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Spark Plaza caters to work-at-home professionals

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An innovative and growing Johnson City business sparked an idea and served as a business model for a similar venture 600 miles away in Peoria, Ill.

Spark Plaza is a co-working business owned by Jose and Shannon Castillo. Located in downtown Johnson City, Spark Plaza offers all-inclusive shared office space that provides laid-back meeting and work space, social interaction and a professional atmosphere for freelancers, entrepreneurs and other work-at-home professionals.

The Castillos started Spark Plaza in 2009 as an answer to a need for co-working space in their own careers. Jose is a technology consultant who often travels and works from hotel lobbies, airports and coffee shops. Shannon, who majored in communications and business at Milligan College, is also always on the go.

"Jose and I thought there was a need for people to have a shared office space, so we invested our own money to open a business and created Spark Plaza," Castillo said.

Coworking is an emerging trend for work-at-home professionals, independent contractors or people who travel frequently. It allows people, who work independently, to share the same work space and enjoy the social interaction that comes with working alongside like-minded professionals.

The concept of coworking, usually found in larger cities, has taken off in Johnson City.

"We used social media to create a buzz before we ever opened," Shannon said. "We created a fan page on Facebook, a Twitter account and advertised our events on social networking sites. Within six months, we were in the black."

Social media also allowed Castillo to reconnect with and help one of her former Milligan classmates, John Searby.

A 1998 Milligan alumnus, Searby, recently

began a new job that allowed him to work from his home in Peoria, Ill. The situation seemed ideal at first, but it didn't take long for Searby to learn there is also a downside to working from home.

"After about five to six months, I started to realize that the isolation was tough," Searby said. "I loved having flexibility, but I am a social person and I missed the social interaction of an office."

Searby took his laptop to Panera Bread or a local coffee shop a couple of days a week, but most of these were difficult places to work. As the lunch crowds came and went, it became impossible to conduct conference calls and concentrate on reports. "I kept thinking, there's got to be a better way to do this," Searby said.

So on a whim one day last fall, Searby posted this Facebook status: "Looking for a new way to work from home."

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