

MAY 26, 2023

## This article was written by a real person, but the presentation the reporter covered used AI

By **Michael Russo, contributor**  
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Chris O'Brien, director of user experience at Harrisonburg-based firm Jenzabar, presents to business leaders at Thursday's Valley TechCon.23 about how employees can use AI — not be replaced by it. (Photo by Michael Russo)

By **Michael Russo, contributor**

When Chris O'Brien prepared his presentation on artificial intelligence and automation for attendees at this week's Valley TechCon.23 conference, he turned to ChatGPT to determine what information he should include, which reduced the time he would've spent researching and using search engines.

O'Brien led a session on the topic "Preparing Your Organization for an Automated Future" and how the arrival of AI and robotic process automation aren't to be feared. Instead, he encouraged local business leaders to experiment with how best to use these new tools, just as he did in gathering information for the conference and in his work as director of user experience at Jenzabar, a Harrisonburg-based higher education software company.

"I think we need to move faster, right? I mean, technology's not slowing down, so we've got to learn to move fast with it," O'Brien said during his session. "How can we plan for this AI revolution if we don't have time to think and engage with our people on how we're going to be successful with it?"

He was one of 24 business leaders, educators and tech experts from across the Valley and the commonwealth who presented at the tech conference Thursday at Hotel Madison and Shenandoah Valley Conference Center. Valley TechCon, organized by Harrisonburg Economic Development with several co-sponsoring organizations, returned for the first time since 2019 with about 150 attendees.

As O'Brien described the workplace's transition to automated systems, he compared it to the moment in "Star Wars" when Han Solo wants to jump to lightspeed whether the Millennium Falcon was ready or not. Chewbacca, as a co-pilot, might be skeptical about it working, but the right pilot makes the jump successfully.

However, such a shift in the ways workplaces operate — and with such potentially large ramifications — doesn't come without controversy. Another session at the conference addressed cybersecurity and how technology practitioners can adapt to potential threats that involve AI, such as more advanced phishing attacks that make it harder for someone to distinguish reality from malicious actions.

Artificial intelligence and programs that rely on it have been developing for years but have particularly attracted attention — and public debate — in recent months since the firm [OpenAI launched ChatGPT](#) in November.

On the same day O'Brien presented about automation in Harrisonburg, Microsoft's president, Brad Smith, spoke at an event in Washington, D.C. to [encourage regulation of AI and minimize its possible risks](#), according to The New York Times. Microsoft has increased its investment in AI. And Smith's call to action comes just over two weeks after Microsoft released its [Work Trend Index Annual Report](#), which revealed that AI can free up people's time to enhance productivity and creativity, and "AI aptitude" and critical thinking skills will become vital for employees' success moving forward.

So as the landscape of how people work and AI's integration seems to be in flux, O'Brien provided some takeaways for how organizations can approach implementing automated systems.

### Opportunities for efficiency

Automation can offer more advantages when incorporated in specific tasks and used in certain sectors more than others, O'Brien said. Finance, in particular, presents many avenues for AI to provide efficiencies.

Scenarios with if-then statements, even ones with more complex rules, are strong candidates for AI to become a benefit, he said.

Rule-based tasks have boundaries that focus AI or automated bots on achieving the desired outcome, and O'Brien said they're often better than humans at not making mistakes. Using bots for repetitive tasks that one might perform weekly or daily can add value, be scaled up for larger projects in the future and save time that could be dedicated to more innovative work. To that end, anything that deals with high volumes of materials or uses up resources also present opportunities for automation to enhance productivity.

The key, he told attendees of the session, is being deliberate about how best to incorporate AI — and that it's not scary.

"We're gonna learn it's easier than we think," he said.

Microsoft's report on AI cites an international survey of 31,000 people in 31 different countries it conducted to determine how people feel about AI and its potential advantages in the workplace. 49% of respondents were concerned AI could pose a threat to their jobs, but 70% said they'd use its capabilities to decrease their workload.

