

The Benefits of Coworking Spaces for Your Business

Claudine Land:

Hello everyone and welcome to the Virtual Ingenuity Business Podcast. We have a local guest today in our studio, Kim Lee. She is the founder and CEO of Forge, a co-working space in the heart of downtown Birmingham, Alabama.

Claudine Land:

Kim's passion for business as a service, hospitality, community, and economic growth of the city drove her to open Forge in September 2017. Forge is a place to provide an avenue for entrepreneurs and small business owners to really thrive through growing their businesses in a way that was previously unavailable in Birmingham. Forge has developed another layer here in Birmingham of the ecosystem for business owners and entrepreneurs to provide a platform for the growth and advancement of those smaller businesses in a way that was not readily available before.

Claudine Land:

Kim is also involved in mentoring entrepreneurs, which I think is wonderful. She mentors entrepreneurs through different organizations in Birmingham, as well as serving on the executive board of Tech Birmingham. I would love to have them on the show as well.

Kim Lee:

Oh yeah.

Claudine Land:

Kim was honored in 2017 as Birmingham Business Journal Woman to Watch, and she was also a 2019 finalist for CEO of the Year. How impressive is that? So in 2008, guys, Forge was a Small Business of the Year finalist, and Kim was recognized on the list of 2020's Top 40 under 40. That is really impressive.

Claudine Land:

So, I want to share with you that Kim founded Birmingham Coworking Collective as a way to bring together and provide community and support for all co-working spaces in the city of Birmingham. She is also a podcast host herself of Building Birmingham Together, where she interviews organization leaders in our city that bring light to the amazing work that leaders in the city are doing and the lessons that they've learned along the way. In December of 2021, Kim graduated from Goldman Sachs's 10,000 Small Businesses program. So impressive, Kim. Welcome to the show.

Kim Lee:

It sounds like a lot, but oh man, it's good to go back and read those things, because day-to-day it's hard to remember the accomplishments.

Claudine Land:

It doesn't register unless someone says it, right? Until someone says it, and you think, "Wow." You've done a lot in the past few years.

Kim Lee:

Well, thank you. Thank you. Yeah, I'm so glad to be here. Thank you so much for inviting me to be on your podcast.

Claudine Land:

You're welcome. It's such a pleasure to have you and a pleasure to see you again. So listen, we know that when a business owner's starting a business, there are so many things, Kim, that they need to consider. You have to consider choosing a location for a business, which is so important. And I want to dive into that little in a little bit after we talk about this. I want you to tell us a little bit about Forge, and specifically for those individuals that are not a member of Forge, because Forge does offer a membership, but let's talk about some of the things that folks that are not a member of Forge can receive.

Kim Lee:

Okay. So, we are a co-working space, we're membership-based. I know we'll get more into that, but we are a place for people to start their business and grow, and community at a relatively low price than if you just went out to get a lease, and a safer option. But one of the things that we love, we're located downtown, so it has always been part of our mission and passion is to still be able to serve the small business community and the ecosystem, even if people aren't members.

Kim Lee:

So one of the ways that we serve is we do a lot of lunch and learns, we do talks, we call them Founder Fridays. So once a month we bring in founders in the city and they share their stories, we do networking events. So that's one way that we serve, that if you're not a member at Forge, is you can come and participate in those for free.

Kim Lee:

Some of them, we even have lunch sponsored, so you can eat here. Sometimes it's bring your own lunch. But we really want to provide resources for people in the city, who maybe it's a side hustle, maybe they're thinking about starting a business or they've started a business, but they just don't have the time or resources to pay for continuing education. So, we try to provide that either free or sometimes there's a very, very low cost.

Kim Lee:

We love, one, it gives them education, but two, it starts that network of support. So, part of starting a business, it's just really hard and it is really lonely, and so it's just starting that network of support. Also, we have started back on those Founder Fridays, they're once a month. We also do free Fridays so people

can come and work for the day for free. So, it's been a great way for people just to get connected and start to get connected a little bit with our Forge community and just even get to know other people who are in the same boat. So, it's just a real challenge.

