PARALLEL WORKPLACE REALITIES IN THE (POST) PANDEMIC WORLD: THE CASE OF VIRTUAL COWORKING

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Abstract

The paper will examine early data from an ongoing study and observe a handful of implications that have emerged around setting parallel virtual work sessions to counter the absence of a physical coworking space setting. Coworking spaces are highly flexible, commonly open-office-based work environments frequented by individuals or teams of knowledge workers who interact, socialize, and collaborate. Due to the significant disruption brought by the recent pandemic and the subsequent need for social distancing, coworking spaces were to a great extent left empty with users switching back to their home-office environments. Some coworking spaces opted for virtual gatherings, regular meetings, and other forms of interactive sittings to keep the interactions and collaborative sessions active. The following research-note paper attempts to share some light on recent events around the development of the said parallel virtual coworking spaces. It builds upon an ongoing study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on coworking environments and their users' evolving perceptions of well-being and work productivity by debating on the data collected from one of the studied coworking environments. Based on the introduced study, the paper proposes the hypothesis that coworking spaces can efficiently build digitized and virtual work environments that can partially or fully replace the positive effects that daily usage of coworking spaces have on an individual user's experience while still working remotely.

Keywords: coworking, virtual workspace, post-pandemic work, well-being, Covid-19

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Introduction

The advancement of networked technologies, socioeconomic changes of the early 2010s and increased flexibilization of organizations have brought enlarged adjustability and ambidexterity in the way how knowledge workers can manage their work tasks and handle the interrelated processes (Flecker et al., 2017). Workplaces have followed the trend of workers'

prevailing preference towards the mobility and fluidity of work and became more versatile, pliable and generally flexible to use (Grekousis & Gialis, 2019). One of the fastest-growing office space trends has been earmarked by the coworking space model, an adaptable and accommodating work environment that is generally centred towards catering for the needs and expectations of individual users (Robelski et al., 2019). Coworking spaces form a third-social place of sorts (Brown, 2017), supporting the user's engagement in formal and informal social relations (Merkel, 2015). Positive implications for individuals well-being (Orel & Dvouletý, 2020), productivity (Bueno et al., 2018) and sociality (Parrino, 2015) have resulted in a number of coworking spaces nearly doubling throughout the last decade and seen its share of swift popularisation amongst individuals and small teams of knowledge workers (Orel & Dvouletý, 2020).

Early 2020 has been marked by a large-scale disruption that impacted the global society and virtually every sphere of human lives. As of late April 2021, the world is still struggling with an ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 coronavirus. Coworking spaces have been forced to be either closed down or became highly restricted in access as the social distancing overtook the mediated or spontaneous interactivity between various groups of individuals. Nevertheless, the disease has shaken and stirred the way how knowledge work is being conducted, with remote work becoming a new norm (Wang et al., 2021). Ceinar & Mariotti (2021) implied that coworking spaces might re-emerge from the pandemic as focal points and office hubs for the swiftly growing class of remote workers. In between, with all of the health measures in place and with coworking offices being the subject of a possible transformation, a significant question emerges: how do users of coworking spaces experience Covid-19 prevention? And perhaps more importantly, what features would enable their users to retain the social and collaborative benefits of a coworking space in the environment where they would be most likely to work if they could not visit a physical workspace for the duration of the pandemic? Can the onsite coworking spaces digitalize their environments and replicate the processes in the digital realm?

This brief research-note paper attempts to share some light on this issue. It builds upon an ongoing study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on coworking environments and their users' evolving perceptions of well-being and work productivity by debating on the data collected from one of the studied coworking environments. The paper proposes the hypothesis that coworking spaces can efficiently build digitized and virtual work environments that can partially or fully replace the positive effects that daily usage of coworking spaces have on an individual user's experience while still working remotely. The paper begins with annotated

literature review before briefly analyzing the first set of data as obtained from a selected Prague-based coworking space, revealing implications about the effectiveness of digitally replicated processes that correspond to activity that usually takes place within physical workspaces. The paper closes with a cursory discussion, highlighting points of further inquiry that could enable scholars to continue their exploration of how coworking spaces and other flexible work environments are being transformed within a society that has been affected by a global pandemic.

