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Empowering Entrepreneurship at the Freedom Business Collective

How ProdataKey (Co)Works in Shared Office Spaces

COWORKING CASE STUDY

On the sunny morning of September 19th, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina, a crowd of people gathered for the official opening of the Freedom Business Collective – a shared working space dedicated to fostering the success and growth of the city's small business entrepreneurs. "This day marks more than just the opening of a building," explained Malcolm Graham, a member of the Charlotte city council, "it marks the opening of doors to opportunity, economic empowerment, and growth for the residents of this business district." As Graham and the minds behind the Freedom Business Collective cut the ribbon drawn across the front door, they welcomed visitors inside to explore the state-of-the-art facility, specially designed to foster creativity and business success. A key aspect to creating this inspiring coworking environment was the installation of ProdataKey access control, which promises both security and functionality in any space.

The Freedom Business Collective: Empowering Charlotte's Entrepreneurs

The Freedom Business Collective is the most recent initiative of Freedom Communities, a place-based, nonprofit organization serving the Freedom Drive Corridor of West Charlotte. Freedom Communities' Director of Economic Impact, Mark Talbot, explains that this area is "historically the lowest income, most challenged community in our city." Alongside projects aiming to improve family stability, affordable housing, and early education opportunities in this area, Mark and the team at Freedom Communities recognized a need to make entrepreneurial resources and opportunities more easily available. In particular, the **small business owners of West Charlotte faced two barriers to growth: the shortage of affordable operating spaces and the lack of convenient and affordable learning competencies.** In response to this, Mark explains, "we at Freedom Communities dreamed and asked, 'What if both of these needs could be provided under the same roof?' And that's what the Freedom Business Collective is."

Mark describes the layout of this 5000-square foot business hub as such: "We've got an educational space that can expand into a lobby area that feels a lot like a mini coworking space, which we offer as well. We actually have some desks and lockers for people who don't need an office. But then we also have fifteen offices that are exclusively for these small businesses." By mid-October, the Freedom Business Collective was already running at full capacity, with all fifteen offices

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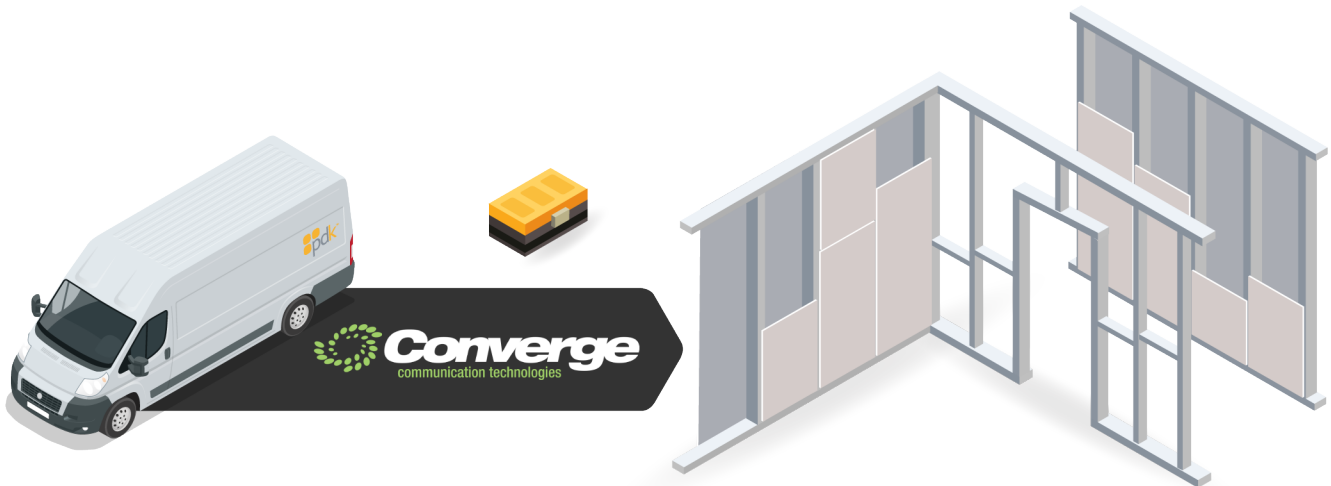> ##
> **Mark Talbot -** Director of Economic Impact

being used by a variety of Charlotte's local business owners. "We have a diversity of businesses," Mark explains, "from a guy who pumps concrete to a lady who sells eyelashes. We braid hair, we have home healthcare, we have a seamstress who makes prom dresses, we even have a testing lab that takes urine and blood samples for DNA and drug testing. It's as diverse as can be!"

Securing the Freedom Business Collective

The construction of the Freedom Business Collective began with a complete gutting and renovation of the existing building. This meant that, when it came to designing something like an access control system, Mark and his team were starting entirely from scratch. In order to devise and implement a quality security system, Mark reached out to Converge Communications Technologies, a North Carolina-based installer. Converge's CEO, Brandon Lowery, was ecstatic to have this opportunity to help out.