Kim Lee:

So, that's the way that we can give, that we serve the city and help people who are just getting started. We hope that one day they join Forge because we really believe it'll help your business grow, even if it's just getting you to work every day and you feeling like I've got my people and they're here cheering me on. But then another way, if you're not a member at Forge that you can use Forge services to, again, help grow your businesses, we do have conference rooms and event space, that you do not have to be a member to use those spaces. And then we also have day passes.

Kim Lee:

So we have groups where ... well, the other day, the AT&T internet was out and so a group came over because we have good internet and that was very important and it did not go out when AT&T went out. So we do have opportunities where if you're in a pinch if you've got somebody coming into town where you can come. You don't have to commit for the long term, but you can just come for the day or rent conference rooms and event spaces.

Claudine Land:

That's great. You did mention this a little bit> You guys are in a great location for those-

Kim Lee:

We really are, yeah.

Claudine Land:

Yeah, for those of you that don't know where Forge is, I mean, you guys are right above The Pizitz restaurant, where there's just a lot of businesses there anyway, and the space is so wonderful as well.

Kim Lee:

Yeah. Yeah, I never dreamed when we were getting started that we would get to be in a place like this that's just the epicenter of everything, but we did. So teams love it if they come for the day, because everybody can get what they want. It's really different, it's fun. Our members love it, because their clients always want to come to them and eat in the food hall. So it's been just fantastic... Plus we've got covered parking.

Claudine Land:

That's right.

Kim Lee:

Covered parking.

Claudine Land:

That's so important too, especially when you're downtown too.

Kim Lee:

Yep. Yeah.

Claudine Land:

Yes. So let's talk a little bit about what are co-working spaces and why do people use them. Location is one of the most important things when we're starting a business. Not everybody can afford to buy a space or buy a building, or even rent typically is so expensive downtown. But Forge offers a space, it's called a coworking space that is really economical for folks that are just starting out. And there's not a lot of traffic that comes through there too because you guys have your own level as well. So let's talk about what your coworking space consists Of there at Forge, Kim.

Kim Lee:

Yeah, so one of the things, we have three different membership levels, well there are a few more, but main membership levels. Our co-working membership, which is just all open seating, you get 24/7 access and that's just first come first serve. We've got tables and chairs, we've got soft seating, community tables, all different kinds of ways to work. But what we love about the co-working membership is it really gives people who are just starting their business a way to be around other people, to have a place that they're proud to work, to have a community that is a very low barrier of entry. They're committing to work on their business, if you're going to pay that much money a month, you've really committing to doing it. But we love that we can provide that community and really nice space for people who are just getting started.

Kim Lee:

Where normally they would just be at home by themselves and maybe go to a networking event once a week or something. So we love that. And then we also have our dedicated desk membership, which is a step above, but you have your own desk, your own space, you can leave your stuff, lockable storage, and conference rooms, ours come with that. And then we also have private offices. So those private offices, again, are a step up. But what we tell people is that you're paying for an office for two to three people, but you really get 13,000 square feet of space. So they get conference rooms, all the open space, and a kitchen. They don't ever have to buy any coffee or snacks or anything for the office. So it's just a really great opportunity for people to instantly have a great place to work that they're proud of, their clients will love, and a community.

Kim Lee:

And one of the things that we have loved recently, especially with our coworking membership and our guests, that we've been working really hard to be able to get the word out and to reach out to companies, is we've had several teams join recently where they want to give their staff who are working remote but have an option to come in. So they're working remotely, but still, people need to get out of the house and have somewhere to go besides just sitting at their kitchen table. Or maybe they have a home office, but they just want to have a perk. And so that coworking membership is a pretty low rate for a company to be able to provide a great perk for their employees, maybe their team is, like, we have one team that the team is in Atlanta. And so the people here don't have that connection with coworkers every day. So here they feel like they have coworkers, except actually there's no office politics. So it's great. It's the best of both. So that's one of the things that we've been really excited to finally see actually take fruition. So it's not just a place for small business owners or entrepreneurs, it's also a great perk for teams who have staff that is working remotely, whether they're based out of Birmingham or not.

