

“What is Coworking?” Some Research Notes

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Introduction

In the last few years I've been interested in “coworking”, which is often seen as part of the “new way of work”, and “the sharing economy” [13, 15]

I first encountered “coworking” (circa 2009) in the context of academic social studies of virtual organizations and computer supported collaborative work (CSCW). Amid fairly conventional topics, a few people were interested in studying newly founded “coworking” spaces, offices dedicated to temporary housing of freelancers, telecommuters, and “digital nomads”.

My interest was further piqued by the development of several such spaces in my home town, a small town which I knew to already be generously endowed with workspaces of many types. Why would we need or want a coworking space here? Even more interesting, it was instantly obvious that these local spaces are significantly different from each other, and serve different populations. It is truly remarkable to see multiple, quite different, “coworking spaces” that serve what must be a relatively small number of workers each.

When I began to think about these spaces I struggled to understand what, exactly, “coworking” is. It doesn't seem that the space or specific attributes of the space are critical, nor are the spaces necessarily different, physically, from conventional office spaces, or from alternative public spaces such as libraries or coffee shops.

As I began to explore the question, I discovered that coworking is not only part of “the sharing economy” (also known as, “the Uber economy”), supporting what I call “the new way of work”, it is also a “movement”, with conferences, wikis, and all the trappings [6-8, 11, 20].

OK, this is getting interesting. There's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear.

But this wasn't the whole story, not by a long shot. Not everyone agrees about or even cares about the “movement”, whatever it really is. In fact, coworking spaces are organized in many ways, offering many different services and “amenities”, and, everyone agrees, have substantially different “vibes” and “cultures”.

Some coworking spaces are noisy, nerf-gun-battling, high tech “boys clubs”. Others are filled with writers and artists. Some are business incubators, filled with tech startups and developers. Others are social enterprises, filled with local community development initiatives. There are large, international chains of cowork spaces, and tiny, (literally) kitchen table spaces. Still others offer spas or even beach resorts.

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How can these things all be “cowork spaces”? What is the essential feature they have in common?

The answer turns out to be “community”! Across all these cases, the space serves and is inhabited by a community of workers, a community that shares the space and values the connection to the community that happens there. This community resembles the “culture” of a company in many ways, but the workers are independent, and the space is not owned their employer.

In other words, coworking is a social or anthropological phenomenon. Cool!

Even better, these communities are scarcely chance developments. They are consciously created and maintained. In some cases, it is describes as “curating” the community membership. There is a growing body of knowledge and practice, and there are now professional “community managers”, and a training program to help promulgate “Cotivation” [5].

Cooler and cooler.

So this is my quest, to discover the many ways that people answer the question “What is coworking?” What kind of communities create and inhabit coworking spaces, what do they do there, and why? What does the space need to be? How do you create and operate a coworking space? How well do they work?

What is the “coworking movement”, and how does it fit with other “movements” such as open source, social enterprises, and so on?

Most fun of all, what kinds of spaces exist? How are they similar, how are they distinct?

Some Background

The coworking concept emerged from corporate settings, where workers, especially technical workers, can have a temporary office away from home. I myself saw this implemented within a major company quite a while ago (in the 1990s?), in the form of a suite of desks that were occupied by visiting technicals for a week, or a month, or whatever. The space was secured as a corporate site and provided easy access to secured corporate networks and resources for workers away from their home office.

Coworking also seems to grow out of telecommuting, exploiting the same technology and organizational logic. In “telecommuting” the worker is remote from an office and company, but belongs to that organization. (In an extreme case, there may be no central office at all, as in the case of Wordpress [3].) Telecommuters might work from home, or from a coffee shop or library.

At the same time, much of the economy has evolved to become “the gig economy”, staffed by freelancers [13]. The gig economy is closely related to “the sharing economy”

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[4], the Uberization of everything. Following the logic, why own an office when you can rent a desk and a fraction of the infrastructure just when you need it?

One influential company, Liquid Talent (LT) tells the story that after the 2008 crash, office workers “had no place to go” and many would not want to go back to a corporate office, were that an option [15]. They wanted, instead, to “operate on their own terms and in fun locations” (p, 7) “A place that combined the energetic, open feel of Starbucks with more collaboration and access to like-minded business types” (pp. 7-8) Enter coworking spaces.