"They serve the lower income community, in a part of town that's safe but needs to be monitored," explains Brandon. **"To be able to monitor the space – to see who's coming and going, who accessed the door, when they accessed the door – was very important to Mark."** Another large consideration when it came to the Freedom Business Collective's access control system was flexibility. Brandon recalls the outlining process being centered around this idea of functionality: "We took his site plans and started marking what needs to go where, for example a wireless access point, a data closet, doors, and so on. Mark really wanted flexibility – the ability to turn off cards and access on the fly, the ability to really see the

community they're serving." Recognizing the Freedom Business Collective's need for security and flexibility, Brandon suggested that they install a ProdataKey access control system.
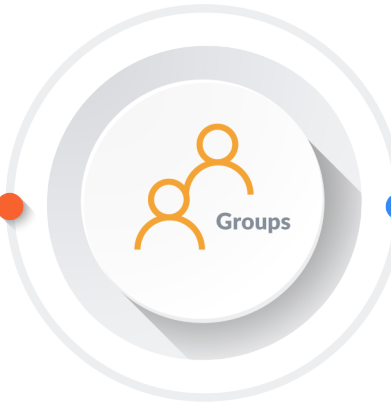
ProdataKey's Cloud-Based Security Solution

The Freedom Business Collective has opted to utilize ProdataKey hardware in both the interior and exterior of the space. The set up of the building's exterior entry points is simple: with ProdataKey readers installed at the doors, access can be granted to approved members of the Freedom Business Collective upon presentation of a key fob, mobile, or PIN credential. However, when it comes to the interior of the building, Mark and Brandon had to dive deeper into the PDK.io platform and set up some more specific group permissions. The Freedom Business Collective offers two types of membership, Business and Associate Members, which have separate sets of permissions. **"We have sort of a special need in that the front of the building – which includes the lobby, the education space, the bathrooms, and our coworking environment – is separated by two doors from the offices in the back of the building that have exclusive use by the businesses."** While Associate Members have access to only the front of the building, Business Members have 24/7 access to all parts of the building, including their own personal office space in the back. Luckily, the set up of these permissions was as simple as could be, according to Mark, as it could all be done simply in the Groups page of the PDK.io 2.0 platform.

FULL ACCESS — Business Members — Groups — Associate Members — FRONT ACCESS

Creating Community in the Freedom Business Collective

Alongside providing business and educational opportunities to Charlotte's local business owners, Mark's overarching goal for the Freedom Business Collective was to foster a sense of community. ProdataKey helps to bolster this sense of community-building through the custom permissions granted to Associate and Business Members. Mark points out the 24/7 access unique to Business Members as an integral part of social bonding in the business hub, saying "They work all night! They've created a little all-nighter club, it reminds me of college when you had your all-night study groups. They'll be in here, bringing snacks and meals, with music playing while they work all night long." Another key facet of community-building in the Freedom Business Collective is local entrepreneur's access to shared working spaces, where they can collaborate and share ideas. According to Mark, "their encouragement of each other, their inspiration of each other, is one of our key values. It's a big deal, and we couldn't have that without this feeling of community and collaboration."

What is a Coworking Space?

The Freedom Business Collective makes use of coworking areas, a type of shared office space where members of different businesses and teams can work alongside one another. Coworking has become quite a popular method of office utilization, with a recent report showing that the global number of coworking spaces has **increased from 16,599 in 2018 to nearly 42,000 in 2024.** As coworking spaces grow in popularity, the management of these spaces evolves in turn, leading to the development of various coworking management systems in recent years.

In order to ensure that this co-space style of working functioned effectively in the Freedom Business Collective, Mark wanted to bring in software to help with the management of this space. After looking into a variety of options, Mark and his team landed on the perfect fit: Coworks.

