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Coworking Spaces: New Places for Business Initiatives?

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly present in many countries, coworking spaces can become spaces for sharing and collaboration to improve the work conditions of self-employed workers, but also of entrepreneurs and salaried workers, although there has been much less study of these. Indeed, there are numerous studies on the self-employed in coworking spaces but few of them are dedicated to entrepreneurs and salaried people, in spite of this population being one of the targeted customers of these spaces. It is thus important to start studying this population of salaried workers and entrepreneurs to identify their interests and strategies in a coworking context. Our article contributes to this, all the more so since these groups are found more in small cities and villages, less in large cities, which mainly host the self-employed. As there is a gap in the literature on these groups, we thus studied the interest of coworking spaces for small firms' employees and entrepreneurs, a result which contributes to a better understanding of coworking and which can help in establishing coworking spaces in rural and peri-urban contexts, where they are less present to this day. This research thus contributes to knowledge of the benefits of coworking spaces for entrepreneurs and salaried workers. As has been observed elsewhere in Canada, this population of coworkers is especially critical for spaces located in rural or peri-urban areas where the number of self-employed does not allow the development of solid business models and ensure the viability of the coworking spaces. This research shows that there is definitely an interest in this type of business perspective. To answer this question as to the interest of salaried coworkers from small firms and entrepreneurs, we interviewed the founders, entrepreneurs and employees of companies using these spaces in

Quebec. The goal is to better understand the strategies that facilitate business initiatives and their success in a coworking context.

KEYWORDS: Coworking, Collaborative Spaces, Business Initiatives, Entrepreneurial Initiatives, Collaborative Innovation, Creativity, Strategies, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial Success

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Workplaces have diversified through historical developments and have contributed in various ways over time to the development of the productivity of entrepreneurs and their employees. Four major periods can be distinguished (Myerson, 2014):

- The Cylinder Office was the most frequent workplace in the service sector during the nineteenth century. The desk was known for its solidity and was composed of drawers, offering the possibility of locking up paperwork, to make it a safe and secure place for the worker.
- The Taylorist Office: At the beginning of the twentieth century, the scientific organisation of labor, advocated by Taylor, justified a transformation of the workplace. There was a transformation of production, workplaces and workers which became production units, essentially industrial workplaces.
- The Social Democratic Office: From the 1960s onwards, the consideration of the human being in his workplace and the search for an improvement in the living environment at work allowed the establishment of a new place of work: the open space. The goal of these new places was to facilitate the exchange of practices, to develop social relations and a spirit of conviviality. Even if the offices were identical, everyone could personalize them with their personal objects. However, these spaces were considered too noisy and employees lacked concentration and intimacy.
- Finally, from the 1970s and mainly from the 2000s onwards, networks and digital developments have considerably transformed workplaces. Employees in the service sector and public administration can work almost anywhere. Consequently, the organization of work has been decentralized, and this has given way to the development of new workplaces facilitating exchanges such as in the 80s and 90s, with incubators or business clubs (Podolny, Page, 1998). Since 2000, Fab Labs, Hacklabs, and other forms of makerspaces and labs, as well as coworking spaces, have emerged. These places facilitate new ways of working (Anderson, 2012) and have multiplied, especially since 2010.

In short, the development of digital technology makes it possible to work anywhere, and especially outside one's home and traditional workplaces. This

latter possibility can be supported by third places (Oldenburg, 1989, 2000) and particularly by coworking spaces, which are intended to facilitate the exchange and sharing of knowledge (Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2017a). Coworking spaces are known to accommodate many self-employed workers, but it is more and more common to find employees of companies of all sizes, and small startups. Indeed, these firms are interesting as coworking spaces as they can ensure a more regular presence and income. Although little or no research has been done on the interests of these business people (themselves salaried workers of small firms and entrepreneurs) for coworking spaces, it can be hypothesized that they use these spaces as much to share certain expenses as for the purpose of networking and possibly developing business opportunities through exchange and collaboration (Loechel, Legrenzi, 2013), stimulating creativity and even innovation (Brown, 2017), but this is still to be confirmed. While this objective of networking and developing collaboration is often put forward by coworking and maker/hacker lab promoters, it is not always the main interest of self-employed workers (Ferchaud, 2019; Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2019a). However, it appears that coworking may be more attractive for this reason in the case of businesspeople in rural and peri-urban areas (Dossou-Yovo, 2019), but there has been little research on this. However, it remains to be seen what can attract this other category of coworkers, and this is the objective of the present research. The research question is thus to determine what factors and services can attract businesspeople (salaried workers or entrepreneurs, small firms) to coworking spaces in order to accelerate their business development.

