

Everyday Humanitarians

with Travis Hellstrom

Featuring



Community Collaboration and Coworking Spaces

with Andrew Conley

Andrew Conley is COO of [100State](#), a non-profit that provides workspace, mentorship and opportunities for entrepreneurial young professionals in Madison, Wisconsin.

Travis: Today we're sitting down with Andrew, who's COO and one of the founding directors of 100State. 100State is a community and workspace for entrepreneurs and problem solvers who are not only trying to do great work, but also solve problems in their community. Thanks so much for joining us, Andrew.

Andrew: Thanks for having me, Travis!

Travis: Could you first start out by telling us a little bit about what is a co-working space and how does a co-working space work?

Andrew: Yeah, that's a great question. Based on my knowledge of the history of co-working stuff, it kind of started in 2005, I think, out in the San Francisco area where—that's, of course, at the core of the entrepreneurial movement and things like that, especially in the tech industries and things like that.

The idea was providing space to people who need to come together who are doing work, but aren't going into a particular office to do it. It can be a lot of different things. I think some people who are—they might be independent contractors. They might be freelancers or entrepreneurs who need a place to work. It's, of course, nice to get out of the home to do that so that you're not as distracted. A lot of people, who, I think, had probably before them, maybe been going to coffee shops and things like that.

Of course, you're going to get a different type of vibe and atmosphere where you go to places like that. What the co-working space really offers is a place for these people to go to get their work done, but in addition to that and I think more importantly, it provides them a community of people who are all kind of doing similar things that you can be a part of that in some manner.

Some people are more high touch on that level or low touch on that level that allows you to bounce ideas off of people and be a part of a network or community of people that are doing similar things as you.

Travis: That's really cool! It seems like it's a growing movement worldwide, too. I've noticed that there's a rise in the number of co-working spaces all over the world. Is that what you've seen and has it been mostly in bigger cities or is it starting to be in places all over?

Andrew: It's starting to be in places all over and I'm going to misquote this, but I read an article. I think there are thousands a year that are popping up all over the globe now. I think it's due to a lot of—it's a lot of timing, like everything is and I think this generation of workers is shrugging off some of what's been done historically and looking for new models on ways to work.

So places where you can be more creative and they're looking for different job models, I think. At least in the United States, the whole idea of the American Dream where you settle down in one career and you work it for 40 or 50 years. I think that model is dead and people are looking for places where they can change and be more innovative and creative and mix things up and do this one year and go do something else different the next year.

I think that what we're seeing in the space wise is that the space is following that mentality of this generation where workspaces used to be more rigid. You had more cubicles and things like that and people are turned off from that. Now it's more of this creative, collaborative, come-as-you-want type model. I think the space is just reflecting the mindset of a lot of the new working generation.

Travis: Yeah, can you tell us a little bit about what normal features are in a co-working space and specifically at 100State, the kinds of features that you have there?

Andrew: Sure. I think—actually, I was down in Austin, Texas about three months and I got to hang out at a few of the different notable co-working spaces down there. While I was down there, I went to Techstars and I was chatting with some of the guys there, and we were talking about what makes a great co-working space. How do you really design something that's going to work the best?

What we all kind of agreed upon was it's a place where you can go, where you can get your work done, and there's a 50/50 balance of space where you can kind of get away from people to really put your head down and get things done, as well as an equal amount of space where you can socialize with people and be a part of that community and share ideas and things like that as well.

At the basics, it's amenities like you're definitely going to need Internet and places for people to sit down and work. Things like having someone at the front desk, having phones, conference rooms, mail, things like that. But I think bigger than that it's really having space for people to be able to work and having a space that's reflective of creativity and innovation as well. It's

something where you go and you get inspired and hopefully it's by the people and by the space alike are inspiring you to do great things.

Travis: Yeah, and specifically at 100State, one of the things that I think is so cool and I honestly haven't seen it at other co-working spaces yet is the community focus, where you're bringing in organizations from the community to try to provide solutions and hear their challenges from the city, from the police department, from non-profits. That seems unique to me. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Andrew: Yeah, so that kind of started naturally as we got this going. We quickly gained a good reputation in Madison, Wisconsin as being young, talented, tech-savvy problem solvers, and we started putting that to use. In the beginning, it was there are all kinds of different organizations and individuals and businesses around town that we thought would be strong to partner with.

What we would do to get to know them is bring them in and do a brainstorm, and we've continued to do that. That's become something that's very at the core of the model of what we do. We bring in different organizations. We sit down and we brainstorm and we just talk about what they do, talk about what we do. What we found is a lot of ways—we figured out ways that we could help them, either in that meeting with ideas or taking it to the next level and assisting them on different projects that they had and using our members' skillsets to help them with those projects.

