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Uber, Airbnb, Pipeline discuss sharing economy's impact on South Florida

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Dozens gathered Friday morning under the gilded ceilings of the nearly 100-year-old Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables to discuss a burgeoning offshoot of technology: the sharing economy.

The panel was part part of the annual Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce conference. It featured representatives of sharing economy heavy hitters: Uber, Airbnb and Pipeline shared-working spaces.

Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce 2016 annual conference panel speakers. From left: Tom... more

The conversation revealed that beyond their chosen business model – one that, at its most basic level, simply capitalizes on idle goods – a number of parallels unite the three companies, each of whom has cemented a place in the South Florida business community.

"We're not taking a piece of the pie," said Airbnb public policy director Tom Martinelli. "We like to say we're making the pie bigger."

Technology, for one, is an integral part of all three companies, explicitly or otherwise.

Uber and Airbnb, both originating in San Francisco, create and operate complex software that enables peer-to-peer exchange of transportation and lodging, respectively. Uber reports that it employs more than 10,000 drivers across the tri-county region, while Martinelli said there are more than 6,000 Airbnb listings in Miami alone.

Pipeline, a network of "co-working spaces," doesn't harness technology as overtly as the other panelists do. It does, however, fuel tech, with South Florida locations in Miami, Coral Gables and, most recently, Fort Lauderdale.

Its shared-working environments provide a collaborative alternative to the fluorescent lights and cubicle farms of traditional office spaces. At Pipeline locations, fledgeling startups work to innovate tech.

"We have had a number of pure tech companies," said Pipeline co-founder Philippe Houdard, describing a company led by an MIT grad who built robotic arms but vacated Pipeline to test his product on cadavers.

But it's not just tech at Pipeline. The network welcomes all kinds of innovative companies seeking a home base.

"Some are less tech-based, and that's great, too," he said.

The representatives also emphasized that their companies are, paradoxically enough, working to enhance human interaction. Sure, they each bolster technology and the socialization gaps technology often creates (think smartphones at the dinner table, chat bots over customer service reps and Amazon drones replacing mailmen). But they are also bringing people together. "At Uber we're constantly thinking about bits and atoms," said Rachel Schultz, Uber's South Florida manager of partnerships.

Atoms power the software, and "bits" are the humans brought together by the atoms, she explained. Tech is, therefore, simply a conduit to affordably transport Uber users who were previously underserved and bring them closer to who they want to see and where they want to go.

Houdard echoed Schultz, highlighting the role sharing economy companies play in fostering human experiences that would not have otherwise unfolded. Shared working spaces, he said, feed off people's "tremendous desire to reconnect."

"A shared workspace has permitted people, particularly in Miami where people emigrate and first arrive alone, and they have the opportunity to immediately connect with people they would have never otherwise known if they worked in individual offices."

As innovation continues to develop in South Florida and infiltrate the business landscape, they say the hope is that the community will be welcoming.

"We hope Miami is embracing of this technology environment," Martinelli said. "As you say, you can't put the genie back in the bottle."

Debora Lima covers technology, startups, biotech and transportation. Get the latest tech news with our free daily newsletter. Click here to subscribe.