Coworking is, of course, not “not just in the technology”, but is all about “collaborating”. The space is “fun, inspiring, collaborative, and creative” p.8. Collaboration happens naturally because “you are comfortable enough to walk up to someone and start a conversation.” (p. 8)

For LT, the prototypical example of coworking is WeWork, a large chain [26]. WeWork “works”, says LT because “[p]eople want to take control of the way they work and have an ability to influence the feeling of an office and create a community.” (p. 9). Also, nomadic workers like on-demand, short term office rental, But above all, cowork spaces “offer exceptional benefits that you will never get at home or in a coffee shop.” (p. 9) These “amenities” include local events, classes, and even summer camps.

“With easy access to co-working spaces around the globe, now we don’t have to worry about where we are going to work from.” (p.10)

As Liquid Talent suggests, today these concept of remote working has evolved to encompass the romantic idea of a completely nomadic worker, who has no permanent work space. A web developer needs nothing more than his or her laptop and connectivity. Everything else is on the Internet, and equally accessible anywhere, in Barcelona, Bogota, or Buffalo.

Cowork spaces are somewhat similar to, and in some cases, incorporated as part of, new business incubators. These incubators, often with public support, provide space and resources, as well as mentoring and encouragement, for small startups. These spaces host multiple startups, creating a stimulating environment of mutual help, inspiration, and even synergy.

In fact, cowork spaces grow out of some of the problems raised by all of these models of working, especially the psychological isolation of the lone freelancer. While working away from the office has advantages, there is little doubt that remote workers are less connected to their organization, and lack the social support of surrounding colleagues [1]. Even more so for independent contractors and freelancers who have even more tenuous connection to colleagues. Working in a coffee shop is less isolated, but not especially supportive of work objectives.

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One thing that is lacking in a world of freelancers is the social support of a community of coworkers, who share work related values, offer mutual help, and a common identity. This social setting is present in conventional organizations “at the office”, and sometimes described as the “culture” of a company. This environment can be a significant contributor to productivity, and to organizational and worker satisfaction [1].

Cowork spaces address this challenge by creating a community of colleagues without a single organization. In a cowork space the workers may find other workers with similar values (and similar job situations), who can share and support each other. But the workers do not work for a single organization.

A coworking space is an interesting organizational hybrid, which, of course, makes it rather interesting to a social scientist. How does it really work? Does it solve the problems it is supposed to? What other problems arise, such as conflict resolution, resource allocation, and sustainability? Who does it, and what do they really do?

So many interesting questions.

What, Then, *Is* Coworking? And What Should It Be?

Wikipedia suggests us some of the salient features:

“Unlike in a typical office environment, those coworking are usually not employed by the same organization. Coworking is also the social gathering of a group of people who are still working independently, but who share values, and who are interested in the synergy that can happen from working with people who value working in the same place alongside each other.” [27]

I think that coworking is something that you know when you see it, but it doesn't necessarily have a firm definition, or firm boundaries. In particular, the term “coworking space” has been claimed by a great variety of spaces, with a rich variety of features. For this reason, it is quite difficult to judge if a particular coworking space is “doing it right” or not—or even if that is a reasonable question to ask.

Even looking around my own little town, I see at least three coworking spaces, and they have significantly different services, “cultures”, and target users. They also blend seamlessly with leased office space and, in one case, with an adjoining coffee shop. Such spaces also blur into makerspaces and incubators, which provide shared facilities for product design and prototyping, as well as skill sharing and development.

Coworking spaces provide shared infrastructure (basic desk, networking, printing, coffee) plus a social environment of like-minded people. In many cases, the networking and collaboration opportunities are offered as better than a private office.

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Such a space is different from a purely public space, such as a library or coffee shop, in that it is dedicated to work (and likely has a specific membership). Many people work in libraries or coffee houses, but they mix with other people and other activities.

A coworking space differs from conventional office space in that the workers do not work for the owners of the space, and workers share infrastructure with others from different organizations. The facilities are extremely similar to conventional office space and infrastructure (and the work done there is similar, too), but the ownership model is different.

From examining what people say about coworking spaces there are several important features.