As that got rolling, we decided to keep it going and we decided that it's a real easy way for us to both use our skillsets and give back to the community, and I think that that's one of the really powerful things about what we do at 100State. I think that we really want to be able to continue to help our entrepreneurs and our innovators and problem solvers by continuing to develop their skillsets and be able to use that in a way that's positive for giving back to the community as well.

We formalized that model and continue to do that, and now we're trying to do one every week or every other week with different organizations to sit down with them and figure out what are the challenges that they're facing,

other problems, and how might we give assistance or know someone who might be of assistance.

Travis: Right. Well, and the cool thing to me, too, is that it benefits, obviously, the community, which is awesome, but it benefits the entrepreneurs and these people who want to get out there and get experience, be able to partner with new people. That is also really cool. Can you speak a little bit to the typical—I don't want to say typical because I'm sure that everyone is unique in the space, but can you speak to what is your community like? What are the people that are involved in 100State like, the entrepreneurs, the innovators, the problem solvers? Can you describe a little bit of their backgrounds and what brings them to the space?

Andrew: Yeah, that's a good question and it's something we've been trying to collect more information about, too, to figure out what is our sweet spot. I would say the typical 100Stater is someone who's in their mid to late 20's who is either full-time pursuing an entrepreneurial project or startup or part-time doing it, where they might have a job and then also pursuing this on the side. They're kind of flirting with the idea of taking it to the next level. How serious do they want to be with the type of project that they're doing?

With that said, our members really—they run the gamut of anything. We have—this being a big college town, we have a lot of students. The directors have done a lot of work partnering with different university organizations, with different universities around town to getting student groups involved. The UW, University of Wisconsin-Madison, has really put together a lot of different cross-specialized groups to bring together business students and computer science and engineering and biotech and kind of, "Hey, these people have good ideas. These people have business savvy. There are a lot of things here that you could run in the startup world." We've kind of positioned ourselves to kind of be right in the middle of that too to help some of those people out as well.

But on the other end, we have people who are older as well. I mean we found that a lot of people who have been successful entrepreneurs want to be a part of the community as well, which is extremely powerful for us because they're excellent resources for people who are just getting started.

We have some people who have been entrepreneurially successful who are now mentors in the space who are just part of the community and they come. They hang out. They talk with people. They're very much interested in being part of brainstorm and things like that as well, too.

People who are working on different projects, they use the community to look for other people that can help them in ways where their expertise falls short and can learn different skills like that as well, too.

Travis: That's great. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to talk a little bit about you personally and how as a founding member, this was an idea that you and other people had and you created. It wasn't just this space that you fell into. It was something that didn't exist and that you created, and it's also had a couple different iterations before becoming what it is now. Can you talk a little bit about where you were coming from? What inspired you to even think of this idea and work with others to make it a reality?

Andrew: Yeah, well, my background—so I originally went to business school before moving up to Madison and starting to work in the healthcare/IT world up here and flirting with the idea in business school of becoming an entrepreneurship major is something that always appealed to me. Running your own business seemed like a daunting task was something that would be amazingly rewarding as well.

I guess just inherently I had that in me, so I've always wanted to explore it. Really what happened with the history of 100State was a couple friends of mine started working on a startup together two and a half years ago now, I think. Or maybe it was a year and a half ago, something like that. Yeah, a year and a half ago.

They decided to get some office space, so they rented out a train car. There's this train that's downtown that different cars of it are different office spaces for different companies. They rented out the caboose, but they needed to get other people in the space to pay for the rent, so they brought in some other entrepreneurs and freelancers that they knew and they created caboose co-working was what it was called, since we were on a caboose of a train.

There were 10 or 11 original members who were there, and that's about the time that I started getting involved as well, hanging out there more often, playing music with people just creatively as well as getting involved with some projects that were going on creating Tech Madison, as well as doing some web design for the city as well.

What happened there was we realized that there was strength in that community. There were a lot of side projects that people started working on together and cross-collaborating and we knew people. If a website needed new photographs, then we had a photographer there so we could collaborate on working together in different ways. We saw a lot of strength in that community of people.

From there, a couple of the founders got some good press about what had been going on there and kind of this entrepreneurial steed that was starting up in Madison. That got hold by a larger consulting company who was getting ready to move office space. They contacted us and started negotiating—getting us to move in. They wanted to have a co-working space within their office space that they were moving into.

With that, we grew and we grew into a bigger space and that's really where 100State kind of started taking off was we moved in with this consulting company, and that's where we're at now, so it's located at 100 State Street, so our name is based off of our address. We still share that space with that consulting company who we actually have a couple of—our members who are working for that company as well as some of their company are members at 100State, so it's definitely that partnership thing that grew there.