In fact, as they are increasingly present in many countries, coworking spaces can become spaces for sharing and collaboration to improve the working conditions of self-employed workers, but this can also be the case for entrepreneurs and salaried employees, although there has been much less study of these. Indeed, there are numerous studies on coworking spaces but few of them are dedicated to businesspeople in spite of this population being one of the targeted customers of these spaces. It is thus important to start studying this population of salaried workers and entrepreneurs, which we will call businesspeople, to distinguish them from the self-employed. As there is a gap in the literature, we thus studied the interest of coworking spaces for these businesspeople. Such a research question contributes to knowledge of the advantages of coworking spaces for salaried people and firms. As has been observed in Canada, this population of coworkers is especially critical for spaces located in rural or peri-urban areas where the number of independent or self-employed workers does not always make it possible to develop solid business models and ensure the viability of the coworking spaces (Dossou-Yovo, 2019). This research shows that there is definitely an interest for this

type of person in coworking space, and while there are numerous studies on the self-employed (Krauss, Tremblay, 2019), there is little research on entrepreneurs and salaried people, in spite of this population being one of the targeted customers of these spaces, especially in small towns and villages. It is thus important to start studying this population to identify their interests and strategies in a coworking context, and this is a contribution of our article, all the more so since these groups are found more in small cities and villages (Dossou-Yovo, 2019), somewhat less in large cities, which mainly host the self-employed. As there is a clear gap in the literature on the interests and motivations of these groups to be present in coworking spaces, we thus studied the interest of coworking spaces for businesspeople, a result which contributes to theoretical knowledge on coworking, but which can also help in establishing coworking spaces in rural and peri-urban contexts, where they are less present to this day. This research thus contributes to knowledge of the benefits of coworking spaces for entrepreneurs, and salaried people who can be employed by these small firms (there can also be teleworkers for external firms, not present in the coworking space, but these are less frequently found, at least in Canada).

Beyond the general research question concerning the interests and strategies of businesspeople in coworking spaces, we also want to determine if coworking spaces are vectors for increasing business activity for this group. To answer this question, we interviewed the founders and employees of companies using these spaces in Quebec (Canada). The goal is to better understand the strategies that facilitate and accelerate business development.

To conduct this research, we based our investigation on work that explores the dynamics that may result from open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003; Chesbrough et al., 2006), as this is the main theoretical source which puts forward the importance of knowledge sharing and networks for innovation, which are sought in coworking spaces. The hypothesis that coworking spaces can give access to external knowledge is nothing new but it has been taken for granted, and not much research has shown that this is actually the case. Indeed, on the contrary, some research (mainly on self-employed coworkers) has shown that many of the self-employed do not attend coworking or maker/hacker spaces in order to exchange with others and have access to knowledge or networks, but rather to take advantage of an office space at low cost, with some equipment (classic and 3D printers, photocopying machines, or more specialized equipment – cf. Ferchaud, 2019). It thus seems that empirical research with self-employed coworkers does not confirm the hypothesis of this interest in access to external knowledge or networking. We thus hypothesized that this access might be more important for businesspeople seeking

business development and thus considered that this theory might be more applicable to this specific group. We will develop further as to how the framework can apply to these businesspeople.

Our sample is composed of a dozen coworking spaces located in various cities in Quebec in which we interviewed the founders or owners, as well as the facilitators (community managers) of these places, but also some employees of small businesses working in these spaces. As mentioned above, the objective is to determine the interests and motivations of these businesspeople, and the strategies used by the founders or owners of the spaces in order to contribute to the literature on business development in the specific context of coworking spaces.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

As mentioned above, the interest of businesspeople in coworking spaces stems from the possibility to have access to networks and knowledge in order to innovate and develop their business. This vision is known as ‘open innovation’, the idea being that a firm will search outside its structure to find external knowledge and sources of innovation. The paper will expose this theory in relation to business people’s interest in coworking, but before this we present a literature review on the concept of coworking itself, as it is not always well understood outside specialized circles.

Coworking: Some Definitions

Coworking spaces are actually third places (Oldenburg, 1989), *i.e.* places which are situated between the place where one resides and the usual place of work. However, just as with the concept of third places (Brown, 2017), coworking is not easy to define. The practice of coworking is a phenomenon that has existed since the 1990s following the appearance of the first hackerspaces in 1995 (Lallement, 2015). The purpose of these spaces was then to accelerate the circulation of information. It took another 10 years, until 2005, for the first coworking space to be created in San Francisco in the areas dominated by Web 2.0 and free software (Lallement, 2015), with the objective of allowing coworkers to develop their creativity and their innovative spirit. Although this mode of collaboration is not new, since similar models could be found as early as the Renaissance with artists’ workshops (Formica, 2016), coworking spaces present different characteristics. To this day, coworking

spaces are mainly urban and often located in large agglomerations (Deskmag, 2019), but more and more projects are emerging in the suburbs and they are also present, and in constantly increasing numbers, in small towns and middle-sized cities, as well as in rural areas (Krauss, Tremblay, 2019). Every year their numbers increase globally, although there are some closures, and these have now reached over 13,800 spaces (Deskmag, 2017).

Coworking spaces make it possible for their users to share a physical space offering the entire infrastructure that can be found in an office and to take advantage of the pooling of equipment and sharing of expenses in exchange for lower monthly rental costs (Capdevila, 2015b; Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2016a). These are above all places composed of seating space and offices (Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2016b; Fabbri, 2016). Offices can be open (open space) to facilitate meetings or closed for more privacy. These two forms of offices are in all cases designed to counter the isolation of coworkers (Oldenburg, 2000). Coworking spaces represent a new solution for working from a distance, but without necessarily being alone at home, and many find it more motivating to work in such an environment than to be isolated at home, where they can be tempted to do other activities (domestic chores or other things).