1   From an onsite office to a digitalized workspace

The first coworking spaces emerged in 2005 when a freelancing individual sub-rented a vacant office space in San Francisco and opened it up for like-minded individuals to meet up, socialize over informal interactions, support each other and actively participate in knowledge-sharing activities. Similar spaces started to emerge around the developed world in the next couple of years and seen a relatively swift growth after the economic crisis of 2009. Rising numbers of solo-entrepreneurs and freelancing workers who commonly sought their temporary and time-bounded work activities on gig-economy platforms increased demand for flexible office space solutions that offered human-centred components of network-related support, balancing work-life activities and aid worker's general well-being (Orel & Dvouletý, 2020).

Onsite coworking offices are largely open-plan based workspaces with several shared desks and other furniture elements that enable proximity between workers, frequently resulting in spontaneous encounters and non-planned interaction. To assist the development of more formal relationships, coworking spaces tend to employ so-called community managers, who use various forms of moderation techniques to connect individual users and interlace them in an internal network of support. Both spatial mechanisms and onsite managerial roles appear to be crucial factors to intertwine individual coworking space users into a tightly knitted supportive network (Spinuzzi, 2012). Subsequently, individual users tend to establish a sense of community (Garrett et al., 2017) and organizational belonging (Spreitzer et al., 2015) that positively corresponds to their well-being and the level of perceived productivity (Bouncken et al., 2020). The latter can be summarised by Spinuzzi's (2012) conceptualization of workers' relations to a local coworking hub by saying that individuals who regularly frequent a selected coworking site tend to "work alone, together".

The sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic radically altered how these spaces operate and how the said individuals tend to use them. First, the social distancing and other health-

related measures corresponded to the inability of individual knowledge workers to seek alternative workspace outside their home office. Second, while most coworking spaces continued to operate during the pandemic, they were forced to introduce social distancing measures and negatively impacted the elemental proximity that generally supports the interactivity between users (Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020). Third, active mediation mechanisms have been put to a halt, with coworking spaces becoming empty shells of their previous existence as lively, highly curated and community-orientated workspaces. In line with that, Ceinar & Mariotti (2021) reported that most community-based activities had been moved online. Some coworking spaces have organized video chat sessions between members. In contrast, others have taken a step ahead and arranged the fully digitalized interfaces that mimic the physical coworking space and the processes that are commonly taking place within.

However, it has not yet been investigated how running parallel digital activities and the tendencies to replicate the onsite coworking space impact individuals' well-being and the level of their perceived productivity. The following section examines early data that attempts to share some light on the inquired subject.

2 Understanding virtual coworking sessions

2.1 Methodological framework

The ongoing study draws on data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the coworking spaces' managers (4) and members (20). Four different coworking spaces in the Czech capital of Prague have been selected for an ongoing study that explores the transformation of the coworking model in the setting of a post-pandemic world. Non-obstructed participant observation has been carried out in these spaces from May 2020 until January 2021, totalling 300 hours, with PI making participant observation both in the physical coworking space as well within its virtual counterpart. The study's objective has been to understand the changes around: i) spatial configuration of selected coworking sites; ii) the transformation and the change of mediation mechanisms; and iii) frequency and form of interactions in the onsite as the digital counterparts of the selected workplaces.

One of the coworking spaces has been, in particular, active in setting digital activities to fill the gap that corresponded to the enforced social distancing and ceased onsite mediation mechanisms that regularly taken place in the said coworking environment. While many regular members continued to use the space throughout the pandemic, some individuals preferred to switch to the home office but continued to participate in the online activities. These included

daily video-chat sessions in Pomodoro technique gatherings where individuals could work alongside each other and had informal chats in between the breaks. The selected coworking space also digitalized its onsite coworking space and copied it onto fully digitalized platforms, allowing members to virtually frequent the preferred part of the coworking space (e.g., café area, office space, meeting rooms, etc.).