For those concerned about [losing their jobs to AI](#), The Wall Street Journal has also reported on the conversation with a look at a study that researchers at OpenAI, which created ChatGPT, and the University of Pennsylvania conducted. That study said at least half the tasks in almost 20% of the jobs analyzed — which included accountants, writers and mathematicians — could be done faster with ChatGPT and other AI tools.

### Ways to help, not hurt

O'Brien said bots and AI can function like a co-pilot, or a "buddy."

When explaining how he used ChatGPT to develop his presentation, he said the chatbot can handle complex prompts that do more than just [spit out a research paper](#). If a user gives ChatGPT specific, detailed criteria for their desired outcome and how it'll be presented, O'Brien said the AI will produce better results, which can take on any format it's instructed to.

And as the software's name implies, having a conversation with the AI and giving it feedback on how to improve its outputs is essential to maximizing its potential, O'Brien added.

With this in mind, O'Brien made a distinction between attended and unattended bots and what those different AI tools are designed to do.

Attended bots act like assistants that work alongside someone. If a bot's processing invoices, for example, it will have checkpoints where it can show the employee something that looks unusual. Or it can write draft emails that a human would review before sending.

Unattended bots are free to complete tasks independently after receiving instructions, but they don't receive as much user input while working.

Two attendees in O'Brien's presentation said their local marketing company is already examining how it can automate more processes, like posting social media content or sending recruitment messages to potential employees on LinkedIn.

Ultimately, they said, their goal is to automate as much as possible to increase the company's profits and maximize employees' time.

### Responsibilities of implementation

As someone who works in user experience, O'Brien said it's important to maintain a human element as automation continues to grow and develop.

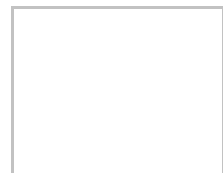
If an organization wants to introduce automated systems in its workflow, he said that includes first getting everyone in the organization on board and having a team of people navigate how to incorporate it in their tasks.

O'Brien also hit on other key factors that come with implementing automations as a benefit and curtailing any risks. He said organizations should be transparent about using it — as he was about using ChatGPT in his presentation — and hold themselves accountable by addressing potential privacy implications regarding how information is processed and as well as educating others about how exactly automation is at play.

In one last call to action, O'Brien said having good people involved in automation's arrival with the right intentions is necessary to prevent misuse.

"We have new tech and cool tech, and it always starts out that way. I want good tech. I want human tech," O'Brien said. "So, I just challenge you all to ... implement this in a human way, in a way that makes work better for everybody."

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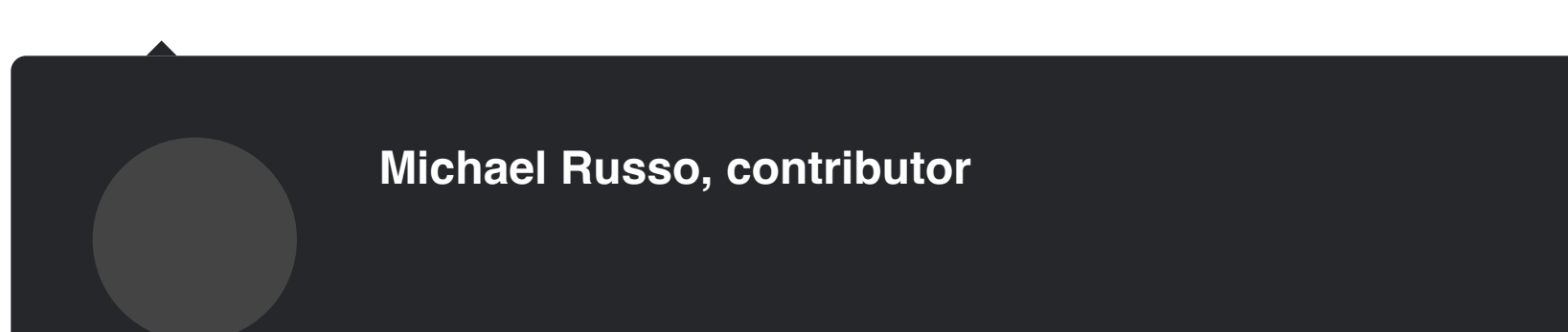