Some publications have indicated that maker and coworking spaces can become a place for knowledge sharing (Fabbri, 2016; Rino, 2013), with or without a commercial perspective, and can favor professional collaboration between the members (Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2017a). It is sometimes possible to detect here new forms of solidarity which can create new cooperation between users, as is the case in some spaces where only 'social economy' enterprises are welcome or favored. In order to develop this solidarity and cooperation between workers, some coworking spaces are oriented towards specific professional groups or some that are relatively close to each other in terms of work tasks (Loechel, Legrenzi, 2013). In fact, there is an over-representation of certain professional activities such as new technologies and digital activities (programmers, creation and programming of Web pages, Web developers, audiovisual production, mobile application development...); writing and communication (translators, journalists, publishers, accountants, communication and marketing professionals, event organizers...); and creation (designers, graphic designers, graphic artists, video editing specialists...). However, as the phenomenon is rather new, empirical data does not always support the idea of more collaboration and exchanges in this context (Ferchaud, 2019; Krauss, Tremblay, 2019), so that authors have called for more research on this (Krauss, Tremblay, 2019).

Coworking Spaces Used by Companies

As mentioned above, to this day coworking spaces are used mainly by self-employed workers, but employees can also use them for teleworking, and these places can be a source of business activity, as has been shown for a few Canadian cities (Dossou-Yovo, 2019). Coworking spaces can be conducive to entrepreneurial or business activity (Pierre, Burret, 2014b). These collaborative workspaces offer a place where salaried teleworkers, nomadic workers or self-employed workers are present, and it is hypothesized that this can facilitate networking, sharing of experiences, or even exchanges and support between co-workers. These are places designed to stimulate creativity (Capdevila, 2015b; Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2016; Suire, 2013), the spirit of initiative, and the sense of belonging to the same community. Co-workers can take advantage of their presence in the same place to share their networks, their knowledge and experiences (Fabbri, 2016), but this is not necessarily the case (Ferchaud, 2019).

At first glance, the advantages offered by coworking may seem more obvious for a young entrepreneur who is starting a business alone, than for employees of a company. However, small companies and their employees can also find advantages, since coworking spaces can often offer the possibility of using many services and infrastructures (Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2016), such as access to a high-speed internet network, meeting or conference rooms, as well as social areas such as a shared kitchen or lounges for informal exchanges and relaxing, for example. They offer more networking options than working from home and can be situated closer to home than the office, thus reducing transportation time and making this time available for work. These benefits can be profitable for both employees and businesses, who find here spaces that are conducive to work, but also places for relaxation, conviviality and, maybe more important for business development, knowledge sharing. Indeed, the configuration of these spaces offers real opportunities to meet other coworkers, to find future clients and to benefit from their skills and networks - as suggested by the 'open innovation' theory, as we will see further on. These latter elements therefore offer additional opportunities for start-ups as well as established companies and their employees using the coworking spaces, in comparison with working at the head office in the center of a large city, for example.

Coworking spaces can indeed make it possible for companies to increase their activity and find new business opportunities through meetings between coworkers present in these spaces. Sharing the same space, users can sometimes find common solutions to their business problems, and this can increase their business activity in an increasingly competitive context. In

short, coworking spaces can allow small firms to develop their business by reducing their costs and taking advantage of the meeting rooms, network and possible business opportunities that are present here. Large companies often have the financial means to develop their activity, or even to create their own coworking spaces, which is increasingly the case in many cities, especially when companies want to reduce their rental costs. Coworking spaces are places for sharing information, facilitating work (Fabbri, 2016), creating a climate (comfort of the premises, quality of the equipment) that conducive to creativity and innovation (Genoud, Moeckli, 2010), and better working conditions (flexible hours, autonomy...) than is sometimes the case in an individual office or within a company. This explains the increasing interest of employees as well as companies for these coworking spaces, as they can be conducive to business opportunities, through 'open innovation' processes.

Coworking Spaces, Open Spaces of Innovation for Companies

At present, many companies seem to be interested in developing teleworking and open spaces of work, as they perceive positive outcomes that can come from these formulas, but also because of the cost reductions that they permit. By working in these spaces, employees can improve their quality of life and reduce transit time. As for open spaces of work, the advantages and disadvantages are, for the moment, less well documented (Scaillez, Tremblay, 2019); some put forward the increased knowledge exchanges and creativity which may develop in open spaces, but the jury is still out on this as some have also presented negative outcomes (noise, disturbances, etc. – cf. Bernstein, Turban, 2018). A few authors (Oldenburg, 1989, 2000; Gershenfeld, 2005; Guenoud, Moeckli, 2010; Liefoghe, 2016; Suire, 2013; Krauss, Tremblay, 2019) have sought to define and conceptualize these new collaborative workspaces, such as coworking spaces, fab labs, and open workspaces in companies. Experts in work organisation have shown that workers have new aspirations related to the workplace (working outside the walls of the company and at home) and working time (flexibility of schedules and more autonomy, fewer controls on time). In fact, it is observed that workers in the knowledge economy wish to work more independently, with increased responsibilities, more participation in decision-making, and in non-hierarchical contexts (Tremblay, 2015). In short, the context seems conducive to new collaborative workspaces, and these also appear very interesting from the point of view of theories on open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006, 2003). Indeed, these theories suggest that ideas coming from anywhere, especially