Claudine Land:

And that's what I love too, Kim, about Forge, is that it's so versatile. The versatility is wonderful. And also too, you know, have to consider your brand when you have a business. So you don't want there to be a lot of in and out traffic, but you want to be able to bring your clients to that space. And Forge definitely has that space. It's a safe location as well. And then if you'd like to go downstairs and mingle even more, then you have that option available. And of course, a wonderful area to eat as well. And you want to be able to also bring your employees to that space. So, let's talk Kim, about the advantage of having a coworking space because there are many business owners that really aren't familiar with what that means. One of the things that Forge does, as you mentioned earlier, is that you have networking opportunities monthly. And I can attest to your networking event has been just wonderful.

Kim Lee:

Oh good.

Claudine Land:

Yes. So I love that. So let's talk a little bit about that.

Kim Lee:

So just about our networking event that we do?

Claudine Land:

Let's talk about your networking events and some of the things that you offer with that.

Kim Lee:

Yes, so we started, it's called Connect. And I started it during Covid because, well take this for what it is, but a lot of the times that I would go to events around the city where one, I'm sure the content was all great and I wanted to learn, but it was also to see people. The events were networking and to see

people even just to keep up to date with what's going on with people like, oh, you opened a new location, or oh, you added 50 people to your staff just to stay in the know. And that way you can know how you can support and people know the same about you. So when Covid started, all people had were webinars and education. And so there was so much, we even did education at the very beginning, very timely education.

Kim Lee:

And then we even kind of pulled back from that because there was so much that we just didn't want to contribute to the noise. But as I was attending webinars from organizations that supported or wanted to learn, all those things, the people were there so you could chat on the sidebar if they even had chat open, but it wasn't the same. There was no relationship, there was no community. And so we started an online virtual networking event. We had it once a week and it was membership-based and you could pop on anytime. You could come every week or you could come once a month. It was low-priced, but the intention was to actually build a relationship, find out what's going on with people, how we could help, and what their needs were. So it ended up being really good.

Kim Lee:

We had a good solid group of about 30, maybe 25 to 30, and they would come and go. But then once everything lifted and people were so ready to get back, we changed it to in-person. And now we do it once a month. And really the sole purpose of it is networking because I just think so much of the help that I've received and how I've been able to help other people and see their businesses grow is really just finding out what's going on in their business and making those connections that we can't send an email. Just simple introductions or like, oh, you're hiring, I know somebody who's looking for a job. And that doesn't happen without intentional conversations. So that's what we do at Connect. We go around and say who we are, our ideal client, and maybe help that you're looking for anything like that. So that it's really about how we can help each other. That's one of the things at Forge is that our members just naturally do. So we want to create a space for people who aren't members, who can still have that kind of relationship and growth.

Claudine Land:

And Kim, with your Connect, what I really love about the Connect group, is that you just don't have people come in and it's up to you to introduce yourselves to each other. You are really involved. You are participating in the conversation. You start the conversation, lead the conversation a certain way, and you get to know the individuals that are there. I love the name Connect because that is truly what you do. Connect with each individual and I love that.

Kim Lee:

Oh great.

Claudine Land:

And then the other thing that I love about Connect is that when it's over, you send everyone an email of who was there. And so you have each other's contact information. It's not just left up to you to say, "Oh goodness, I forgot to get this person's information". Kim, you do it all. You are just amazing.

Kim Lee:

We try, we try. It's not all me too. I have a great team. So I can't take all the credit.

Claudine Land:

You have a great team. You do. Another thing with Forge is when you're choosing a coworking space make sure that it's a space that is versatile and you're able to switch up your space, which Forge does offer. You talked about offering a conference room, you can have a private office, it could be open. And it allows a boost in productivity as well. And it does expose you to a chance, opportunities. Chance to see others, which is what I love. And it allows you to get outside of your bubble other than just working from home. So is it possible, Kim, with Forge to have maybe a virtual address if someone doesn't want to use their home address?

Kim Lee:

Yes.

Claudine Land:

Especially someone that's working virtually through Forge.

Kim Lee:

Yeah.

Claudine Land:

So tell us a little bit about that.

Kim Lee:

So we do have a virtual mail program. It's pretty fantastic. Especially, I can see, well I'm getting off-topic, but I can see virtual mail really sticking for a long time. Especially with people moving, and the way leases are changing. It's an address that no matter where you go, you can keep that. So everybody knows for a business license you have to have an address. So that's one reason to do it.

Claudine Land:

A physical address too at that.

