

Workspace, WeWork, The White Collar Factory and St. Benedict

Co-working, shared serviced office space, Workspace, WeWork, and The White Collar Factory. What might these have in common with a set of guidelines 1500 years old? asks Peter Wolton

The "Rule of St. Benedict", written in around 530AD, remains astonishingly relevant for all organisations, not just religious ones. It emphasises Work, Community, Hospitality and underpinning all this is Prayer. It, also for those with "ears to hear" has much to say about effective leadership.

The fact that it has stood the test of time and has spawned many books such as the recent "Doing business with Benedict" is testament to a wisdom that can appeal to people of all faiths and none. It has allowed countless generations to understand both enterprise and the Gospel.

The Rule is a manual of instruction with short chapters that underpin the life of the Benedictine monastic order. Today 1400 communities of Benedictine and Cistercian men and women live under this rule plus innumerable lay persons.

The two key attributes to the Rule are flexibility and balance. St. Benedict learnt the hard way. He wanted to be a hermit but such was his draw that people were attracted to him and wanted to live alongside him.

What could be worse for a hermit! So austere did he become, that those around him tried to poison him. After his escape, Benedict became a man of humility, prayer and an appreciation of the need for flexibility. He accepted the call to be a monk and a leader.

In April 2018 I attended a real estate conference organised by Peel Hunt which included visits to co-working properties. How different to the inspections of office blocks on 25 year leases that I used to undertake as a Savills graduate trainee in the late 1970s. And what a buzzy atmosphere: excellent coffee and food, small cellular (monastic?) work stations for the Fintech executives – all of which made me reflect on St Benedict.

The co-working office places great emphasis on Reception with staff trained in the art of welcome. St. Benedict was wise to this too. Chapter 66, "Doorkeeper of the Monastery" sets out the eternal

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skills of a good receptionist. "The person will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find someone to greet them." He continues "As soon as anyone knocks or calls out, the doorkeeper replies: "Thanks be to God" or "Your blessing please." Then with all the gentleness that comes from utter piety, the doorkeeper will provide a prompt answer with the warmth of love."

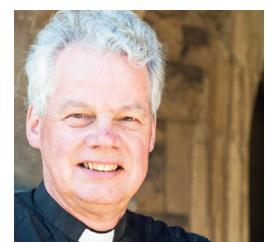
St. Benedict wrote "The monastery should, if possible, be so constructed that within it all necessities are contained and various crafts may be practised." Reflecting this, co-working properties provide a range of services to ease the working day, including concierge facilities, excellent coffee and food, a bar, a gym and in the case of Derwent London's White Collar Factory, a rooftop running track.

Landlords set out to help enterprise flourish and build community in the gathering areas and more formally. Club Workspace offers "like-minded business people (to meet) in an atmosphere designed for ideas to grow into long term successful business models."

St. Benedict believed in the importance of enterprise. "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, all the community should have specified periods of manual labour as well as for prayerful reading."

In addition to flexibility, another hallmark of the

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Rule is not straightjacketing people. Regarding food (Chapter 39), Benedict writes "Two kinds of food are to be provided to allow for personal weakness. In this way, those who may not be able to eat one kind of food may partake of the other." And regarding drink he continues, most famously: "Each of us has a special gift from God, one this and another that" (1 Corinthians 7.7). It is therefore, with some uneasiness, that we specify the amount of food and drink for others. However, with due regard for the infirmities of the sick, we believe that half a bottle of wine a day is sufficient for each. But those to whom God gives strength to abstain must know that they will earn their own reward."

New patterns of working and of leases have become a feature of the office market since the Millennium. The recognition of the need for flexibility of tenure and the growth of a more entrepreneurial culture is, perhaps, a response to the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis. Landlords have learnt that alignment with the needs of tenants is of benefit to both sides.

All of which mirrors one commentator on Benedict: "The Rule not only brings people together, but somehow enables them to stay together." ■

'Doing business with Benedict – Continuum 2002'

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