from outside the company, can often be the ones that are conducive to creativity and innovation. Open innovation theories call for developing versatility, multi-competence, reducing the rules and procedures to stimulate creativity and initiatives. Above all, they call to open up the company to external knowledge and ideas, to abolish the walls between the company and the external world and sources of information and knowledge sharing. In this context, open spaces within the company and, even more so, coworking spaces, appear attractive. From this perspective, coworking spaces can be an excellent way to introduce knowledge within a firm. Indeed, coworking spaces permit more networking than working from home or with the same work colleagues every day. Thus, firms may find it interesting to have some of their employees working in these spaces, as they will have contacts with other professionals, not those from their firm. This may contribute to business development through access to new information and knowledge. Indeed, these spaces make it possible to meet other coworkers, to attract new clients and to benefit from the skills and networks present in the coworking space, rather than have to look for them elsewhere outside the firm - as suggested by the 'open innovation' theory. These elements thus present opportunities for startups as well as established companies and their employees who are present in the coworking spaces to have access to external knowledge.

Open innovation refers to the idea that companies do not have all the skills needed to innovate in-house. On the contrary, external resources, such as external information, knowledge, research and development, can foster creativity and innovation in an organization. This theory of open innovation is to a certain extent based on the work of Nonaka (1991), who also indicated that firms do not always have the best talents within the company, so they must seek to take advantage of external expertise and skills, including the tacit knowledge put forward by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). This does not mean that internal knowledge must be forgotten, but that it is also necessary to acquire intellectual property and ideas developed by others (Trott, Hartmann, 2009). Firms also need to integrate into external networks to gain access to external knowledge. It seems that some options for access to external knowledge, creativity and innovation can be found within the coworking spaces.

Many authors have described the dynamics of knowledge and information sharing that may result from open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003; Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2013; Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2016). This theoretical framework is comprised of two main schools, the first addressing knowledge sharing with the business community in general, the second relating to some external partners which can fuel creativity and innovation within a

given firm (Chesbrough, 2003; Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2013; Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2016). The coworking context extends this view to an intermediary situation, that of a coworking space, which is not limited to the external partners of the firm but neither is it the very large business community in general. As concerns coworking, the second school of thought thus appears more appropriate as the context is one of information and knowledge sharing with other persons present in the coworking space, thus persons who are external to the firm, but not the whole business community in general. However, and this can be a contribution of the research, it certainly makes it easier to develop contacts, easier than in the business community in general, and possibly also easier than with external partners of the firm as there is no 'copresence' in this last case.

Trott and Hartmann (2009) point out that this idea of relying on external knowledge is not entirely new, but that it has not been exploited as much as internal talents, as a source of creativity and innovation. This idea of open innovation is therefore perhaps not so new, and, in fact, it has some elements in common with quality circles and Z-theory in Japanese companies or J companies (as opposed to American companies – A – being less focused on Quality and innovation, Tremblay, Rolland, 2019). However, the idea of finding external ideas in a coworking space is an addition to the two options put forward in the Open Innovation theory, as we saw above. In any case, these theories of open innovation or the (Japanese) innovation-driven company emphasize the importance of knowledge exchanges and networks for access to new knowledge in order to succeed in innovating (Trott, 2018; Tremblay, 2014), or even simply to find new opportunities or business ideas. We hypothesize that this can be the case in coworking spaces.

Theories on open innovation are essentially about companies of a certain size, which open up to the external world to look for talent. However, with coworking spaces, this can also apply more easily to very small, small and medium-sized enterprises and also to their employees. There are more and more small firms establishing themselves in coworking spaces. By using these collaborative workspaces, they have access to ideas external to their firm, which can be a source of innovation because of the diversity of knowledge they can provide (Trott, 2018; Chesbrough, 2003). Actions emanating from open innovation may indeed participate in the development or enhancement of a product through exchanges with external sources, or various external actors (Chesbrough, 2003; Laursen, Salter, 2006). In coworking spaces, these actors can be the other coworkers with whom the company employees can share information and collaborate, and one contribution of this research could be to confirm this. Open innovation is based on both the

intervention of external resources, as well as intermediaries (Chesbrough, 2006), who can organise meetings between various users and contribute to an innovative process. From this perspective, a coworking space can be considered as an open space of innovation, but it needs to be seen if this can facilitate collaboration between its members, because this is not necessarily automatic or spontaneous. Yet the existence of a collaborative environment is an important factor at the beginning of the innovation process of very small, small and medium-sized firms as success or failure depends on their ability to acquire the resources and external knowledge that can complement those that are available internally. In order to serve the interests of the user companies, a coworking space needs the assistance of intermediaries, either individuals or organizations serving as an interface between two or more parties, throughout each stage of the innovative or creative process (Howells, 2006; Tremblay, 2012). This intermediation role is often assured by a community manager, when there is one in the coworking facility. This person will thus work at developing trust relationships between the actors, by facilitating meetings, for example.

This intermediation activity can be facilitated by:

- The use of resources in the coworking space (Chesbrough, 2003), such as convivial spaces (kitchen, coffee room, lounge rest room) or meeting rooms, for example.
- The development of an environment or infrastructures designed to facilitate exchanges between members of the group.
- The circulation of knowledge and facilitated meetings (Leroux *et al.*, 2014; Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2016).