Kim Lee:

Yes. You have a physical address. But yeah, you don't want everybody having your home address for your work. You never know who's going to show up. So, we use a software that makes it so great. I mean, I think it's fantastic. So we receive everybody's mail, we take pictures of it, it uploads it to their portal and then they can choose, okay, I'm going to come pick it up or I want you to recycle it or shred it. I want you to scan it so I can see it or I want you to forward it to me. So we have a lot of people who aren't even in the state of Alabama, but they want an Alabama presence. And so that's what they do and we'll just forward them all their mail or we'll scan it all and then throw it away for them.

Kim Lee:

But it's just a great way to manage mail. We have lawyers who we pretty much do their paperwork for them like we scan everything for them. So it's really a great way to have a presence here in Birmingham and they'll never have to go to the post office. You don't need a PO box. It's much better to have a real address than a PO Box. So it's great, we love that program. And right now we have about 175 virtual mail members.

Claudine Land:

Oh wow.

Kim Lee:

So yeah, it's really great. And so another option that we have that's kind of might fall under that virtual office type thing, we have what we call an Access membership. So it's really for people who just want to use our conference rooms. And so it's \$50 a month, but then they get member rates on conference room bookings. So if you book two conference rooms a month, you've paid for it. It's a really great way for somebody to consistently use the space, be a part of our community, don't have to scramble, but they may not ever want to work here, but just need the conference room. So we try to put together as many things as we can to serve business owners and that falls under the virtual option.

Claudine Land:

Very nice. That is wonderful and impressive. Kim, where can our listening audience find you?

Kim Lee:

Yeah. So our website is work <https://workatforge.com/>. On Instagram we're WorkatForge, Facebook we're Work at Forge. LinkedIn we're just Forge. Yeah, but we're really the most active on Instagram and so I would definitely say to follow us or you can sign up for our newsletter on our website. Because our newsletter is where we talk about all the events that are coming up, and any availability that we have. So the newsletter is good. Instagram, we also put everything on Instagram. So that's a good way to follow and keep up with what's going on and any specials that we might have.

Claudine Land:

You guys have a wonderful newsletter. It's not congested, it's very just to the point. And I love that you have your networking events there as well too.

Kim Lee:

Awesome. Thanks.

Claudine Land:

And then you guys just had a big anniversary, didn't you?

Kim Lee:

We did, five years.

Claudine Land:

Five years.

Kim Lee:

Which is so crazy. I know. It really is hard to believe, especially that two years of it were in Covid. So in a business model that depends on density.

Claudine Land:

Yes.

Kim Lee:

But a lot of coworking spaces did not make it. And so we just feel very blessed to have survived. We have great support. So five years, it's crazy.

Claudine Land:

Fantastic. Congratulations on that.

Kim Lee:

Thanks. I remember when I signed, our first lease was a five-year lease and it was like, this seems so far away, this doesn't even matter.

Claudine Land:

Yeah, now another five years at least, right?

Kim Lee:

That's right, I know.

Claudine Land:

And that's right around the corner. So listen, if our listening audience, Kim, could have one takeaway from what we talked about today, what would that one takeaway be?

Kim Lee:

Yeah, I think really not underestimating, and this goes for a small business owner, an entrepreneur, or even people who are a remote worker working at home. Just the power of community and connection in the success of your business, the success of your work, your quality of life, just being around people who are excited about what they're doing, working really hard. It just encourages you and makes you feel not alone. And so we say that people join Forge for the space, but they stay for the community because that really is, I mean, it's great to have a space to work and it's cool, it's in a cool spot. It's really beautiful, but that's not enough. What makes it great is being around other people who are working hard. Like you said, we have such a diverse group of people here through, age, male, female, race, and business industries.

Claudine Land:

Industry, yep.

Kim Lee:

Position levels. There's so much diversity here. So there's just so much to learn from each other. I mean, just for a silly example, yesterday I was working in Canva. Which we use all the time, and I was trying to move something into a folder and I swear I looked at Canva for 20 minutes and was like, "I cannot figure out how to do this". And somebody walked by, I was like, "I need your help" within two seconds, I mean.

Claudine Land:

Done.

Kim Lee:

Oh yeah. And then I finished with it. It helped me so much. So that's just so silly and small. But if you think about that, helping with messaging, we've had people start businesses together. I've gotten off of your question. Exactly.

