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Introduction to the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Coworking



Mina Akhavan, Marco Hölzel, and Divya Leducq

1 The Changing Geography of Work

The world of work and spaces for work are changing together with the urban economy. Technological advancements, the expansion of ICTs and broadband have enabled time–space compression [18], and working is becoming less dependent on time and space [15]. In the age of digitalisation, cities are increasingly adapting to such rapid changes. Nevertheless, remote and rural areas may still have poor-quality ICTs infrastructures. Innovations in rural areas tend to take place in isolation and more slowly [26], social capital becomes an essential factor in developing entrepreneurship in rural areas [17].

Since the mid-2000s, the digitalisation of work has enabled flexible working [27], leading to a broader shift from full-time office hours to part-time, casual working. Therefore, the spatial and temporal boundaries between the living and working spaces are blurring. In the context of digital work, flexible working spaces (FWSs), i.e., new working spaces (NWSs—most popular being the coworking model), have become the subject matter of many studies in management, business, sociology, economic geography and urban studies [1]. However, the role of planning and policy in supporting these changes remains largely unexplored.

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Before the pandemic, especially during times of economic crisis and the rise of the creative class (Florida [12]), there was already a trend in increasing number of precarious workers and freelancers, including independent professionals, contractors, and self-employed knowledge workers, also known as the ‘lone eagles’ (Beyers and Lindahl [6]). They endeavour to break loneliness and isolation and expand their socialising and networking opportunities. Unlike traditional office space and rigid working hours, flexible working allows teleworkers, freelancers, and lone eagles to choose the place and time that best fits their necessities. The emergence of new ways of working within a flexible, sharing, and collaborative environment can also be inserted within the broader phenomena of smart cities [8] and sharing economy [9].

2 A Focus on Coworking Spaces

Flexible and collaborative working spaces include various kinds of spaces of collaborative and innovation such as coworking spaces (CSs), living labs, innovation hubs, etc.; hybrid working spaces, including the concept of third places, coined by the sociologists Oldenburg and Brissett [29]. These spaces represent a flexible combination of working, household, parenting, caring, and leisure, where different professions can experience ‘working alone together [33]. Nevertheless, this book is particularly concerned about the ‘coworking model’, which has been rapidly proliferating worldwide since the early 2000s: from 3 spaces in 2005 to more than 20,000 CSs and 2.5 million users worldwide.

CSs first became popular in big cities such as San Francisco, New York, London, Paris, Milan, etc., where there is a concentration of urban amenities and business infrastructure and availability of high-skilled workers. Although the coworking concept has reached maturity, it is still evolving in terms of its location (urban vs rural), spatial features (e.g. size), governance structure (private, public, and public-private), and, more recently, its adaptation strategies to the pandemic [24] (Akhavan [1]). Nevertheless, as an alternative solution to traditional office spaces, CSs share values in providing flexibility (in time and space), fostering collaboration, interaction and sharing (knowledge and infrastructure) [5], and promoting networking practices, social interactions (Fuzi [14]) and community making [34]. The collaborative environments in CSs may lead to creativity and innovation in terms of new projects, clients, suppliers, and knowledge-making [7].

So far, CSs have shown significant effects on individuals (see Akhavan and Mariotti [3]), but it has also affected the built environment, urban planning, and transportation [4, 23]. Moreover, many studies have highlighted the manifold effects of CSs on the local economies and real estate markets (see the review by Vogl and Akhavan [35]). Other studies have provided evidence that flexibility in time and space can reduce and shorten working commutes [28] and traffic reduction [16, 20]. However, there is a lack of holistic studies that also consider the potential rebound effects, such as the effects on daily mobility in general (e.g., more leisure travel, fewer work commutes, more human-powered mobility) and long-term mobility and

residential decisions [21, 31]. Considering flex-work as a planning conundrum [30] and coworking as a talent attraction strategy, there is an urge to understand the effectiveness of planning and policy tools—such as the 15-min city concept [22]—to ensure sustainable development in terms of mobility, density and land use in the longer term.

3 State-of-the-Art Studies on the Pandemic Effects

The worldwide shock brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly restructured our societies, ways of living, working, residence choices, travel and commute patterns [13]. Recent transformations are interpreted as the ‘new normal’, which deals with the contemporary challenges of sustainability, climate change, and social inequality [19].