A coworking space can thus be a place where this intermediation is possible through a diversity of factors facilitating the spirit of collaboration and thus allowing contacts between people in order to reach the desired results, such as business opportunities or innovations in products or services, through a process of open innovation or access to knowledge from various persons. This is what we seek to show in our research, as we try to determine what strategies and factors or services can attract these firms aiming for business development.

Research Method

Sample and Interview Grid

Our research contributes to knowledge by identifying the factors and strategies associated with coworking spaces that facilitate and stimulate exchanges and collaboration between people present in the coworking spaces, but for a particular group which has been less studied: business people, that is essentially small businesses and company employees for our research. Most research focuses on self-employed workers, and there is little research on the advantages for businesspeople in these spaces. This research is based on qualitative methods: 25 interviews with 20 coworkers and 5 founders and facilitators of 10 coworking spaces in Quebec (Drummondville, Granby, Longueuil, Montréal, Québec, Sainte-Thérèse, Vallée-Jonction). These coworking spaces were created between 2007 and 2015. The 20 coworkers' interviews selected for this article are all with small business employees or creators. These coworkers use a coworking space at least two days a week; some are full-time residents aiming to improve their business performance or innovation; others have made the coworking space the sole headquarters of their company (mainly small businesses with fewer financial resources).

Data Collection Method

In order to carry out the interviews and collect information, we spent several weeks in coworking spaces in order to observe the practices and conduct semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded and then analyzed according to the qualitative method developed by Miles and Huberman (2003), based on an interview guide that includes both open and closed questions. The interview guide was adapted according to the interviewee (founders and facilitators, creators of a firm or employees). The objective was to understand the professional trajectory of each person, but also their motivations in occupying (or creating or organizing) a coworking space and the advantages they found for their firm in such an environment. The questions dealt with their work organization, the impact of organization of the space, the resources (financial, human and material) available, the location of the space, the values conveyed, the collaborative initiatives and finally the results achieved in the coworking space.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews were analyzed, and we extracted a typology of factors and strategies (see below) designed by users of these spaces (business creators and employees), in order to improve the business opportunities that may arise from possible

collaborations. Secondary sources were also consulted (documents, activity reports, newsletters and internet sites of the coworking spaces visited). The aim was to better understand the strategies used by coworking facilitators and managers and the factors that did contribute to attracting and maintaining businesspeople in the spaces.

Results

The survey led us to identify several significant factors concerning managers' strategies and factors of interest for the businesspeople. The managers or facilitators of the coworking spaces interviewed developed an infrastructure intended to facilitate collaboration. We have identified two broad categories of elements which can explain how businesspeople who were established in coworking spaces, in a given context, chose specific strategies in order to attain their goals and enhance their business activity, whether as entrepreneurs or salaried employees for a firm, and these elements can be facilitated by managers of the spaces:

- The contextual elements, infrastructure or factors present within the coworking space and which contribute to creating an environment conducive to relations between companies and other coworkers.
- The various strategies that can facilitate contacts, as well as the creation of joint projects and business opportunities for companies within these spaces.

Setting Up a Context Conducive to Business Activities

In this paper, we explore the contextual factors or infrastructure developed by the managers and facilitators of the coworking spaces. This contributes to the literature not only by helping us understand the specific motivations of small business creators and workers, but also by contributing to an understanding of the reasons for the presence of more collaboration in some coworking spaces and less in others. Through our interviews with the founders, managers and facilitators, as well as the company creators and employees, we identified certain factors which they deem to be decisive in the development of an environment conducive to collaboration between the users. The location and infrastructures of the coworking space seem to be factors which have a real impact, as well as the resources offered by the place, as Table 1 shows. These are elements which the managers indicate are conducive to attracting and retaining businesspeople.

Table 1 – Contextual factors and strategies of coworking spaces

Contextual factors	Strategies	Number of persons using this strategy
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared values - Common ideology 	3 coworking spaces in Montreal 2 coworking spaces in Quebec
Infrastructure: comfort, layout and diversity of workspaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing sociability and a sense of belonging - Sharing knowledge 	All
Human Resources (services)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attracting people with close or similar professional activities - Setting up a relationship of trust - Fostering collaboration 	3 coworking spaces in Montreal 1 coworking space in Quebec
Financial resources (or support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitating collaboration and access to knowledge at low cost - Supporting the business activities of companies 	3 coworking spaces in Montreal 1 coworking space in Quebec 1 coworking space in the suburbs

The Location of the Coworking Space: A Decisive Factor for Collaboration

The location of the coworking space seems to be a determinant factor in developing cooperation between users. The founder sometimes chooses the location based on his/her pre-existing links with the community and the local area. This knowledge of the environment is an asset for the founder because s/he already has a social capital on which s/he can rely to promote contacts between users but also with his/her personal network. The location of the coworking space can also be decisive for professionals seeking a better work-family balance (Tremblay, 2019). Indeed, some of the employees interviewed prefer to work independently, far from their supervisors and company managers, as well as to reduce the stress of urban life and transportation, but without the isolation that can sometimes be experienced when working from home.