The following analysis reports on the findings obtained with observing the selected coworking space during the first wave of the pandemic. These memos are connected with interviews to illustrate how users perceived these changes. The conducted interviews focused on members' well-being and perceived productivity and how these are impacted by the inability to use the coworking space as they have used before the pandemic. Interviews have been analyzed using thematic analysis, uncovering the themes related to the subject of inquiry. These themes are summarised and discussed in the following section of the conference paper.

2.2 Data analysis

The studied coworking space had seen its gradual transformation back in March 2020, when Czechia, like most other European countries, announced its first lockdown. The coworking space kept operating with limited activities throughout the first wave of the pandemic. However, most of the individuals who frequently frequent the space daily and used it as their office environment have followed the governmental measures and stayed at home. One of the long-time users has initiated the daily online sessions where individuals met every morning during the workweek at 9 am and participated in a Pomodoro technique session. The session's structure mimicked one of the collaborative gatherings that users had back at the onsite coworking space. Individuals gathered, introduced their daily work tasks, briefly stated any possible pressing issues that they are encountering in the scope of their work and then started the timer to work along with each other – although virtually – in silence for the next 25 minutes. After each session, there was a 5-minute long break, where individuals intentionally discussed informal content such as the pandemic, family-related issues and alike.

From the participant observation, it was unfeasible to see how these online sessions differed from those that commonly took place in the physical workspace. The interview with the community manager revealed that from the managerial point of view, the said sessions were meant to replicate the coworking space's *ambience* where individuals share the sensation of working alongside each other and forming a supportive network.

"So as I said, this event [meaning virtual coworking sessions] is more, um, for creating the coworking atmosphere, even working remotely and people, uh, let's say they just work together at the same time, for like 20 to 25 minutes, and then they take a five-minute break to discuss the ideas. So it's kind of like a brainstorm." (Coworking space C, community manager)

However, while the interview with the community manager shared the light on organizational issues when handling a coworking space during the pandemic and how these sessions can be viewed from the managerial perspective, the interview itself has not revealed how users might perceive the lack of physical workspace and their view on digital gatherings. In line with that, it was expected that the individuals' productivity might see a radical drop due to an abrupt shift to the home-office environment and the lack of immersed involvement into the onsite coworking space and its activities that form the identified ambience. However, the analysis of interviews conducted with actual users shown the prevailing and repeated themes of *active participation* and *increased productivity*. The described sessions enabled individuals to replicate their daily routine by having a friendly chat with other coworking space users that they would typically have every morning to participate in one of the group work runs.

"I thought this would completely destroy my productivity, but it didn't really because of these virtual groups that… and seeing someone…and we usually do it in a way that we did before which is everybody says what they were gonna' work on and then work on that and then say how they did afterwards. So, doing it over the phone or the chat, particularly over Skype or Zoom, meetings and things like that, I think it works extremely well actually. I feel it's even more personal and more feeling like someone is there, that you're accountable to do something. [The virtual working sessions] helped to keep my work-life balance, so I was communicating with and seeing the same people I would here. The ones that I would see most regularly, I would still see them." (Informant 1, freelancer copy-writer)

Subsequently, it could be assessed that having virtual coworking sessions brings a *structure* to a home-bounded life of an individual. As implied by informant 1, active participation in these digital gatherings enabled her to balance her work-life stability optimally. As commonly indicated in the previous research on remote work, telecommuting and other home-bounded forms of work may result in increased isolation, work-family conflicts and impaired productivity. However, participating in digital *collaborative work* sessions might positively affect the *sense of community* and the *social attachment* that individuals have built during their stay at their local coworking space.

