

Greenhouse Coworking: Fostering community and innovation



Greenhouse Coworking opened its doors in Suva in November 2021, becoming Fiji's first full-service virtual and in-person coworking community. The creative hub provides local MSMEs with affordable office space, skills development, community support (in-person and virtual) and networking opportunities.

MDF supported the coworking space with the development of their business plan and financial modeling, hiring Greenhouse Coworking's first Community Manager, and incentivising membership packages to encourage uptake. MDF is now gradually exiting as the business models show encouraging signs of sustainability.

MDF sat down with Maria Ronna Luna Pastorizo-Sekiguchi, the visionary founder of The Greenhouse Studio and Greenhouse Coworking, to learn about their journey after two years in operation.

? Bula Vinaka Ronna, could you please share with us what inspired you to start Greenhouse Coworking?

Greenhouse Coworking is about building a spirit of community. There is a physical space because people need space. But it's really about people meeting others, collaborating, and refining ideas to help each other. The Greenhouse Studio and Greenhouse Coworking have one mission: for people to converge in a space, whether virtual or physical, to collaborate and solve the region's biggest problems. That's the business that we're in.

I started The Greenhouse Studio in 2014 with just a laptop, mobile Wi-Fi, a phone and two clients. I couldn't afford a physical space. We aim to inspire change and help solve our problems in the region by being innovative and creative through our communications agency. Opening Greenhouse Coworking is an organic extension of The Greenhouse Studio as it provides a space for others to innovate.

? What difficulties did you encounter in your efforts to start Greenhouse Coworking?

The main one was getting people to experience the vision. There weren't other coworking spaces equivalent to what we envisioned when pushing this idea. Even internally, there was a lot of fear because we are a small business. That was a very emotional and somewhat harrowing experience, especially during COVID. Greenhouse Coworking also required a massive amount of financial capital, and just like how it was hard for people to visualise it, it was tough to get people to invest in it. We had a pair of investors who caught our vision because they knew about it for a while and worked with The Greenhouse Studio. Other investors came on board when we opened the space. The initial capital came from The Greenhouse Studio, and that wasn't easy because the capital required was huge. We wouldn't have been able to do it without MDF support and The Greenhouse Studio, which was working so hard during COVID, to come up with the capital.

? Did you anticipate these challenges?

When we initially pitched the idea, we had a vision and a basic set of numbers, but we lacked a sustainable business plan, which MDF helped us develop. We didn't have the capacity to create a three-year plan, conduct market research, or engage an accountant to do the financial modelling to ensure it works. MDF supported us with that first. Their assistance was instrumental in de-risking our expansion into Greenhouse Coworking, a significant venture for a small business. Rental properties in Suva are horrendous, and finding the ideal place, location, and size is key to sustainability. If we were too small, we wouldn't be sustainable. It was a lengthy process, but with MDF's support, we managed to secure the space and refine our pitch to potential investors. The sustainable business plan was key and a top priority, ultimately enabling us to open in October 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

? How has business been since it opened two years ago?

MSMEs and consultants make up over 40 per cent of our total revenue. Over 50 per cent are organisations and corporations, which is interesting. The two top-earning income streams are the memberships and the meeting room bookings. In fact, our revenue from membership plans grew by 75 per cent and meeting rooms by nine per cent over the past year. These are mostly corporations or organisations looking for creative places for workshops and breakouts. That was interesting because we wouldn't have known this unless we started the business. We also assumed we needed one Community Manager and a part-time Business Development Manager. Still, with the demand, it wasn't feasible at all. Now, we have five people, including a Business Development Manager and an accountant, who are shared by both The Greenhouse Studio and Greenhouse Coworking. So, we're exceeding initial targets set out in our sustainable business plan and revenue has been consistent since we opened which we're pretty happy with.

? How has Greenhouse Coworking supported MSMEs, especially women micro-entrepreneurs?



Over half of our total current membership are women. While micro-entrepreneurs are not our main membership demographic, women micro-entrepreneurs have been able to utilise some of our business development services and networking opportunities. In fact, women MSMEs have accounted for up to 50 per cent of participation in a few of the events we've hosted.

We also host an annual Coworking Week and an open day where anyone can access our coaches. During the open day we hold a day or night market that features our members, including YGAP (yHer programme), who work with women micro-entrepreneurs. This gives them a platform to promote their products and services.

Our partners, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), have also worked with us on an incubator program for women micro-entrepreneurs in the Qauia settlement (located on the outskirts of Suva) and an accelerator program involving creative entrepreneurs, some of whom are women.

? What are the main contributors to Greenhouse Coworking's growth and success over the past two years?

Our Greenhouse Studio team. The process felt like a long labour, and in the end, we ended up having to do an emergency caesarean because it was so much more expensive! But the pain is part of the process, and you appreciate it more (laughs). Our business mantra is to inspire change, which means we do that internally too. We support each other. That's our culture, and that translates into everything else. If the Studio earned more money during COVID than they did the year before COVID so that we can open this space, what does that tell you? Everybody went over and above so that we could get work out and get paid more. It's our team culture. When you have the right people, it changes everything.



© Ronna (kneeling centre) with Greenhouse Studio and Coworking team

? What is Greenhouse Coworking's plan for the future?

We aspire to have a regional presence. While having a physical space in Suva is beneficial, it limits our impact. A virtual community means your impact can reach people in Labasa, Kadavu, and beyond Fiji. The plans are there, but we also want to ensure sustainability. We want to make sure that we are financially able to keep running the space and become the go-to coworking space when you're in Suva. We want that creative hub for the community and then, beyond that, really building that virtual community online where people can support each other, whether that's training courses, micro-skilling or business, learning how to do business, or having partnerships with other coaches or mentors from around the Pacific. It takes time, but I think the virtual community is part of Greenhouse Coworking's future.