As a consequence of the spreading of disease and governmental lockdowns, two significant trends can be recognised: (i) (temporary) relocation to second homes; for example, the Swiss moving to their second homes in ski resorts [28], (ii) reverse urban to rural migration flows; e.g. many Italians are returning to their towns of origin in southern Italy: the South Working¹ phenomenon is developing as an opportunity to attract talents to the lagging-behind regions.

Although the phenomena of remote working (other similar concepts known as teleworking) and home office are not new, the current pandemic has been a catalyst for remote working. The mass shift to working-from-anywhere has raised public awareness for flexible working spaces, particularly CSs. While it is reported that in European countries, about 25% of employment belongs to teleworkable sectors, around 40% of EU workers began full-time teleworking during the first months of the Corona outbreak. In 2019, only 11.1% of EU employees were working from home (‘usually’ or ‘sometimes’); more women teleworked than men (respectively 11.6% and 10.6%) (Eurofound [10]). Nevertheless, recent data show that, throughout EU27 countries, in early 2021 compared to a year before, working exclusively from home is becoming less relevant: the most significant decline was recorded in Spain (from 46 to 21%) and Italy (from 48 to 26%) [11]. No doubt that home-office has its benefits, yet it is not the best solution for all, considering the difficulties couples face competing for the same working space and resources, adding some providing childcare and home-schooling (Reuschke and Felstead [32]).

A recent publication on the new working spaces () and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic from socioeconomic and spatial perspectives by Mariotti et al. [25] brings together 18 chapters in a volume that discusses: “(i) coworking spaces and smart work centres; (ii) makerspaces and other technical spaces (fab labs, open workshops); (iii) other new working spaces (hackerspaces, living labs, and corporate labs); and (iv) coffee shops and public libraries that provide formal and informal spaces for working” [24: 256].

¹ South Working Movement: <https://www.southworking.org/>.

4 Aim and Structure of This Book

The original idea of this book was born within the project COST Action CA18214 “The Geography of New Working Spaces and the Impact on the Periphery” the Working Group 2 (Direct and Indirect Effects): 17 countries delivered a short piece narrating the immediate effects of the pandemic restrictions on coworking industry in their country, during the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. The result was a multi-authored working paper that was circulated internally among the COST members.

This book offers a multidisciplinary and comprehensive perspective regarding the immediate and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on CSs in the European Region. The current pandemic has imposed several effects on work and spaces for work: some are immediate effects and will last for a short time (such as the closing down of the space), and some will last longer (namely, the reorganisation of the space to meet the physical distancing), and some will stay for a long time (remote working and hybrid working). Although the literature on coworking spaces and the effect of the pandemic is growing fast, empirical studies are yet limited. Within this context, this book seeks a twofold aim: (i) to contribute to the fast-growing literature on CSs with country-specific (12 countries) empirical studies in a European comparative view (ii) to present a multidisciplinary perspective about the yet-lasting Corona-pandemic effects on the patterns of remote working and consequently on CSs, as the most diffused form of new working spaces hosting remote workers.

Apart from the two introduction and conclusion chapters, the current book is organised into three main parts, based on a geographic sub-division of the EU region: (i) Narrations of the countries in Northern and Western Europe; (ii) Narrations of the countries in Eastern Europe; (iii) Narrations of the countries in Southern Europe. Chapter “[Remote Working and New Working Spaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic—Insights from EU and Abroad](#)” by Aleid Elizabeth Brouwer and Ilaria Mariotti provides an overview of remote working after the pandemic restrictions and how this phenomenon can change geographical patterns. The following provides a short description of each section and the corresponding chapters:

Part 1 presents five chapters from Estonia, France, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands. Chapter “[Acceleration of Remote Work and Coworking Practices in Estonia During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)”, by Kaire Piirsalu-Kivihall, Anastasia Sinitsyna, Luca Alfieri and Tiiu Paas, mainly based on national statistics, reminds us that Estonia is a country with a small and flexible economy that is highly digitalized that was pretty much ready for teleworking during the pandemic. The state of mind of employers and employees could help to improve rural revitalization beyond Tartu or Tallinn big city. Divya Leducq and Christophe Demazière discuss the case of France. Based on both primary and secondary data, Chapter “[Narratives on COVID-19 Effects on Coworking Spaces in France: A Winning Ticket for the Peripheries?](#)” enhances the fact that in favour of COVID-19, a new territorial narrative around coworking and flexible places of work has emerged in