“I was telecommuting, working from home, but I wanted to (...) break the isolation because being at home all the time in fact has affected me in the long run and so I was looking for a place, and (...) I was recommended (...) to use a coworking space that was going to be created”.
(Interview with the employee of a company doing coworking)

In some of the spaces, the choice of location may be due to specific reasons. It can be a very personal choice, linked to the backgrounds of the founders. Some coworking spaces have been created in the place where one of the founders was born, or in a place to which they have a strong attachment, or for reasons related to work-family balance.

“I have been living in this area since I arrived in Quebec City. I know it well, so it was obvious to me that this was the place where I wanted to establish my coworking space, because it is always better to know the area, its potential, before creating this type of place. And then I don’t live far away so it’s also very convenient to come back in the evening and spend some time with the family”. (Founder and user of a space in Quebec City)

In the interviews, we also noted a need expressed by some founders to contribute to the economic development of a given region or city district. The founders hope that the creation of the coworking space will contribute to the revitalization of the district or the city. In some cases, the space is created at a certain distance from the urban center in order to support employment in a part of the city which is undergoing a revitalization process.

“We, the founders, made the risky choice to establish a coworking space in the district of Limoilou in Quebec City, because it is a working-class district that has had some difficulty in reconverting due to the closure of many factories. The unemployment rate is higher than in other parts of Quebec City. We hope that our space will help local entrepreneurs improve their business, and even make others want to create a business here. We want to bring this neighborhood back to life”. (Founder and user of a space in Quebec City)

This intimate attachment to the neighborhood gives the founders, as well as the co-workers, the desire to integrate this space, to establish a community that already has as a common point in their attachment to the location. This appears to be an essential element in the motivation of many people working in this place. Cooperation appears to be more natural. It can also be for more pragmatic reasons, since some of our respondents told us that they had chosen a location because of the local activity and thus to get a good return on their investment (financial and real estate). In this case, the meetings are facilitated by a significant presence of customers, as well as several companies and their employees -and therefore coworkers. The creators also hope that the economic revival of the area will contribute to the development of the coworking space and the companies present in this space. In addition to the

neighborhood, the infrastructure of the place itself can facilitate exchanges and access to new, external, knowledge for businesspeople.

The Infrastructures of the Coworking Space: A Factor Facilitating Collaboration

An important part of stimulating cooperation has to do with the infrastructure itself. In fact, the infrastructure refers to the presence of several types of offices with open spaces that allow users not to be isolated, which promotes collaboration.

“I bought this house in the center of our small town. It’s a beautiful house, it’s big, it has a warm ambiance. People who use this coworking space feel at home. There is a relaxed and family atmosphere here. We all use the kitchen of the house, we take breaks in the big living room. It’s like working at home, but with colleagues around us. We like to stay late in this space and we talk more easily to other coworkers”. (Founder of a coworking space in an average size city in Quebec)

The choice of the infrastructure and layout of the coworking space seems to be an important factor in appropriation of the place by its users. There is an identity to the place that is conducive to meetings and exchanges. Some coworking spaces also play on the comfort offered by the place, the quality of the resources offered, as well as the possibilities of collaboration facilitated by the events that can be organized there (cocktails, happy hours, conferences, etc.).

The Importance of Human and Financial Resources within the Coworking Space

According to many founders, facilitation of the collaboration in order to attract and retain businesspeople also depends on the resources present in a coworking space. Financial resources commensurate with the ambitions of its founders make it possible to acquire the right material, to hire staff and to communicate well on the services offered. The choice of material resources also plays a major role in the development of a spirit of conviviality. Thus, the choice of furniture and equipment (spacious offices, ergonomic chairs, comfortable armchairs) or the presence of meeting places (well-equipped kitchen, good coffee machine, lounge and sofas for breaks) are all important assets (Pierre, Burret, 2014-b) that will encourage businesspeople to come to this place rather than to another. And it is precisely this conviviality and the meeting possibilities that it offers that will promote exchanges between coworkers. In this regard, the role played by the community manager is

crucial, as was observed in other research (Dossou-Yovo *et al.*, 2019; Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2019).

“In a coworking space, the human relationship is extremely important because there are some people who are there for a specific time only, there is a fairly large turnover, and so you can spend a week with a person and then a few months with another person, then she will leave. So, having a good organisational team, a core of regular members, to have people who pay special attention so that these human relations are strong and pleasant, this is important”. (User of a coworking space in Montreal)

The coworking space is thus constructed as a specific entity, with a particular identity, thanks to its community manager (Pierre, Burret, 2014a) who tries to facilitate meetings between coworkers for the benefit of their activity (Fabbri, Charue-Duboc, 2016). The facilitator will arrange training sessions, demonstrations around a specific theme or social events such as happy hours, organized to facilitate meetings between the coworkers who use these places, but not necessarily on the same day, or at the same time.

In addition to these infrastructure and environmental factors, it seems that some strategies can also contribute to developing cooperation between companies and other coworkers. Indeed, coworking spaces can support companies in increasing their activity and offer business opportunities through meetings between coworkers organized in these spaces (Gaglio, Lauriol, 2011).

Strategies to Stimulate Business Activity in a Coworking Space

The results show that specific strategies can be used by both the founders and the managers-facilitators to facilitate meetings and develop cooperation between firms and coworkers. Also, the interviews show some results that can be attained by both the coworking space and the company that uses such premises.