First of all, it is very clear that this story isn't about office space, it's "about community-building". Second, it appears that coworking seeks to address some of the emerging challenges of the "gig economy", in which everyone is a freelancer. And third, coworking taps into aspects of the "sharing economy", the Uberization of everything, in this case, offering "on demand" office space. Finally, coworking is, if not enabled, then certainly facilitated, by digital and Internet technology. To the degree that one can work from anywhere, one is free to choose where to work. To the degree that "the software stack" is a generic commodity, you can work with it everywhere.

A pedestrian, "main stream" coworking space resembles an office complex, with some amenities common to many corporate and community spaces, such as food, events, classes, and so on. And, almost by definition, a coworking space is home to a community of coworkers, sharing both infrastructure and a group culture.

Unlike office space owned by a single company or institution, the space is not constrained or driven by organizational imperatives, but only by the need to attract and keep workers. The "company culture" in the space is all about what the workers want, whatever that is.

Looking at coworking spaces, we can see that the basic template of coworking can be used by almost any community that wants to do so. There are hundreds and thousands of coworking spaces, with an amazing diversity of "cultures".

Coworking As A Movement

The United States is mad for religions. "100 religions, and only one sauce" as Voltaire is said to have snarked of the English. In the US of A, it is more like 100,000 religions. Religion is how Americans organize communal and cultural life. From political economics to sports to psychotherapy, most important "movements" adopt the psychology and trappings of what might be a religion in other places.

It is not surprising to me, therefore, that for some people, Coworking is a "movement". An idea of what this might mean can be seen in, for example, the "[Coworking Wiki](#)",

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which advocates “*the values set forth by the movement’s founders*” [8]. (Note the reference to the moral authority of the honored, if unnamed, patriarchs.)

These values are [23]:

- Collaboration
- Openness
- Community
- Accessibility
- Sustainability

Collaboration, particularly, frequent face to face personal contact is certainly better than alone. Collaboration also involves learning and teaching and sharing, which you would get as part of a conventional job.

Openness is an analogy to open software. (But this is a bad analogy. You can’t download a coworking space tweak it, and then use it for your own purposes.)

Community captures the notion that a coworking space is a “clubhouse”, that you have to participate in, and where you identify as belonging. Clearly, this fills a need that membership in a larger organization would fill.

Accessibility clearly does not mean the same thing as general usage about mobility. This has something to do with opting in and out of the community. I think they are trying to avoid the “members only” feeling.

Sustainability is not limited to “green”, it is about sustaining the community. This includes financial sustainability, i.e., business plans.

Clearly, whatever this kind of coworking is, it is way, way beyond mere office space.

But wait! There’s more!

There is a desire to enable anyone to create and/or thrive as a coworker, so there should be an open source set of tools [21] (primarily software, but increasingly, models for social organization [5] and, for that matter, furniture [17]). Actually, there may be more than one such software effort, though they will likely converge. (E.g., in addition to above, see [25]) These efforts are trying to provide freely available versions of all the software and processes of a business office.

Phew! All in all, this is not a terribly coherent program. And it is certainly not tightly related logically to “office space”.

To be sure, there are plenty of coworking spaces that do not hew to some or all of the values of this movement. (It wouldn’t be religion without schism, would it?) It is

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perfectly possible to do coworking, and to be successful at it, without subscribing to “the movement”.

Example Coworking Spaces

If a coworking space is a “clubhouse”, Let a thousand clubs bloom, I say!

It is frequently observed that the exact same technical and social elements can be and are combined to create cowork spaces with significantly different ‘vibes’. These spaces resemble each other physically, and provide similar infrastructure and services, but serve and are inhabited by different communities, who enact different “cultures” within the space. Yet any and all these various spaces can be highly successful, so there is no single correct definition of “cowork space”, and there are many “right” ways to do it.

This diversity is actually one of the fascinating features of coworking: it is instructive to all the different ways that the same technology and infrastructure can be used to support different “communities”, with different values.

Example Coworking Spaces

There are plenty of coworking spaces or similar facilities in the world so let’s look at some cases. There are directories with thousands of entries, all over the world (e.g., [10, 22]). Most good sized cities have quite a few cowork spaces, even smaller cities have a few. These spaces are all similar in some ways. But there is an amazing diversity as well.