France, addressing the issue of better territorial balance (planning policies) and individual well-being (way of life): quality of life and proximity of remote working places can benefit to small and medium-sized cities in the shadow of metropolitan cores. In Chapter “[Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Remote Working and Coworking Spaces in Germany—Narrative Literature Analyses](#)”, Marco Hölzel and Thomas Vogl discuss the situation in Germany. The authors gathered information from different sources on governmental measurements, the world of work, mobility and transportation, people’s behaviour, companies’ strategies, real estate market to create a narration of immediate impacts, medium-term and long-run effects on new working spaces, in particular coworking spaces. The case of Norway is presented in Chapter “[Working \(and Living\) During Corona Times and Implications for Planning and Mobility—The Case of Norway](#)”. Mina Di Marino and Hossein Chavoshi explore the ways of working and living during the Corona Times and the implications for planning and mobility in Norway as a Nordic country, in short, and medium temporalities. They point out significant consequences for our cities and the current societal debates related to urban planning and design: new housing demands, commuting habits and transportation modes, asking from where to work remotely. The final chapter in this section, by Martijn Smit, Veronique Schutjens, and Aleid Brouwer, is dedicated to the case of the Netherlands. Here in Chapter “[Not Going Back to the Office any Time Soon: Coworking Spaces in The Netherlands](#)”, the authors underline the high number of users of ‘third spaces’ even before the pandemic. They provide an overview of the geography of Dutch coworking space as a kind of third space for work and discuss the Covid-related effects.

In Part 2 there are three chapters from Poland, Slovakia and Turkey. In Chapter “[The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Coworking Spaces in Poland](#)”, Grzegorz Micek, Karolina Małochleb, Katarzyna Wojnar and Maciej Smętkowski make use of their long-term database and several interviews to analyse the resilience of the CW sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the real estate market on CS and how the effects of CSs on local milieus have changed during the pandemic in Poland. Eva Belvončíková, Lukáš Danko and Oliver Rafaj describe in Chapter “[The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Influence on Coworking Spaces in Slovakia: West–East Division](#)” the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on CW, companies and the office market in Slovakia. They give insights into the support programs issued by the government, the organisational development within the community of CSs and the activity of CSs through events, online or in-person, by comparing main urban areas in east and west Slovakia. Tüzün Baycan and Meltem Parlak Mavitan presented their analyses of CSs in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic in Chapter “[The Booming Growth of Coworking Spaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey](#)” regarding the development of CSs in recent years, the immediate responses and measurements of CSs and coworkers on the spreading of COVID-19 by conducting in-depth interviews with operators of CSs. They reveal changes in the daily routines and events of CS and show some trends of CS in touristic destinations. The situation in Hungary is analysed by Dóra Bálint, Réka Horeczki, Judit Kálmán and Gábor Lux in Chapter “[Coworking Places in Hungary During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)” regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CSs and the measurements issued by the

government. They take a closer look at the varying presence and strategy of CSs and their responses to the pandemic. Further regarded aspects are trends of relocation of companies and private households.

Part 3 includes three chapters from Italy, Malta and Portugal. Chapter “[Italian Experiences in Coworking Spaces During the Pandemic](#)”, by Ilaria Mariotti and Michele Lo Russo, reports on the adaptation strategies applied by the coworking managers of CSs in Italy by referring to the two surveys done by the centre of Italian coworking. They present the state of the coworking resilience level in terms of size, ownership, sector specialization, hybridization, etc. The authors discuss the so-called ‘community garrisons’ found in Southern Italy as a response to the rising number of remote workers (e.g., “southworkers”). Bernadine Satariano and Thérèse Bajada present the case of Malta in Chapter “[The Impact and Complex Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Working Environment and the Use of Coworking Spaces in Malta](#)”. They show the results of their in-depth interviews with managers and users of CSs, to describe how the pandemic may be impacting the coworking industry in complex ways: negative impacts, such as soft lockdown measures, and limitations related to social distances; yet there are positive long-term effects, i.e. the rising number of remote working and freedom to choose where to work. This book’s last case is Portugal, narrated by Elisabete Tomaz, Maria Gato and Gislene Haubrich in Chapter “[Dynamics of Change at Work and Reactions of Coworking Spaces in the Aftermath of the Pandemic: Notes on Portugal](#)”. The scholars describe the growing public awareness of new workplaces and the transformation of work as positive effects of the pandemic. They highlight the main public measures adopted by the government following the growing number of teleworkers, underlining insights for the future.

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