

Coffee shops take a hit in Silicon Valley – Advanced 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. Find the words and phrases in the article that match the definitions. Use the paragraph numbers to help you.

1. in bad condition and likely to fall down (1) _____
2. people who invest money in new businesses that may or may not be successful (2) _____
3. more modern and fashionable (2) _____
4. the fact of finding pleasant or useful things by chance (3) _____
5. a negative way to describe people interested in technical or scientific subjects (5) _____
6. the noise of a lot of people talking at the same time, especially when angry or excited (5) _____
7. existing or present around you (5) _____
8. a place where someone likes to go often (6) _____
9. without much activity or reaction (7) _____
10. better or more important than anyone or anything else in a particular activity (8) _____
11. somewhere that is seen as the centre of a particular activity (9) _____
12. an occasion when everyone leaves a place at the same time (12) _____

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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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. Customers of The Creamery (2) _____
2. Non-tech customers in The Creamery (5) _____
3. The Creamery's disappearance (6) _____
4. The founders of WhatsApp (7) _____
5. The use of social media and video conferencing in 2020 (10) _____
6. Chance meetings (11) _____
7. Decisions by Facebook and Twitter (11) _____
8. The San Francisco housing market (12) _____

4 Business language – first and second conditionals

a. Write conditional sentences about the article using the information given.

1. Red Rock / not raise / money / have to shut down

2. Tech workers / not meet in real life / fewer opportunities / meet people unexpectedly

3. Tech companies / give money / help Red Rock / able to stay open

4. Rent drop / San Francisco / 25 per cent / still be expensive

5. No physical places / tech workers / meet unexpected people / Silicon Valley / become less important / tech world _____

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

5 Business language – prepositions

- a. Complete the phrase with the correct preposition. Use the definitions to help you.

1. up sticks _____ a place = to leave one place for another
2. thrive _____ doing = to become successful or happy in a particular situation, especially one that other people would not enjoy
3. fall victim _____ something = become a victim of a plan
4. thrust something _____ someone = to force someone to do or accept something
5. ebb _____ = to gradually become smaller or less

- b. Complete the sentences with the correct phrase from activity a. You will need to modify some of the expressions to the correct tense.

1. My uncle _____ credit card fraud last year. He lost thousands of pounds.
2. The popularity of coffee shops in our area is gradually _____.
3. She was not suited to life in the country. She clearly _____ living in a busy city.
4. It's not fair to _____ such major responsibility _____ a junior team member.
5. My parents _____ the Lake District when they retired.

- c. Choose three of the phrases above. Use them to write three sentences about the effect that the coronavirus pandemic has had on business in your local area.

6 Discussion questions

How does the author use the underlined adjectives in the following excerpts to express his opinions? Do you like his choice of language?

'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.'

'... 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.'

Do you think Silicon Valley's large tech companies have a duty to save the coffee shops that hosted their meetings. Why? Why not?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of Silicon Valley losing its monopoly on technological innovation?

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. Get into groups of three or four. You're going to hold a meeting. However, this is no ordinary meeting! Your teacher will give you a meeting scenario.

In the meeting, you should discuss:

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

b. Present your ideas and opinions to the class. Listen to each of the other groups and take notes.

c. Write a short article (200–300 words) about creative meetings. Include:

- advantages and disadvantages of different meeting scenarios
- your opinion on your own experience of a new meeting scenario