francisco, across the street from the Caltrain station that ran commuters all the way down to San Jose at the southernmost tip of Silicon Valley.
- 2 That made it a favourite spot for venture capitalists visiting from Sand Hill Road who did not wish to waste precious time going too far into Soma to meet prospective investors. Founded in 2008, the café soon became a San Francisco institution, even as hipper coffee chains, such as Philz, Blue Bottle and Sightglass, expanded across the city.
- 3 The Creamery brought a serendipity to offline social networking that no app has ever matched. But no more: last month, the Creamery closed for good.
- 4 Many hospitality businesses across the world have fallen victim to the pandemic. In the UK, for instance, sandwich chain Pret A Manger is closing 30 branches. But Silicon Valley's coffee shops are more than just caffeine stops — they are venues for programming, pitching, dealmaking and brainstorming.
- 5 That these conversations could be so easily overheard seemed strange to me when I first moved there, and it can be irritating for residents who don't work in tech to be constantly surrounded by a nerdy hubbub. For me at least, over the years, it became a useful form of ambient awareness of the industry's latest obsessions.
- 6 It is especially difficult to watch independent San Francisco outfits such as the Creamery disappear when there is so much money surrounding them. Red Rock Coffee in Mountain View is another Silicon Valley entrepreneur hang-out, as well as playing host to weekly open mic nights and the Knit Wit knitting club.
- 7 The founders of WhatsApp worked from there in the chat app's early years; I bumped into them at the same low-key coffee bar soon after they sold the company to Facebook for \$19bn. In July, Red Rock said it would close if it could not raise \$300,000.
- 8 Mountain View is home to the headquarters of Google, LinkedIn and Silicon Valley's pre-eminent accelerator programme Y Combinator, as well as the innovators of previous decades such as Silicon Graphics and General Magic. Family homes there typically sell for more than \$2m. Yet after a month and a half on GoFundMe, at the time of writing Red Rock was still \$200,000 short of its target.
- 9 If the tech community is letting hubs such as the Creamery and Red Rock die, maybe VCs just want fancier coffee these days. But I fear a deeper problem may be emerging.
- 10 Silicon Valley thrust social media and video conferencing on an unsuspecting world and in the past six months we have never been more grateful. Yet the cradle of the internet has always thrived on physical networking. Nowhere has been able to match the Bay Area's density of talent, capital and ambition.
- 11 Now, the opportunities for serendipity — so vital for nourishing the community — seem to be diminishing, in no small part due to the rapid shift to remote working that the tech industry has embraced: Facebook, Twitter and others have all said they will allow people to work from anywhere after the pandemic recedes.
- 12 Talk of a mass exodus from San Francisco feels overdone. The city's overheated housing market could see rents plunge 25 per cent and still feel expensive. Yet moves towards long-term remote working point to a less romantic future than upping sticks to Lake Tahoe: techies stuck in their tiny apartments, staring at Zoom all day simply to avoid the two-hour commute.

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13 If tech staff do become more widely distributed, that would only reflect where most of the industry's best ideas are coming from these days. Some of the most influential tech companies today are not based in the Valley: TikTok is Chinese, with its US base in Los Angeles. Shopify, the ecommerce platform that inspired several start-up ideas in the latest Y Combinator batch, is in Ottawa, Canada. The most important new internet markets — such as India, Indonesia and Nigeria — are far beyond the horizon of closeted US West Coasters.

14 Silicon Valley's monopoly on ideas has been ebbing away for some time. Without the right physical places to meet unexpected people and exchange new notions, that trickle could become a flood. While Big Tech races to build an interconnected 3D virtual world, it must remember the value of IRL. Losing community hubs such as the Creamery risks undermining what has made the Valley so special for the past 50 years.

FT

Tim Bradshaw, September 8 2020

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Glossary

venture capitalist

someone who invests money in new businesses that may or may not be successful

serendipity

the fact of finding pleasant or useful things by chance

3 Understanding the article

a. In pairs, read what the author mentions about the topics below and identify if the author expresses a fact (F) or an opinion (O). The paragraph numbers have been given to help you.

1. The coffee sold at The Creamery (1) _____
2. Silicon Valley's coffee shops (4) _____
3. Red Rock Coffee (6) _____
4. Family homes in Mountain View (8) _____
5. The Bay Area (10) _____
6. Locations of influential tech companies and new internet markets (13) _____

4 Business language – first and second conditionals

a. Match the sentence halves to make conditional sentences about the text.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. If Red Rock doesn't raise enough money ... | a. there will be fewer opportunities to meet people unexpectedly. |
| 2. If tech workers can't meet in coffee shops ... | b. it will still be expensive. |
| 3. If the tech companies gave money to help Red Rock ... | c. it will have to shut down. |
| 4. Even if rents drop in San Francisco by 25 per cent | d. Silicon Valley would continue to lose its control on tech ideas. |
| 5. If there were no physical places for tech workers to meet people unexpectedly ... | e. it would be able to stay open. |

b. Write conditional sentences about businesses affected by the coronavirus crisis in your area. You could consider the following: customers, staff, the wider community and networking opportunities, the local economy.

5 Business language – verbs relating to ideas and growth

a. Complete the missing letters to make verbs that match the definitions.

1. If a business, organization or activity does this, it grows by including more people, moving into new areas, selling more products, etc.

_____ x _____ a _____ d

2. to try to persuade someone of how good something is

p _____ h _____

3. to give someone the enthusiasm to do or create something

i _____ p _____ r _____

4. to completely accept something such as a new belief, idea, or way of life

e _____ b _____ c _____

5. to give something in return for something they give you

e _____ c _____ g _____

b. Complete the sentences with the correct verbs from activity a in their correct form.

1. She _____ me to want to become a CEO.

2. They met yesterday and _____ ideas about their plans for their departments.

3. The company is planning to _____ into the Asia market.

4. Have you tried _____ your ideas to management?

5. He changed companies and really _____ his new company's philosophy.

c. Use three of the verbs above to write three sentences about your work/company and how you generate ideas.

6 Discussion questions

Do you think Silicon Valley's large tech companies should be responsible for saving the coffee shops that hosted their meetings? Why? Why not?

The author says that Silicon Valley's monopoly on tech ideas has been diminishing. Is this a positive development or a negative one? Share your opinion.

How has the coronavirus pandemic affected your working life? If you had to work from home, what impact did this have on you and your relationship with your work colleagues?

7 Wider business theme – Creative meetings

- a. You are going to work in groups of three or four to hold a meeting. However, this is no ordinary meeting! Your teacher will give you a meeting strategy.

In the meeting, you should discuss:

- ideas for how to make meetings more creative
- your opinions on your meeting strategy

- b. Give a three- to four-minute presentation on your ideas and opinions to the class. Listen to the other groups' presentations and take notes.

- c. Write a short paragraph about creative meetings. Include:

- advantages and disadvantages of different meeting strategies
- your opinion on the meeting strategy that you practised