We saw a lot of different things that are kind of all happening. We saw the strength in the community of people who could really support each other with what they were doing from entrepreneurial perspective. We also saw a need in Madison for this community of young professionals who can really strengthen each other and really showcase that Madison is a place where you can be really innovative. It's really easy to open doors because it's not too big. It's not someplace where you have to climb a lot of rungs in a ladder to get to something. It's more achievable here.

We saw that Madison, at least with our peers, didn't seem like a place where a lot of 25- to 30-year-olds were living. People were always like, "Oh, we love Madison," but if you're not here for the university or if you had moved up here to work at Epic, it kind of seemed like a place where you might be leaving for a while and maybe coming back to. Something like that.

We wanted to build it as a retainer of talent in Madison, too, where people can—we can really showcase that you can really make a big difference and kind of start your own thing in Madison as well. We got a lot of feedback that shared the same sentiment from other business people in town, from the mayor, from other people along those lines. We saw it really as a great opportunity to build this community of people and really step up the entrepreneurial game in Madison and show what kind of talent that we have.

Travis: Well, I know you've said before too that you and others are making a decision to stay in the community rather than leave and to try to make a difference. I think I agree with what you said before. The world is changing a lot in terms of work. This kind of make-your-own-work or the increased freelancer work that's being done around the world is a really interesting thing, but besides just observing that, you've helped to harness it and bring it back into the community and keep it there, which I think is really exciting.

What kind of advice would you give to other people who are inspired by the kind of work you're doing and might not have a co-working space where they live or they might live in a place that they think is too small to do that in? I know you have said before even Madison didn't have that and people might have thought, "Oh, well. It's the capital of the state, but it's still not San Francisco. It's not New York City or L.A." I think that's daunting for people, but what kind of advice would you give people like that who are excited about the idea?

Andrew: Well, I would say definitely check out what is in your community. See if something does exist. Definitely look there first and see—if you're looking to start something, some type of co-working space, start talking to people in the area and figuring out what are the strengths of your city that should be

focused on that can really add benefit to people who are trying to be successful as well as playing on the strengths of that community as well.

One thing we did here in Madison is with a university hospital and a large healthcare/IT firm and things like that, healthcare has been a lot of the focus of what we do and we're very conscious of that. We're conscious of what does Madison need and how can we be of use to them with what we're doing? I would say that's definitely something to be aware of as well.

The more people you talk to and the more you find out about your city, I think, is really going to be where the strong foothold is going to be. I would also say look to online communities too. Travis, like what you're doing and stuff. That's a great way to get started with advanced humanity, things like that, where you can meet people from different areas and start collaborating and start getting in that mindset and of that spirit and stuff and see what other people are doing, too. Bouncing ideas off people and sharing great ideas, I think, is really what creates change.

I was chatting with a friend of mine in Fort Wayne, Indiana, who he shared similar sentiments about it. He wanted to be in a more entrepreneurial, creative environment and he wasn't sure Fort Wayne was the right place for that. I gave him kind of the same advice that I've been saying here. I was like, "Keep your eye out. Look for what the strengths and what are people trying to do? What are the innovators looking at doing in that community and stuff and how can you build around that?"

Then we talked more about brainstorming for ways to have an online community as well. For people who might not be in the right spot or have the right whirlwind of effects to create that space right away, they can at least stay in tune with what others are doing too.

Travis: Yeah, absolutely. Beyond just the individuals that have found you, you've also found organizations that want to partner with you and work with you. That's pretty exciting. How would someone go about finding the right partners or how did 100State find the right partners when you started off?

Andrew: That's a great question and we've been lucky enough to not have a shortage of partners, by any means. We've been lucky enough to have enough good press and enough good—a strong enough community that's recognized the value of what we're offering too. I get emails every day with new people who want to sit down and chat about how we could partner with 100State and things like that as well. That's one thing that we're very glad to have, and we definitely take the time to sit down with everybody and see what they're doing and stuff like that, too, and see how we can help them.

I would say figure out what is it that you're trying to do. What's the core of what you're trying to do? How do you make sure that everybody else is seeing that same type of vision and that's where you're going to really find the good partners?

At 100State, one of our mottos is, "Win, win, win." Everything we do at 100State, we want it to be a win for our community of 100State members, a win for the person who's running that project, as well as a win for the community at large. That's really kind of the barebones criteria for if you're going to do something at 100State, as long as it fits those criteria, as long as it's benefitting everyone involved in the community at-large, that's really what we're looking for. When we look for partners, I think we're looking for the same type of thing too.