"I just find out I work a lot better if I'm around people in general. I found since the COVID virus, I discovered that I don't actually need to be in the room with them, and then it works just as well too, to have this kind of virtual contact." (Informant 2, programmer)

Seeing familiar faces and maintaining the relationship with other users creates a feeling of *digital proximity* and points towards the available capacity of a coworking space to recreate their workplace in the digital realm. Another onsite gathering that the coworking space replicated was their weekly coffee-break session. Before the pandemic, these events habitually took place once per week with community managers preparing snacks and coffee and invited coworking space users to gather for an informal chat. These sessions were partially moderated and purposed for connecting individuals who have interacted before with the clear aim of fortifying existing relations. Through the pandemic, these coffee-break sessions have been virtualized through a fully visualized platform that resembled the actual look and layout of the physical coworking space. Individuals created their pixelated avatars and moved through the virtual space. When in proximity with another avatar, the video chat appeared, allowing the connected individuals to interact face-to-face.

The interviews indicated that strictly informal gatherings positively affect their *well-being* and consolidate the existing relations between users who met before. What is more, the interviews underlined the importance of these sessions as it enables individuals to find the needed *motivation* during these digital sessions and assists them with tackling the isolation that surfaced due to the sudden transition from a group-purposed work environment to the solitary home-office space. Seeing others onscreen acts as a stimulus that corresponds to the perceived level of productivity, indicating that the virtual coworking sessions contribute to the individual's well-being that fits with their production capacity.

"So I, because I'm very sensitive to that to being on my own and being at home. So I think that seeing other people at work or also having a reason to get up and maybe being forced to Skype with them in the morning or so, and then seeing what they do, I think it would help me, it would make me more productive. And based on that, I would be happier because I felt more valuable. Yeah. And I guess, independent of productivity, probably I would benefit from having more social attachment." (Informant 3, independent scholar)

The selected coworking space maintained the daily digital gatherings throughout the first wave of the pandemic. When the first wave slowed down and the government started to lift the movement restrictions, most individuals returned to the psychical space where they resumed working by each other and engaging in similar interactive activities as before. However, the digital sessions remained, mainly due to active seniors who were part of the

endangered social group and had health issues before the pandemic. The digital gatherings remained their social bridge with the rest of the community and continued to serve as a virtual workplace.

Conclusion

A key finding in the preliminary data suggests that a physical workspaces digital counterparts can replicate the sensation of using a shared, collaborative environment and provide the benefits sought in physical coworking spaces. Reproducing the formal or informal sessions that coworking space users habitually participate in can partially or fully replace the positive effects of daily usage of a coworking space on an individual user's experience while still working remotely. These digitalized events recreate the ambience of collaboration that is customarily found in coworking spaces.

It is implied that active participation in virtual coworking sessions can replicate a daily-life structure and positively contribute to the individual's well-being that fits with their perceived level of productivity. Structured work sessions also create a sensation of togetherness and maintain the sense of community that participating individuals have built throughout their engagement within the selected coworking space. On the other side, less structured and less formal virtual gatherings motivate the participating individuals and contribute to having a supportive environment that can assist them in coping with possible personal problems.

However, although these early research findings point towards the positive effects of running parallel digital sessions that somewhat clone the onsite collaborative processes, more rigorous research with a larger sample would be needed as a single-case study provides little basis for generalization of results to the broader scenery of coworking spaces. What is more, different coworking spaces have various community engagement levels and unalike forms of group engagements that could be difficult to replicate. It is also important to underline that some coworking space can have a varied number of active users that would require heavily moderated work sessions with spontaneous encounters resulting in relatively shallow and inefficient communication.

Nevertheless, the study unveiled a previously unresearched case of running digital work sessions that reproduce events commonly found in physical coworking environments. As there are several pressing issues to be further understood, it can be suggested that the virtualization of coworking spaces should be further researched.

Acknowledgment

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