Some of these are basically rental office suites, others are tied to particular missions, such as technology incubation, or community development. Some are small, some are large. Some are very professional, others highly informal. Some aim for specific populations (e.g., women, artists, software developers, business professionals). Others cater to freelance, digital nomads.

Let’s glance at a handful of cases, to get a flavor.

WeWork [26] (New York City and elsewhere)

WeWork is a chain with sites in more than a dozen cities around the world. Overall there are tens of thousands of members. Members can get space at any site. The space includes not only office and break areas, but game rooms, a screening room, and so on. The space also holds events including classes, talks, parties and summer camp. There is a community magazine.

We work is similar to many cowork spaces, promulgating “community”, with a vibe evoked by **Strongbox West [19] (Atlanta, Georgia)**: “*The Southeast’s largest & most bad-ass coworking space.*” Members are freelancers and start ups, doing digital work.

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Paragraph [18] (New York City)

“Paragraph was created by writers for writers, with an understanding that writers work best in a quiet, comfortable space away from the hurry and obligation of urban life.” Features include “a quiet to write”, decor includes book cases and books. Events include member readings, agent roundtables.

Paragraph has similar facilities, but offers is a stark contrast to the “bad ass” vibe of the classic cowork space. Members are writers, not start ups. I doubt there are many nerf gun fights.

HeraHub [12] (San Diego (and elsewhere))

“Hera Hub is the first national spa-inspired coworking space for female entrepreneurs.” No !s allowed! They are developing a franchise business to spread.

- “Tranquil, yet professional, coworking space designed by and for women
- Numerous networking opportunities with other female entrepreneurs
- Flexible, multilevel memberships
- Supportive workshops and classes”

The “bad ass” vibe of many coworking spaces is off putting for many women and, I would say, grown ups in general. HeraHub has the features of other cowork spaces, with a package that aims to serve women who may be “bad ass” but don’t necessarily want to hang with teenage boys. Other coworking spaces have begun to provide childcare as one of the “amenities” (e.g., NextKids [16]).

“Reimagination Station” [14] (Seattle)

Home coworking as described by Lori Kane in her book [14]: literally in her kitchen. Free. Self organized. Small scale. Way less venture capital hoo-haw, way more baking cookies.

In Kane’s version, the “community” is the neighborhood community, the workspace is an extension of all the other community activities. Explicitly reacting to the young, white, male “bad ass” vibe, “home coworking” creates *“Private space reimagined as community space.”* Far from a business, this space is “a friendship incubator”, says Kane.

Enspiral [9] (Wellington, NZ)

Enspiral is a coworking space *“for entrepreneurs, startups, freelancers, and charities with an ethical focus.”* But the coworking space is just one of an array of interlocking enterprises, that constitute *“a virtual and physical network of*

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companies and professionals working together to create a thriving society,” under the auspices of the Enspiral Foundation. The enterprises include business services (e.g., accounting and legal consulting), a software consultancy, and several software products supporting their ethical theme.

The Enspiral cowork space is just one part the needed infrastructure for the community of social entrepreneurs. It is “tools in the hands of the workers”, with a bottom up, not-really-for-profit governance and very definite ideological goals.

The Surf Office [24] (Santa Cruz and other beaches)

A “beach villa with coworking space”, with locations in Lisbon, Gran Canary , and Santa Cruz, CA. A seaside room with an adjoining cowork space, where “digital nomads come from all over the world to live, work and enjoy the coastal lifestyle.”

What more needs to be said about a “work” space located at prime surfing destinations? Clearly, this community is not interested in local community development, nor particularly interested in people with kids or other responsibilities. the goal is to enjoy a creative life, and the freedom that comes with youth and good fortune.

Conclusion: There Are So Many Good Questions To Ask

Clearly, there is something interesting going on here. Coworking is an interesting case study of the “new way of work”, and a fascinating sociotechnical phenomenon. I have sketched some of the terrain and there are many questions worth looking at.

In short, there is a research agenda to be found here.

The Role of Technology

Coworking is clearly enabled by digital and Internet technology, as we can see in the “standard” infrastructure: coworking assumes that you “Bring Your Own Device”, and that all you need is Internet and a desk (and coffee). This approach would not have been feasible or even conceivable 25 years ago.

However, despite what many people assert, coworking is certainly not technologically *determined*. Technology enables but does *not* drive coworking: the same technical infrastructure and work practices have been folded into many different forms, and have been deployed in so many different ways, to support so many different social communities, that we can’t possibly claim that technology is shaping what people do.