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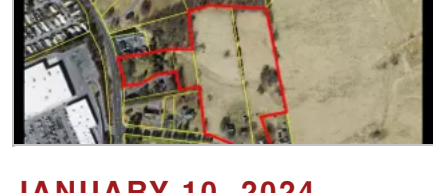


AUGUST 18, 2023

# Innovation hub that helped grow businesses prepares to take root in Harrisonburg at Wetsel's Seed building

By **Michael Russo**, contributor  
Posted in **Harrisonburg Issues**

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The Wetsel's Seed building will be the home of the Harrisonburg Innovation Hub.

By **Michael Russo**, contributor

For Clara Metzler and her nonprofit Project GROWS, the **Staunton Innovation Hub** didn't just act as a base of operations — it was a place for connection.

**Project GROWS** works to improve the health of children and youth in the community through garden-based education and access to healthy food, Metzler said, and held membership with the hub from its opening in 2018 until 2021. Metzler, who began at the nonprofit as a farm assistant and is now its executive director, would come to the hub for team meetings with her colleagues, often bringing surplus produce and feeling welcome to take over the central kitchen space.

"The fact that we came in with dirty clothes didn't seem to bother anyone as long as we cleaned it up," Metzler said. "[We] got to know a little bit more of the local business and nonprofit community by virtue of working in some of the same spaces there, even if we weren't working there all the time."

These kinds of organic moments between Project GROWS and other hub members and nonprofits aren't singular. Rather, they reflect a vibrant sense of community the hub's leaders — its founder, Peter Denbigh, and director, Hannah Cooper — say they strive to cultivate in Staunton. Now, business leaders are hoping for the same effect when a new hub opens in the coming months in downtown Harrisonburg's historic Wetsel's Seed building.

## From the Queen City to the Friendly City

Development of the **Harrisonburg Innovation Hub** comes amid a larger push by the city of Harrisonburg to **appeal to its growing community of remote workers** and will take over the Wetsel's Seed building on North Liberty and West Market Streets.

Brian Shull, Harrisonburg's executive director of economic development, said the new coworking space will provide more options for remote workers in Harrisonburg and align with his office's mission to foster entrepreneurship while attracting, retaining and expanding businesses in the area.

"We've been able to see that it certainly filled a need down there [in Staunton], and it's been very successful," Shull said.

As a JMU alumnus with a background working with many small businesses and start-ups, Denbigh said replicating the Staunton model by bringing a hub to Harrisonburg "made so much sense."

"Harrisonburg is a very vibrant community," Denbigh said. "This just feels like home, so a lot of things came together at good moments to help bring that to life."

Denbigh said the team has faced some challenges with starting construction, but they expect to open at least one phase of the new Harrisonburg location by the end of the year, with the rest of the space being completed in 2024.

Like the Staunton project, the new hub in Harrisonburg will assume a renovated space. Cooper said the aesthetic of both facilities combines elements that honor the history of each location with modern design features that make for a comfortable environment to work in.

As for the amenities, Cooper said many features from Staunton will carry over to Harrisonburg, including essentials like high speed internet for video chats, fresh coffee and free printing in addition to private focus rooms and conference spaces for groups to gather. Most memberships also include 24/7 access to the building where patrons can enter with their phone, Denbigh added.

In both locations, there's ample space for remote workers, Cooper said. The hubs offer a **variety of membership** options that start with day or night passes to pop in the main coworking space a few times a week. That can be upgraded with the option to have a dedicated desk space to settle in with, and there are plans that accommodate more consistent use of the facility for those working in academic or corporate settings.

## A community of support

A pivotal aspect of the Staunton hub and forthcoming Harrisonburg hub is the partnerships its leaders and community managers establish with other businesses and organizations in the area, which typically take up a bigger footprint in the facility with "anchor space" to match a larger commitment to the community, as Cooper described.

