



Coworking Spaces: Threat or Opportunity to Face Crisis Situations[†]

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Abstract: A crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic placed many workers at home and changed the minds of how business activities can be carried out. This paper analyses whether coworking spaces help us to work safely and overcome the problems derived from working at home. In-depth reviews of coworking websites were performed and interviews with key players and users are under process. Website analysis classified a series of measures in three categories: sanitization, working together with social distancing and new products and services. Nevertheless, a deeper analysis of the positive and negative impact of coworking spaces under this new scenario is needed.

Keywords: coworking; occupational health; shared spaces; crisis times



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1. Introduction

The working environment before the COVID-19 pandemic was influenced by the concepts of flexibility and sharing resources. Coworking was one of these types of new working styles, offering flexibility, a space for sharing resources and a community. A place where individual workers such as entrepreneurs, freelancers and microbusinesses did not feel alone and could find support. Urban workspaces appeared in the wake of the Great Recession of 2007–2009. The financial crisis left commercial offices in U.S. cities empty due to downsizing, bankruptcy and foreclosure, increasing the number of workers who needed a more flexible workspace [1,2]. Subsequently, the emphasis shifted to the practice of new business activities with the construction of the “new economy” [3,4].

In addition to this, there is a growing tendency to collaborate towards the consumption of goods and services over the Internet [5]. This virtual space allows the establishment of business models that do not require the purchase of expensive and technically complex goods or services thanks to the concept of shared use [6]. In fact, with the current pandemic, several companies have changed their onsite business activities to work from home to maintain social distancing and avoid contagion. In other words, they continue their business in a safer environment.

Nevertheless, worldwide reports [7] show the difficulties of working at home and trying to achieve a work–family and personal life balance. In addition, lack of social interaction and sedentary work patterns have also resulted in physical health-related problems, including an increase in stress levels. Thus, the role of coworking spaces is under analysis. It could be considered a savior to face the new normal and contribute to a safer occupational environment. In this research, an in-depth analysis of the role of these working places to face crisis situations was performed based on the revision of websites, measurements taken by working places and perceptions of workers.

2. Methods

In order to understand how coworking spaces can help to work safe and overcome the problems derived from working at home, two different actions are being developed: firstly, in-depth website reviews of Madrid coworking spaces. Secondly, interviews with key players of the industry and coworking spaces users are under process. Some of the main preliminary results of the web analysis are outlined below.

3. Results

An analysis of 12 websites of main coworking companies (more than 25 coworking spaces in Madrid) was carried out with a special emphasis on post lockdown measures.

After reviewing the websites, the following measures were identified:

- A schedule without limits or restrictions, 24 h per day, seven days per week.
- Advanced air filtration, a virus and pollutant-free space.
- Flexible time (morning, evening, night).
- Separated spaces (just for one person).
- An increase in new services.
- COVID-19 protocols.
- Increased cleaning.
- Modification of shared spaces for teams so that they can practice healthy social distancing in the workplace.
- Signage and directions in different languages as friendly reminders about social distancing and cleanliness.
- Reinforced standards of cleanliness with more frequent and intense cleaning
- Contactless mail and package delivery.
- Virtual spaces for companies' legal obligations.
- Protection screens.
- Flexible price and time (from EUR 5 per hour).
- Incensement of private offices.
- Digital transformation.

Thus, the measures can be classified in three different categories: (1) sanitary measurements, (2) working together but with social distancing measurements and (3) new products and services to face the new normal. The measurements are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of post lockdown coworking spaces measures.

Sanitary	Working Together with Social Distance	New Products and Services
Air filtration	Private offices	24*7 schedule
COVID-19 protocol	Data	Flexible time operation
More cleaning	Redesign of working spaces	Virtual obligations
Anti-COVID-19 signage	Contactless mail and package delivery	Flexible rates
	Protection screens	More private offices
		Digital transformation

Source: own elaboration.

All of these contribute to reducing stress and maintaining a relationship with others in a safe way. Specially, new products and services can help to conciliate when the whole family is working at home. Flexibility and an extended schedule are a step to make the return to work easier. The creation of new products is a must to facilitate the possibility of having a private office in which to work without interruptions and with the possibility of physical meetings with social distance.

4. Conclusions

Some conclusions can be emphasized as follows: coworking companies and spaces are growing worldwide and in Spain in a number of companies and coworking positions. Spain ranks the fourth worldwide, only behind the United States, India and the United Kingdom [8]. Those coworking spaces have adapted their spaces and operations to the new situation in order to provide trust to their coworkers and involve the employees in the solution for building a common sense of purpose.

The growing of coworking operators and spaces is changing the way people go to the office in Madrid. As the results show, the post lockdown coworking spaces measures include three categories (for becoming an opportunity to face crisis situations): sanitization, working together with social distance and new products and services. For instance, working together with social distance includes the redesign of working spaces considering the appropriate square footage per employee and adjusting desks to ensure a safe distance between each employee. “De-densifying” office spaces will require a new design of common areas and how people interact around the office. This might lead to improved ventilation, larger conference rooms, new kitchen protocols, one-way pathways, and reduced capacity in elevators. Enhanced cleaning protocols and the ubiquitous availability of hand sanitizer and disinfecting supplies will be essential [9].

Besides, there is a trend for companies to delay the hire or purchase of a whole office, the main reason being avoiding the debts and costs associated with ownership. Flexible spaces can prove to be a problem-solver as outsourcing office spaces to flexible workspace operators could substantially ease the commitments associated with maintaining a permanent staff whilst also ensuring that social distancing, sanitation and safe hygiene within the premises is strictly adhered to [7]. However, it has not found any specific measure to encourage women to use coworking spaces beyond the aforementioned measure that they are not gender neutral.

The digital transformation will be one of the main steps in this new way for the coworking spaces. New digital strategies are needed for new digital business models. Now, offices have become less important and working from home has suddenly become necessary. This emergency need to work from home is driving the digital transformation of the workforce and the evolution of the work environment at an unprecedented speed, and telecommuting has become a vital business change since the outbreak of the virus. [10]

Finally, these insights also show that a deeper analysis is needed to identify coworking spaces’ positive and negative impacts regarding city spaces, such as urban transformation [11], citizens and traditional working spaces, among others.

We also consider that coworking spaces need to be resilient, accentuate the positive and strengthen communal bonds to restore confidence for bouncing back in this post-pandemic world [12].

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