Coworks: Efficacy and Community in Coworking Spaces

Coworks is software that streamlines the management of shared working areas. Created by entrepreneurs in a coworking space, the team behind Coworks knows from experience what features matter most, ranging from billing to event management, easy check in, visitor tours, room reservations, and more.
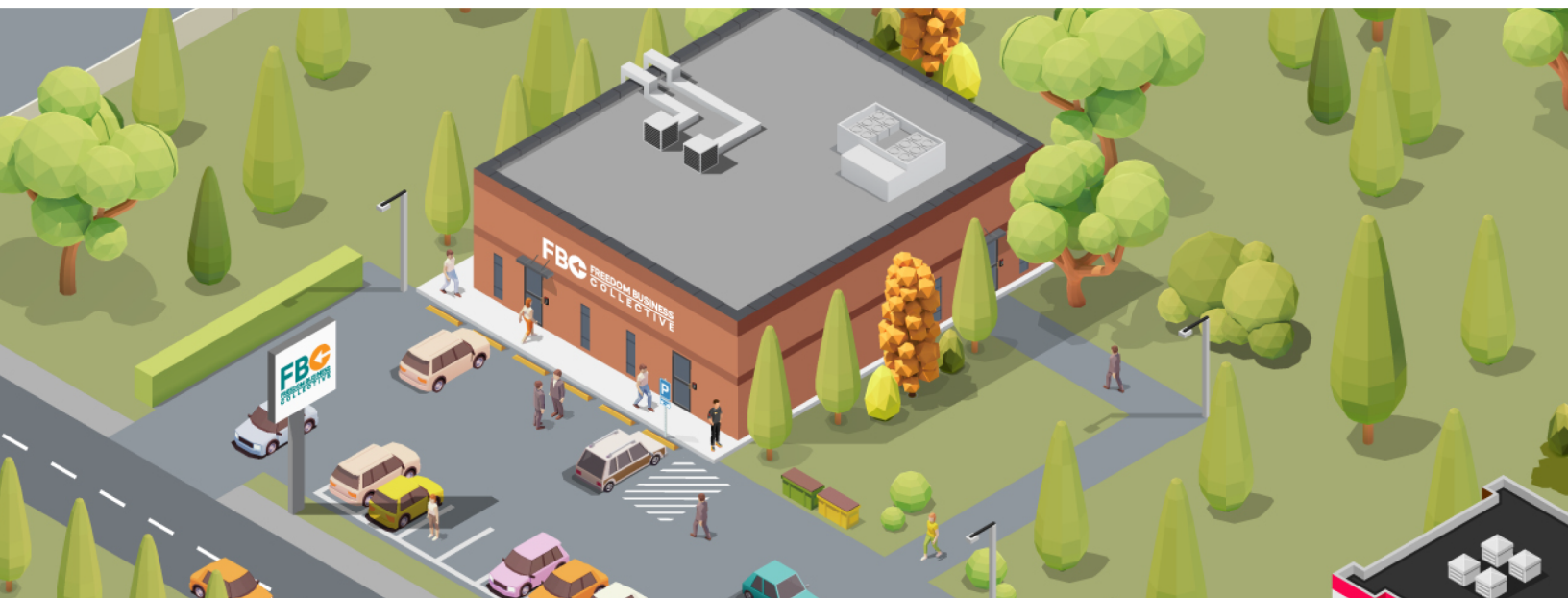
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> **Brandon Lowery -** Converge CEO
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The process of finding Coworks was a very intentional one, explains Mark: "We were talking to Coworks early on, and I looked at probably eight different software platforms for us to use, and Coworks was the one that fit us the best. They could handle a smaller facility like ours." Brandon was able to reach out to the local ProdataKey sales representative to see if it would be possible to integrate Coworks, and the answer was a resounding "Yes!" Not only was it possible, but it was simple. "It was literally just an upload, and then checking the databases to make sure everything was properly flowing back and forth," explains Brandon. "There's a plug-in that PDK has built that plugs into Coworks and makes it a single dashboard, which I found is most important for people." Once Coworks was synced with the ProdataKey system, Mark could immediately jump in and start managing user profiles synchronously across both systems.

When it comes to how the Freedom Business Collective utilizes Coworks, Mark identifies the three main functions they make use of: billing, communication, and reservations. Coworks makes billing and communication simple and customizable, creating a seamless experience for people working in a space like the Freedom Business Collective. Additionally, areas such as the conference room can be easily reserved in the Coworks platform, making it very simple for people to hold meetings or host larger educational events. "We've had two sessions already of

group educational sessions," explains Mark, "which have been, to me, the most awesome thing that's happened. When you get everybody in a room, fifteen or so small business people, all at the same stage of life, begging to learn, chomping at the bit, it's pretty exciting." **Integrating Coworks into their ProdataKey system allowed for a simple transfer of user information and management,** allowing for events like this to come to fruition easily and effectively.

Making Business Easier With ProdataKey and Coworks

Reflecting on the creation of the Freedom Business Collective's access control system, Mark recounts, "This access control, I have to admit, was much more complicated than I expected, but we've got a good team put together. We needed to put a safe and functional system in place, and Brandon [Converge] helped us do that, Coworks helped us do that, and ProdataKey helped us do that." Thanks to the collaboration between ProdataKey and Coworks, the Freedom Business Collective is functioning effectively at full capacity, serving and protecting the inspiring minds of West Charlotte.

If you want to learn more about how ProdataKey could benefit your business, schedule a demo today.

PDK is a team of security integrators with decades of hands-on, in-the-field experience. PDK believes that the best technology is created by professionals who know what it takes to secure a facility properly and provide the end user with a solution that instills confidence and safety.

PDK is passionate about creating technology to enhance the security, safety, and overall experience of both the professionals installing electronic access control and those that live with and use the system. PDK continues to create technology every day to enhance its products and the products of its technology partners.

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