Project GROWS was one of the first community partners at the Staunton location. During its time at the hub, Metzler said, the nonprofit grew and was able to invest in a capital infrastructure project to build its own workspace on its farm.

Even though Metzler and her team no longer needed a regular spot at the hub, she said the connections she and her colleagues made with other members remain. They occasionally attend a nonprofit support group held at the hub for both members and outside organizations. The chance to share experiences in a setting with different kinds of experts is one Metzler said was — and continues to be — valuable.

"I've got my ear to the ground, and when I hear of something that I think we might benefit from, then I pass it along to our team or go myself, so it's really great that that's still something that we can take advantage of today," Metzler said. "I've certainly referred a lot of other folks to it as well. So, I think that's just like a really cool community engagement effort that they clearly invest time in ... We've certainly benefited from that."

Another example of the community environment found at the Staunton hub is its relationship with Mary Baldwin University, one of its anchor tenants. Through this partnership, Cooper said, student interns at the hub receive memberships and are paired with businesses that operate out of the facility. One intern, she added, engaged with other members while visiting the hub, which helped fuel her own entrepreneurial ambitions.

"It was just this beautiful relationship," Cooper said, "seeing her as a student in this space [and] going from that to starting her own business until working with a couple of the people in the hub currently."

## 'To each their own'

Almost three and a half years after the COVID-19 pandemic forced a worldwide shift to remote work, some companies, like **Farmers Group insurance** and the **Walt Disney Company**, are expecting employees to return to their work offices in a typical office. Workplace trends suggest employees want to keep employees connected under the same roof, especially amid cutbacks and layoffs in the tech industry, according to the **New York Times**.

However, Cooper said some companies' return to traditional in-person work doesn't impact the hubs' business model. She said the hubs exist between the fully in-person and remote extremes, and with its multitude of options for drop-ins, permanent work spaces or satellite offices for companies based elsewhere, they can accommodate many members' needs.

Likewise, rather than focusing on where one's working, Denbigh said the debate should take a look at the flexibility of the varying circumstances. He's not on one side or the other for where employees should be working, he said, but his priority is empowering people to have choices within a place that sparks success and builds a community.

"You get to have the freedom from and freedom to do things," Denbigh said. "You get freedom from a lot of the normal distractions of life, particularly if you're working from home. You don't have the laundry in the corner, and you don't have the grass that's still growing and the dog that's barking ... As a result of that, you have the freedom to really focus in and make the most of the time that you're actually working someplace."

Having experienced remote work, a flexible coworking facility and an independent workplace, Metzler said she appreciates being in person with her team, especially after apprehension to do so during the pandemic.

"You can't really put a price on the experiences of meeting around a water cooler or heating up your lunch together and chatting and connecting about what you did over the weekend," Metzler said. "I think maybe as an organization, we tend to work better when we're seeing one another in that way, but to each their own, and every organization and business is different. And I think supporting that — seeing what your team needs — is the most important thing."

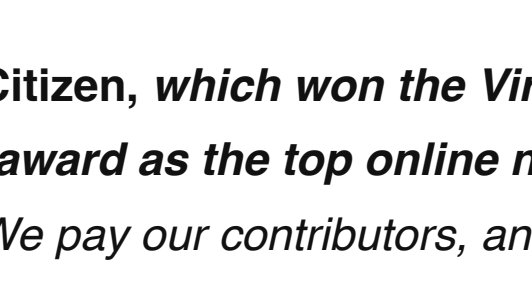
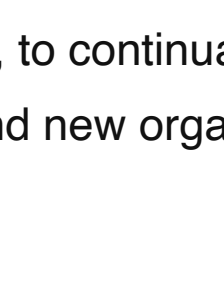
Many of Project GROWS' initiatives — like its **mobile farmer's market** and **partnerships with schools** systems in the Staunton and Waynesboro and Augusta County area — involve going out in the community. Some **volunteers** who assist in these projects come from the network of people Metzler and her colleagues built at the hub, perhaps while sharing produce and gathering together in the kitchen, she added.

