Smart office rental platform uses Airbnb-style model to target remote working

Tired of working from your kitchen table? Leanne Beesley, CEO at Nooka, tells Maddyness UK why the office rental platform she cofounded could be the answer to more productive and focused remote working.

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Before Nooka, I was the CEO and cofounder of Coworker.com, the largest global platform to find, book and review coworking spaces. I started that with my cofounder in 2015 to solve a problem we were having at the time – figuring out where to work from while travelling in Asia.

Before that, I had a few other entrepreneurial projects, such as selling my own brand of kitchen utensils that I manufactured in China and shipped over to the USA to sell on Amazon, a e-commerce store selling nootropics, and various random experiments. I was also a freelancer doing online marketing and designing and building websites for clients. Prior to that, I was in the digital advertising industry in London and Malaysia for a couple of years. I did my undergrad at the London School of Economics but never really followed the traditional career path that most of my peers did.

## The catalyst to launching Nooka

There's been a ton of innovation in the flexible workspace industry over the years, from giants like WeWork to smaller independent coworking spaces. But despite the shift towards coworking spaces as a popular

option for people working remotely, millions of people were still working from home – even before COVID hit.

We wanted to figure out a way to make this 'work from home' experience better. People shouldn't have to choose between the convenience of working from home and the productive environment of a modern office space, so my cofounders and I wanted to create something that bridges this gap.

Nooka is the world's first network of smart, Wi-Fi connected, fully furnished backyard office spaces. We work on a subscription/membership model rather than requiring people to purchase their Nooka. This makes it much more accessible to people, as the upfront costs are very low.

We also have the Nooka marketplace app, where people can choose to set their Nooka as available to rent by people in their neighbourhood. This allows people to monetise their Nooka when they're not using it themselves, and also provides residential communities with great micro-office spaces in close proximity for short term use as an alternative to working from home.
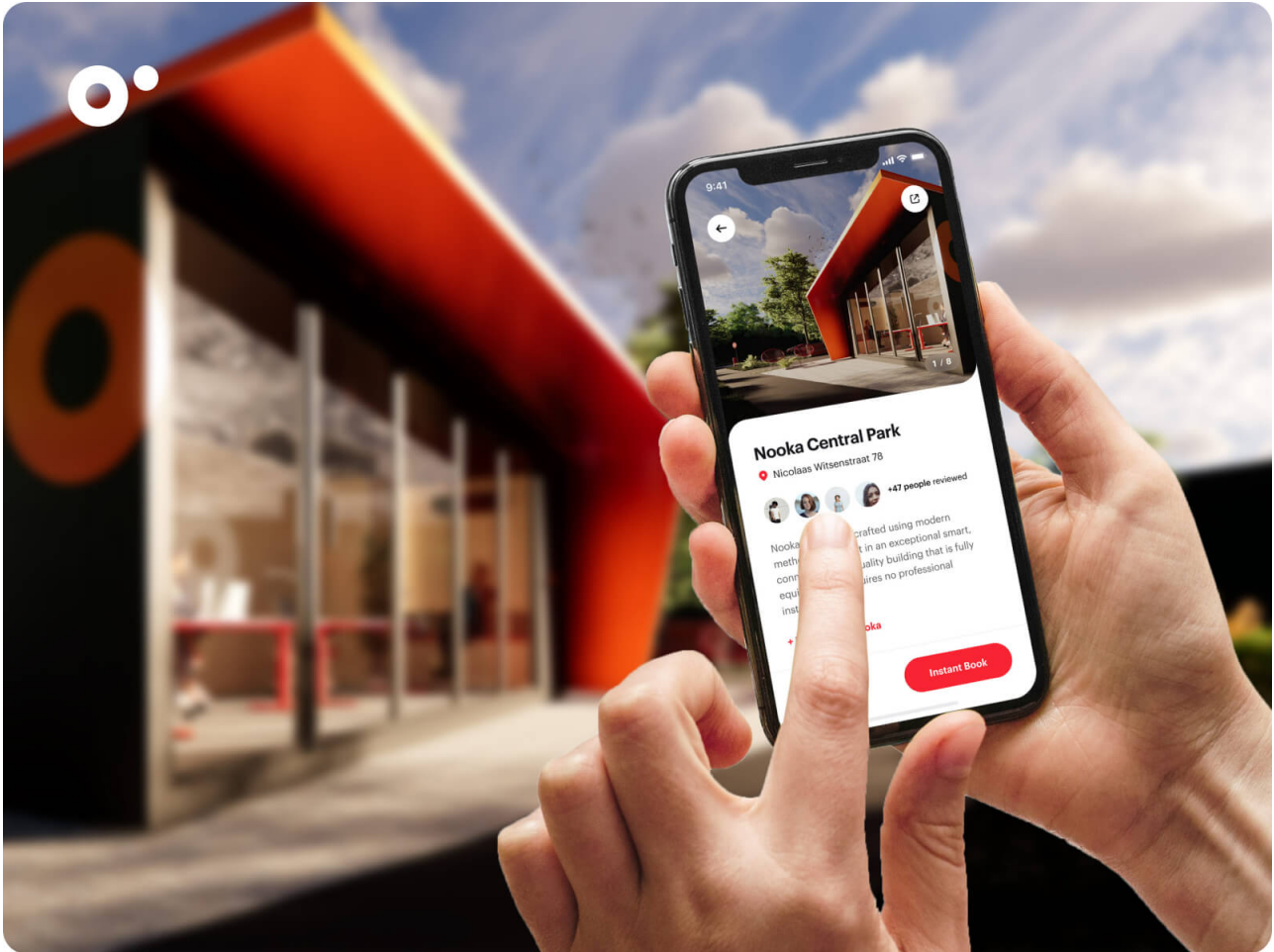
Inside every Nooka is at least one Steelcase ergonomic chair and electric height adjustable desk, so people instantly have a professional office setup. We also have a larger Nooka model that fits two people. Having a trusted global brand like Steelcase provide the ergonomic workstation was really important to us, as comfort and ergonomics are crucial to creating a high spec office experience.