Claudine Land:

That's ok.

Kim Lee:

I think it's just don't underestimate the power of being around people. Accountability.

Claudine Land:

That's right.

Kim Lee:

Encouragement can really help you grow your business. And when we talk about growth, like we say, we're in the business of growing businesses. If our members aren't growing, then we're not being successful. But we talk about growth as far as several different ways that you can grow, whether it's revenue, whether it's profitability, whether its team members or your personal life balance, whatever, that's kind of what... Your personal happiness and happiness with your work and your life. That is a huge area of growth that we can provide for business owners and employees.

Claudine Land:

And it's funny that you mentioned that, Kim, because on The Virtual Ingenuity Business Podcast, we did an episode last week about your well-being. Finding that life-work balance is so important. When I am at Forge, I feel as though that balance is there. You know you feel like, oh wow, you're sitting in a virtual atmosphere previously and then you come to Forge and it's so open, it's so friendly. You never know who you're going to meet. That's the wonderful part about it. And a business is all about building those relationships. And at Forge, you all do it really well.

Kim Lee:

Oh, thank you.

Claudine Land:

Kim, what is the one piece of advice that you wish someone had given you when starting your business? And we're going to end with this.

Kim Lee:

So this one's easy because it is the biggest lesson that I've learned. So starting a business is really hard. For me, probably most of my anxiety and stressful times, and tears have all dealt with conflict of some way. I hate conflict. Some people don't even see it as conflict, but those kinds of conversations and some money things too. But I can remember very specifically, and I actually just was telling somebody this, I don't even remember what the anxiety and tears were about. Like the specific issue, but it was very bad.

Kim Lee:

I mean, I was feeling very bad and it was Christmas and I was sitting with my husband and all the lights were out except for the glow of the Christmas tree. And I was having a very hard time. And he pointed out, he said, "Everything that you go through, like this situation is just one of those presents under the tree. It is a perfectly wrapped present with a big red, beautiful bow on it from the Lord that this is exactly what you need at this moment. This is exactly what you need for your good, your growth, and his glory." And so it's like, I have no idea how things are going to work out. It could be as bad as I am

imagining, or it could be great. Most of the time things are never as bad as you imagine. Except in Covid. But it could be as bad as you're imagining. But it's still, it's not a surprise. And it's exactly what you need at that moment. You don't know why.

Claudine Land:

At that moment. That's right.

Kim Lee:

Yeah. So that for me, and I definitely am getting better. That was like four years ago. So I'm definitely getting better at dealing with things and the anxiety that can come with those really hard moments. But that's the perspective that I always try to remind myself of. This is what you need. You don't know why, I don't know if we'll open our doors tomorrow, but it doesn't matter because it's not a surprise and this is exactly what I need.

Claudine Land:

That is so interesting that you say that because I had a guest, Dr. Valencia Moses, on the podcast last week, and she ended with the same, similar thing. And one part that stuck out to me, Kim, was she said she really helps her clients to grow through what they go through. Out of everything that we talked about. That was a sticking point for me. I will never forget that. So life is really about growth.

Kim Lee:

I'm writing that down.

Claudine Land:

Yeah. I just thought, wow, that was like when Oprah says she has these "aha moments", that was that "aha moment" for me. You grow through what you go through.

Kim Lee:

Yeah.

Claudine Land:

Right? That is awesome. So thank you so much, Kim, for joining.

Kim Lee:

Thank you. This was so great.

Claudine Land:

Yes. It's always great to see you and hang out with you. I'll see you again soon.

Kim Lee:

Okay.

Claudine Land:

And you all please remember to follow Forge on Instagram. They're on LinkedIn and Facebook as well.

Kim Lee:

And I will say, if you are listening, you're like, I want to go check this out. You can book a tour very easily on our website. It's all over the website. So hope to see somebody soon. Yeah, I would love that.

Claudine Land:

All right. And then tell them you heard it on the Virtual Ingenuity Business Podcast as well.

Kim Lee:

That's right.

Claudine Land:

Awesome.

Kim Lee:

Yes, I love that.

Claudine Land:

All right. So you can listen to more of the Virtual Ingenuity Business podcast on Apple Podcast and Spotify.

Until next time, my friends, let's impact together!