As Project GROWS continues to evolve and serve others, Metzler attributes part of its progress to the resources and environment at the hub that helped the organization thrive and make the impact it does today.

"The hub really was a launchpad for us ... Given our growth over the years, we came to a point where we could eventually build a barn like this for us, making space, we hope, for another organization to come in or another business to come in who can also similarly use it as a launchpad," Metzler said. "So I think they've done their mission of creating an incubation experience that allows for that growth to take place, as you hope it would, to continually generate the innovation and the experiences for new businesses and new organizations to take root."

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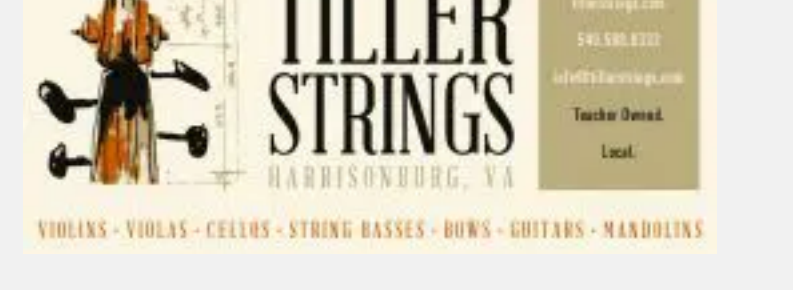
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JUNE 23, 2023

Harrisonburg seeks to appeal to remote workers

By Michael Russo, contributor

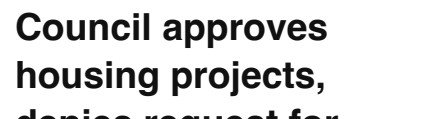
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The Wetzel's Seed building is slated to become an innovation hub in 2024 that will have space for remote workers and start-up companies. (File photo)

By Michael Russo, contributor

While remote work was one of notable societal shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's not going out of style — at least in Harrisonburg. In fact, local economic development leaders are making remote work a focus of their sales pitches to employers and employees.

"I am excited about this — this initiative. I think it helps many different areas," Brian Shull, Harrisonburg's executive director of economic development. "Yes, we could attract some talent here and also people who are working for other businesses, so that gets us connections with businesses that aren't physically located here right now."

Shull said his office focuses on three main priorities: attracting businesses, retaining businesses and allowing them to expand, as well as encouraging entrepreneurship.

Shull said these strategies can come into play in different ways. For instance, if someone moves to the area for a job, it could allow their partner to work remotely for a company based elsewhere. This flexibility also applies to entrepreneurs, Shull said, who could start up a business from their home in Harrisonburg or a coworking space like The Perch at Magpie or the yet-to-open Harrisonburg Innovation Hub.

The growing potential of the city's initiative to draw more remote workers to Harrisonburg includes all three of those areas, he said, calling it "a win-win all the way around."

At the heart of the messaging to prospective workers and employers are Harrisonburg's characteristics: its proximity to universities and recreation, its affordability, and its accessibility to metropolitan areas.

Navigating the remote work landscape

Remote work was among the key focuses of the recent Valley TechCon.23 conference last month that brought business leaders, educators and tech experts to Hotel Madison and Shenandoah Valley Conference Center.