Shared Values or a Common Ideology

Co-workers can be encouraged to integrate a coworking space because it conveys a certain brand image, a very good reputation or values that one shares, such as is the case with some spaces which favour social economy initiatives. By expressing the values put forward by the coworking space, the community manager can attract people who share a similar vision in terms of professional practices and ethics. These common values can then facilitate

encounters, and more easily result in a relationship of trust (Moriset, 2014) and exchanges.

“I chose this space because it specializes in social economy initiatives. Most of those who rent an office here share ecological values or an alternative view of the economic system. We want to work differently and have different consumption patterns. These values bring us together”.
(A user of a coworking space)

To have this type of collaboration emerge, some spaces also find a common interest that will lead to more exchanges. For example, they might focus their activity on an ideological proximity (sustainable development or other); while there is no guarantee of success, this common objective can at least promote the interest and the desire to collaborate. As mentioned, some of our respondents created a space based on social economy initiatives and identity. Within these spaces, it seems that some companies have managed to develop business relationships, and have encouraged their users to collaborate with each other, to innovate (Torre, Wallet, 2012) and to support their activity.

“The companies that come into this space do not come by chance, they know that our values are linked to the social economy. Adhering to these values is required to come here, it is a prerequisite. And this makes it easier to exchange and collaborate because the coworkers work in areas close or connected to each other”. (Founder and user of a coworking space, specialising in social economy initiatives)

Search for Similar or Compatible Business Activities

To further strengthen these links, some spaces have a professional proximity. These places will specialize in attracting people who have a professional activity in a specific field. In addition to the social economy, our sample also includes some spaces that are specialized in the fields of culture or the Web, for example. This professional proximity can lead to collaborative dynamics. In the same vein, some interviewees also wished to gather around common or related professions (Loechel, Legrenzi, 2013; Scaillez, Tremblay, 2016a, 2016b), such as activities related to the digital economy, social innovations or cultural innovations. Being present in this type of space specializing in a specific activity can indeed stimulate common initiatives and thus benefit many users. They are not colleagues, in the sense of employees of the same company. But being in the same workplace and sharing the same professional interests offers co-workers opportunities to exchange and allows them to collaborate and develop their professional network, as well as new innovations and business ideas.

Establishing a Relationship of Trust between the Coworkers

To encourage collaboration, it seems that the establishment of a climate of trust is one of the major strategies required. The knowledge economy tends to develop through learning (Koenig, 2006) and innovations (Torre, 2015) and this can come from activities carried out by different people. If these individuals who attend the same coworking space get to know each other and trust each other, innovation can be more easily generated through exchanges and collaborations. In addition to having a mindset conducive to establishing a relationship of trust between coworkers, it seems that some events help to get to know each other and create trust.

“You don’t attend this space on the same day or at the same time, so when you’re in a space for a happy hour, it’s a good time to meet and get acquainted”. (User of a coworking space in a small town)

Certain moments of the day also allow to share knowledge and to increase trust.

“Here, in this space, we work a lot and all day on our activities and the only time we can get to know others is during lunch, or during coffee breaks”. (User of a coworking space in Montreal)

A large majority of coworkers are seeking social interaction, and it helps if the manager or facilitator arranges activities to bring people together. This is a strategy often used by managers in order to develop trust and cooperation and they consider it to be useful in bringing people together to exchange information and access knowledge and develop their business.

“I have tried several methods to develop my business. I worked from home. But I was working on my kitchen table and in the end, I did more housework than professional work. Then I went to cafes with Wifi and it ended up being expensive. It was noisy and I was still alone. So I came to this coworking space and it costs me less and I have people to talk to, and it is a pleasure to come here every day. I am no longer alone, and I am more dynamic in my work”. (User of a coworking space in Quebec City)

Once this relationship of trust is established, exchanges and collaboration between users are facilitated. This environment can then lead to the development of joint projects and the stimulation of business activity. As we have seen earlier, being in a coworking space can foster collaboration between users through chance meetings, which can lead to cooperation. This climate can then offer business or innovation opportunities to companies, if so

desired. In any case, accommodating companies can also benefit the activity of the coworking space itself.

Stimulating the Activity of the Coworking Space through Business Activity

As concerns business activity, it is observed that hosting companies often allow coworking spaces to benefit from various advantages. In fact, attracting companies makes it possible to benefit from a clientele that has slightly more financial resources than a self-employed individual. Also, quite often, firms will rent offices over a longer period. According to interviewees, companies want a lease ranging from 6 to 12 months, while self-employed individuals often only have the resources to rent an office over a shorter period, sometimes only 1 to 3 months, given their financial resources and their short-term professional prospects. In addition, it is common for companies to rent closed offices, rather than offices in open space, to have more confidentiality, to be able to receive customers, and to be able to leave their materials in the office (clients' files, specialized office equipment, etc.).

“So I was working from home and it lasted about two years but at the end of the second year I really wanted to get out of my house and have an office, because I wanted to be able to meet customers in a space which looks more professional than at home. When I was at home I never met anyone. I always had to go out. I could go to my clients or in a neutral place but I had no place to welcome them”. (Salaried employee, user of a coworking space in Quebec City)

In a coworking space, closed office rentals (where available) are more expensive. In other words, renting closed offices to company employees is interesting from a financial perspective, as well as in terms of the length of the rental. In short, companies and coworking spaces both benefit from this.