Travis: That's really great. I love that same model, too. Another model you talked about was the lean startup model and I think that a lot of people feel the need to have everything perfect and have all the money and everything exactly right before they start, but the lean startup model is a little different. Can you talk about what that is and how that inspired you and your work?

Andrew: Sure, so yeah, it's definitely a book that if you're interested in co-working, if you're interested in entrepreneur-type things, then it's definitely something to check out. For us, it's a better model. It's a model that makes sure that you're not wasting your time working on something that's not useful or valuable for people.

Really what it does is it helps mitigate the risk with being an entrepreneur. A lot of what we see and a lot of what that book goes into is talking about how

people will work on something for months or years and they won't have ever talked to a customer about it or a potential user of it. What happens is that these very talented people will end up spending months and years working on something that ends up not being valuable or useful at all.

What we've done instead and kind of it plays into the history of how 100State started was the more we talk with people about problems and issues and what they want and what they see right up front, the quicker you can find out how successful you're going to be. I think that's one thing that's made 100State a big success is always having our ear to the ground in the community and talking to people and figuring out, "How do we make this a great working model?" It's something that we advocate with our entrepreneurs as well.

It kind of goes back to our brainstorming model too. A lot of projects come out of that, and the idea is that some of those projects could turn into startups. What we've done is we've already—we've sourced the problem and we know that we have potential users before we've even come up with the startup idea. That way you know you're addressing a problem that it's urgent for somebody to have some type of a solution for it.

Travis: Yeah. That reminds me about Peace Corps a little bit, too. We talk about needs assessment all the time and making sure that what you think is a problem is something the community thinks is a problem before you go in and say, "Here's a solution," and they say, "We don't have a problem." I think that's an anchoring point.

Andrew: Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, I think that's very comparable.

Travis: I guess one of my last questions is when you interact with young people who are in college or maybe in high school and they're looking at the changing working landscape, and like you said, things are changing rapidly and I think a lot of people are seeing that and it can be kind of daunting to walk into that. What kind of advice would you give to young people who are just now starting off in their careers, trying to figure out what to do, and they're listening to all this? They're really excited, but they're not really sure what the next steps are for them. What kind of advice might you give to those people?

Andrew: I'd probably start off by saying if you're interested in doing entrepreneurial things, come stop by 100State so you can start getting involved. But really what we try to do and we've done a lot with younger people as well is to really show them possibilities that they may not see otherwise.

I know when I was younger, when I was in high school, I didn't really think of this as a possibility or as an opportunity or a way to work or a way to start a company and things like that, too. I think opening their eyes and getting them involved to kind of see what does it look like on a day-to-day basis being an entrepreneur, if that's something I want to be.

As well as—I think what a lot of people are noticing too along with all of this change that's happening in the world is that nothing is quite as stable as it's always been. There's a lot of change in industry and things like that, too. So always be learning. That's another one of our mottos, too, is always be learning something new and always making sure that you're making yourself valuable and exploring what you love to do too.

The more, I think, that we open their eyes to this idea of you can be an entrepreneur, find something that you're passionate about. That's kind of another thing that's really at the core of what 100State does is making sure people are finding what they're passionate about because we know that's going to be a recipe for success.

So helping people do that. Find their passion and opening their eyes to this different world of things that exist that if they have this advantage that they can take hold of and really make root of and helping them make a decision on what they want to do from there. I think that's really what's powerful for young people.

Travis: Yeah. Okay, I lied. I have one more question. What would be a way that someone can help you? I think even if they're not in an area—obviously, if they're in the area, they need to come by right away. If they're not in the area, what would be ways that people who watch this and are really excited about what you're doing can help you and the mission of 100State?

Andrew: That's a great question. I think that we're advocates, but we're advocates for this type of mentality that we've created here in this community. I think that's something we want to spread worldwide, too. We wouldn't mind having advocates for that type of philosophy elsewhere as well. We think that—I don't necessarily think that we created this philosophy or anything like that, too, but it's definitely something that we believe in.

The more collaborative and open-minded and innovative and taking initiative and stuff like that people can be and supportive of these types of communities to really help people find their passion, take it to the next level, and be successful, that's definitely a way that people can help us.

If people have ideas or if they have ways that they think that they can be of use or that 100State might be of use for them, definitely check out 100State.com and you'll find ways to be able to contact us and hook up with us and we'd definitely be willing to partner or help out in any way too.

Travis: That's great. Thank you again, Andrew, for sitting down with us. It was really wonderful to talk with you and I really appreciate all of your answers to all of my questions.

Andrew: Not a problem! It's been more than fun, Travis.

Travis: Thanks!