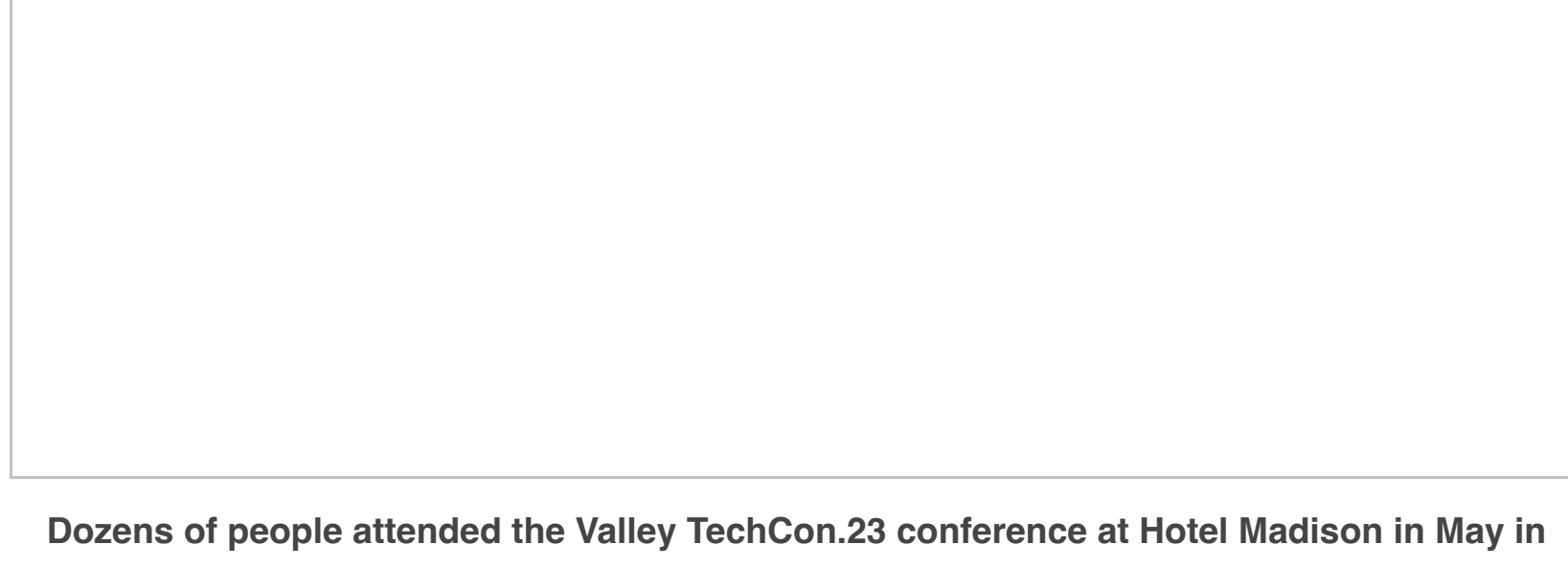
During one panel, for instance, several experts said Harrisonburg appeals to many people for its high quality of life, as well as lower cost of labor and living compared to areas like northern Virginia and the Richmond area, while still being only two hours away from the nation's capital. Proximity to local universities like JMU and EMU and ability to tap into their networks of students, faculty and alumni also presents strong benefits, the experts said.

Kirsten Moore, owner of the coworking space The Perch at Magpie, for instance, said part of remote work is breaking away from the idea that one will be working the typical 9-to-5, 40-hour work week, especially when using a coworking space. Remote workers like her husband, Moore said, have more flexibility, and if they satisfy benchmarks and deliver quality products in their job, they're still meeting the necessary outcomes. And if that doesn't take a full eight hours or between traditional bankers' hours, that's OK.

"I do think it is about how do you change that mindset?" Moore said. "We have a lot of people who aren't there every day, they just kind of need a change of scenery, or they need to focus more than they can focus somewhere else. So there's definitely a change in learning how to work this way."

But she said there's still work to be done in improving the city's infrastructure and creating more opportunities to "make it easy for cool businesses to come in and do cool things" in Harrisonburg. That's especially true when remote work can be done anywhere, she told the conference participants, who included policy makers such as Harrisonburg Vice Mayor Laura Dent and city council member Dany Fleming.

Ben Markowitz, product design lead for health care technology company Rialtic, said remote work isn't about doing less or more — someone could think of something for a project they're working on while taking a run on an extended lunch break. It's simply working differently while maintaining the same level of quality, he said.



