

Executive suite for hire

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Published: Monday, March 5, 2007

You meet your client at reception in a downtown office tower and chat casually as you walk along an art-lined hallway that leads to your corner office with a fabulous view. An administrative assistant drops by with the copies you requested moments earlier. The client is impressed with your office, but it isn't your office, it's an office centre.

Novice entrepreneurs who have just launched a business could never afford to be housed in such a prestigious address, but an office centre lets them leap ahead a few years.

Such executive office centres are even useful to established companies that want a high-class address and competent support staff services.

AN INSTANT BOARDROOM FOR ENTREPRENEURS: Isabel Garcia runs two office business centre locations in Montreal. Pierre Obendrauf For National Post



"When I first started, it was the big facade; we'd always train our receptionist never to say this is a business centre," said Isabel Garcia, who runs two office business centre locations under the banner Global Prime Office Network in Montreal and is on the board of the Office Business Centre Association International.

"Now, I have clients going around being proud that they've made a sound business decision."

The premise of office business centres -- sometimes called executive office centres -- is simple: provide upscale office, meeting and conference space and the related support services to businesses on a temporary basis to eliminate the hassles, overhead and long-term commitment of leasing high-priced, prime space.

Clients range from corporations requiring temporary office space to small startups and home-based professionals in need of office administration services or occasional meeting space.

While such centres have been around for years, "we're still the best-kept secret; people still don't know about us," Ms. Garcia said.

Yet there are 4,000 such facilities in North America; 5,500 worldwide, said Karen Carruthers, marketing director for The Rostie Group in Toronto. The centres occupy more than 3% of class-A office space, with growth in the industry projected to surpass 5% by 2010, she said.'

Clients can sign up and move in the next day.

"Virtual offices and executive offices basically started with local businesses and not a lot of international exposure," said Ms. Carruthers. "But what's happening is, as the Internet and technology makes the world smaller, everyone's here. We have companies from pretty much every continent and we deal with a lot more people through technology rather than a physical presence."

The Rostie Group has two office locations -- downtown Toronto and in Mississauga near the airport -- along with the virtual office services.

A virtual office provides people who work from home or travel a lot with a prime office address and all the administrative services of a physical office -- from a receptionist to handling mail-- minus the cost or the obligation to work there.

Jerry Hynes is vice-president and principal officer of the U.S.- based Fifth, Third Bank, facilitating its launch in Canada. The bank has rented space through The Rostie Group since 2004.

"When one is exploring setting up shop particularly in a market like Toronto where many foreign banks have come and gone, having a local phone number and address during the exploration phase signals to the market that this is serious," said Mr. Hynes.

Marilyn Steinkopf is special assistant to the director at the Montreal-based Concordia University's Goodman Institute of Investment Management, which runs its MBA classes from The Rostie Group's facilities.

"It suits us really well because this is the first time Concordia has ever had a program in Toronto, so they're just getting a foothold and didn't have a feel for how many students they'd have so it didn't make any sense to get their own space," said Ms. Steinkopf, who works from her home.