Adapting working as we know it

We actually consider Nooka to be a new category of coworking space, where we share the same principles of flexibility and productive space but our community is distributed across a network rather than under one roof. We're calling this new category a proximity office space.

Our big vision is that eventually, everyone lives within a short walk to a proximity office space like Nooka as an alternative to working from their kitchen table at home.

We started an online marketing campaign focusing on Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg last month when we launched, so we've started taking pre-orders last month already with guaranteed delivery within 60 days anywhere in the EU. Over the upcoming year, we'll be expanding to the UK and in 2022, we're planning to enter the US market.

So far, it's been pretty interesting seeing the diversity of our customers. We've had the B2C side, which we were expecting, but also it's clear that there's strong demand on the B2B side. We've had orders placed by city councils to place in public areas and are in talks with companies to provide Nookas for their employees.

Nooka's main unique selling point is the "Airbnb type" business model we're building as a layer on top, allowing people to monetise their Nooka when they're not using it, but we also have two other unique selling points.

A Nooka is literally plug and play, ready to go, which means that from day one, you'll have high speed WiFi, an ergonomic workstation, smart features and everything you need to have a really productive day in your home office. None of the other backyard offices provide all this; they're mainly empty shells that you have to furnish inside. Also, there's no massive upfront costs to purchase it as we have a flexible membership model which makes it really affordable.

Overcoming hurdles and looking ahead

The main challenges we have with being in a pandemic are around fulfilment and logistics. Luckily, our manufacturing facility in Romania is still operating as normal for production, but we need to keep on top of government guidelines when it comes to crossing international borders and making sure we actually can deliver to customers in certain locations.

COVID-19 means that on top of the usual startup challenges, we have a whole new set of things to think about, such as "are two people from different households legally allowed to travel inside the same vehicle in this country or do we need to change our installation process?"

I think having quick and easy access to a great workspace in extremely close proximity to your home – whether in someone's backyard or in a

public space – will eventually become so normal that in the future, we'll look back and think how inefficient life was before it.

Similar to how Uber changed our habits around transportation and Airbnb opened up new possibilities to the way we travel, I believe proximity office spaces like Nooka will change the way people work. We're the first startup pioneering this new category of flexible workspace so there's definitely a long road ahead, but my four cofounders and I are ready for the challenge!

Leanne Beesley is cofounder at <u>Nooka</u>.

Article écrit par Kirstie Pickering