Dozens of people attended the Valley TechCon.23 conference at Hotel Madison in May in which attracting tech innovators and employees emphasized the continued role of remote work. (Photo by Michael Russo)

A not-so-remote reality

Dave Urso, a business consultant and dean of academic affairs at Blue Ridge Community College who moderated the expert panel, told The Citizen that part of the challenge of attracting remote workers is busting myths about what it really looks like.

"If we're trying to tell the story, we have to break a framework of going like, 'remote work looks like I sit at my kitchen table for eight hours a day, five days in a row on a Zoom call doing my email and working,'" Urso said.

While Urso has an academic background he also has experience working with nonprofit organizations and views the benefits of attracting remote workers more holistically.

"Remote work is about the community 100%," Urso said. "Can this community thrive by giving remote workers access to resources? They want [and] access to that thing they can break away and do in the middle of the afternoon for an hour to feel like they're breaking up their day with something meaningful?"

When a remote workday becomes more fluid, work-life balance can blur, Urso said. So an employee must be intentional about when to take breaks. Someone taking a long lunch isn't the end of the world if they're also responding to messages on their own time.

Urso said remote work isn't lonely either, as some may think from time working from home and limiting exposure to others during the pandemic. Coworking spaces, Urso said, present opportunities to find community among remote worker peers that one likely wouldn't in a more traditional work environment.

Urso said if he were to visit The Perch, for example, he could have an open meeting where he and others can discuss problems they're facing in their jobs. Though he works in academia, he might hear from others who work in healthcare or coding who bring different perspectives to finding a solution.

"I'm like, 'I never would have thought of that because of my professional blinders. This is amazing,'" Urso said. "I think the coworking space is a resource at step one, but it's actually like a think tank. What is happening by getting myriad perspectives [and] personalities ... into the same space and going, 'How do we leverage that?' So the biggest win, I think, is saying, 'Hey, this coworking space is about your job, but it's also the community of workers who are like you, collectively lifting us up.'"

Coming soon ...

The Harrisonburg Innovation Hub is set to continue to foster the kind of environment Urso described. Shull said the facility, which will take over the Wetzel Seed Building on West Market Street, will open in early 2024. It is expected to include 60 workspaces that can accommodate up to 100 businesses with office spaces, individual desks and conference spaces for workers to use.

The new facility is modeled after the Staunton Innovation Hub, which Shull said has been successful since opening in October 2020.

To fill Harrisonburg and the new facility with more remote workers, Shull referred back to the TechCon panel and said alumni from local universities, such as the larger classes from JMU, are the "low-hanging fruit" of who to bring back to the area, even if the companies they work for are based elsewhere. Shull said he thinks it would be a joint effort between the city and universities to keep graduates in the area or entice them to return to Harrisonburg.

It's "in everybody's best interests" to maintain connections among alumni, the schools and the city, he said.

"They spent four years here, so they had the opportunity to learn all the great opportunities here," Shull said. "That should be an easy target for us to remind them that they can come back and take advantage of what the Valley has to offer and still work where they need to work remotely."

A growing population means a growing demand for housing. Shull said a number of housing development projects the city council has approved in the past two years will help address this issue but await finalized finances before breaking ground.

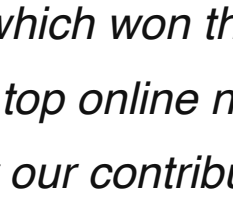
Urso also suggested temporary housing — which is available through homestays and short-term rentals, like Airbnbs, in Harrisonburg — as an option for people who want to test out what it's like being a remote worker in the Valley without fully committing right away.

Looking ahead, Urso said it's up to elected officials to seize the opportunity.

Shull's office plans to continue showing off Harrisonburg and seeking to recruit new people while also working with current residents and business owners.

"One of the best things we can do is to continue to promote the Shenandoah Valley lifestyle as a great place to live and raise a family," Shull said. "So if we continue to just work on the holistic approach of making Harrisonburg the best community we can in all aspects, that will naturally help spread the word to the remote worker crowd as well."

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