Coworking is motivated and shaped by forces other than digital technology: perhaps primarily by the psychological needs of “the new way of work”, and the participatory theater of a variety of cultural narratives about “digital nomads” and “autonomous, independent creators”.

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Actual Practice

There are many questions about how coworking actually works or should work. How are cowork spaces organized, and how are they sustained? What do people do in a coworking space?

We know that coworking spaces are communities, with their own local “cultures”. What kinds of communities have successfully created and sustained cowork spaces? How are they similar, how do they differ?

One important question is what sustainability or business models work for coworking? For Profit or not or not-totally-for-profit? How do coworking spaces recruit and retain members? What kinds of related enterprises and cross revenue sources have been tried? These questions obviously connects to the nature of the specific community served, and their goals.

One interesting point is that nearly all coworking spaces has a web presence, with promotional materials describing their “culture” in some form. It should be possible to analyze these texts to explore the way people think and talk about their spaces. That work remains to be done.

Evaluation

How well do cowork spaces “work”, and how would we talk about “success”? What are the essential and optional roles in a cowork space for operators and coworkers? How do people like coworking spaces, and what do they like about them?

There is a growing literature claiming that workers “thrive” in coworking spaces, suggesting that people are creative and productive when coworking. Given that coworkers self-select the spaces they use and belong to, it’s not too surprising if they should be satisfied with their choices. But can we actually demonstrate creativity or productivity gains? Compared to what?

Or is this perhaps a case of niche marketing, providing a range of work spaces to suit different workers? One size doesn’t fit all, and coworking lets individual workers find a home that suits them. I don’t think coworking is usually thought of in this way, but it is an interesting hypothesis to explore.

Self-selected work environments create communities of interest. Unfortunately these communities of interest may also be homogeneous demographically. Many observers have commented on the primarily young, pale, and male populations in some cowork spaces. At the same time, some spaces emphasizing “diversity” are themselves ideologically selective, and may be quite homogeneous in that way.

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I see that there are potential policy issues here. If a coworking space is “curated”, and only recruits simpatico “people like us”, it can easily lead to social segregation and, ultimately, conflict. A corporation is held responsible for racial or sexual harassment in its workspace, but who can be held responsible for bad behavior of a coworking space? What rules should apply, and how would they be administered? For that matter, what is the “social contract” of a coworking space?

The New Way of Work

Coworking spaces support the Freelance economy, serving freelancers, teleworkers, and solopreneurs. Coworking spaces seem to fit into a spectrum of workspaces available to such workers, including home, public spaces such as libraries and coffee shops, and business incubators. The differences among these venues are largely in the range of services and, especially, the people inhabiting the space, not in the infrastructure or design of the space itself.

What are the long term prospects for such “permanent temporary” working conditions? While the workers may have a series of short term gigs, perhaps the coworking community will persist and provide some continuity throughout life. Or the coworking community may prove to be short term as well, placing workers in a perpetual “new job” situation, for better or worse.

Over even longer times, how well will coworking spaces serve workers as they age and go through life. Most coworking spaces do not serve parents of young children very well, and one imagines that today’s digital nomads will eventually need to settle in one place (at least until they retire and return to the road).

In addition to the coworkers, there is a new profession, dedicated to creating and operating coworking spaces. Given the diverse and eclectic range of communities, there have been a lot of different approaches, drawing on practices from conventional rental operator and community organizer.

At the same time, a whole new practical job title is emerging, that of “community manager” or, as some say, “curator”, for a community space [2]. These folks take up the task of creating and sustaining a “community”, and its culture. Is this job a form of applied anthropology? It appears that the job involves a grab bag of skills from office management, HR officer, and event planner, among other things. It would be worthwhile to examine some of these pioneers in detail, to see what trail they are blazing.

Further Research

This paper sketches the question “What is Coworking?”, an interesting sociotechnical phenomenon that has arisen in the past couple of decades. Coworking offers a case study of “The New Way of Work”, which is enabled by, but not determined by technological change.

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I identify a number of research questions, that might be addressed through a variety of methods from ethnography and qualitative research through content analysis to surveys and experiments.

I will address these and other questions in future work.

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