Stimulating the Activities of Companies in the Coworking Space

There can be simple exchanges that develop into friendships between two coworkers, without any professional link because the activities are very different. In this case, the coworking space will have contributed to improving the social connections of the persons concerned but as mentioned in the theory on open innovation, access to different external knowledge can often be beneficial. In this case, the co-worker takes advantage of the advice or experience of other users to help him/her in his/her tasks, and this contributes to business development. Also, in some cases, firms can also gain from

the development of a new network. In general, coworking spaces can also contribute to the increase in professional activity. For example, in several spaces, the accountant working in the place was asked by other coworkers to be their accountant. In this case, the other coworkers became customers, thus increasing business activity. Business opportunities arise simply by being present in the place. In the same vein, some users have had access to the clients of another co-worker and have managed to increase their business activity. For example, we can find exchanges of expertise to set up a common project, a common activity, or a new product or service. Business opportunities often arise for business users of the premises. In some cases, being present in a coworking space can allow a firm to come up with new ideas, the creation of a new product, a new service or another form of innovation, as mentioned in the theory on open innovation.

“We met in this coworking space and created fresh juices based on a logic of the circular economy. Initially, we were working for two different organizations and by being together in this space, we developed this entrepreneurial project”. (Users of a coworking space in Montreal)

The 10 coworking spaces surveyed show us that strategies are more developed in the big cities (Montreal and Quebec City). Within these two cities, the location of the place, the choice of the neighborhood or the building are choices that are considered essential, as competition is fierce. These spaces also have more human and financial resources. Within rural or peri-urban areas, although strategies appear similar to those in larger cities, they seem less developed (however, the number of spaces is increasing in small cities and regions and we will be investigating this in the coming year). These spaces use basic strategies, for example the comfort of the place or a Wifi network and quality equipment (photocopier ...). The goal is to offer people a place that is more comfortable than their home. On the other hand, they often do not have the human or financial means to go much further. A company that uses a coworking space can therefore improve or increase its business initiatives and turnover. However, with or without specific strategies, these opportunities remain opportunities, but are not systematically taken advantage of. Indeed, as in the case of self-employed workers, some salaried workers and some firms prefer to work in their own corner, not particularly looking for exchanges or cooperation with others, nor for open innovation opportunities.

Discussion

There is a wide variety of coworking spaces that present a more complex picture than is often thought at first glance (Boutillier, 2018). We have added the case of businesspeople to the picture, often concentrating on the self-employed, and this leads us to conclude this study with a critical discussion and synthesis on the factors and strategies identified.

First of all, we observed that coworking spaces are clearly appreciated by businesspeople for the possible access to knowledge and thus to open innovation opportunities (Chesbrough, 2003, 2006). We saw that the location, infrastructure, human and financial resources are important factors to attract businesspeople, as well as employees from small firms. Also, various strategies are used by employees as well as facilitators and managers of these spaces in order to develop cooperation and innovation. Amongst the main strategies are the choice of a specific professional category, a vision or common values (such as the social economy orientation), and the organization of events in order to build trust between members and thus lead to cooperation and innovation. This identification of contextual factors and strategies, and especially the concentration on businesspeople, constitute the main contribution of the paper. This contributes to the literature on coworking spaces, but also on open innovation, by putting forward a new way for firms to access knowledge and develop themselves in the context of 'open innovation', through a third option, beyond the two already identified and relating to the business community in general and business partners. The coworking space sits between these two sources of external knowledge.

However, while these factors and strategies are important, and we did observe innovations and business developments related to knowledge sharing and forms of open innovation, it is clear that cooperation and innovation cannot develop in all cases. It is important to present this more nuanced picture, as much of the writing on coworking seems to assume that cooperation and innovation will flow automatically, just by bringing people together. Our interviews show that there are preconditions for knowledge access and cooperation, and some strategies can be more conducive to this than others, as we have shown.

Coworking: A Possible Source of Cooperation without Guarantees

The collaborative work culture that we have illustrated above is in fact not observed in all coworking spaces and if it has often been put forward as

an advantage of coworking, it has not been fully validated, for all spaces, nor for all groups, self-employed or businesspeople. Bringing people to work together in the same space does not necessarily translate into cooperation between them. In the same vein, it was observed that geographical proximity does not automatically transfer into coworking with coworkers, or any form of cooperation (Boschma, 2005). Also, a coworking space can stimulate creativity, innovation, initiative and a sense of belonging to the same community, but again, this is not always the case (Suire, 2013; Scaillerez, Tremblay, 2019; Krauss, Tremblay, 2019). Exchanges and collaboration seem to be easier between self-employed workers, although they also occur between salaried workers, and this is often why firms like to place their employees in these spaces, as was indicated in our interviews. However, we observed that just as not all self-employed workers want to collaborate, some employees of the same company who attend a coworking space may tend to work amongst themselves. Also, they often occupy closed offices, which tends to reduce interactions with other coworkers, although there are still chance meetings at the coffee machine or lunch table. Yet corporate employees are becoming a population that is increasingly targeted by coworking spaces. Spaces in rural or peri-urban areas could also bring greater strength to their business models, since companies can reserve offices for many of their employees and for a longer period than self-employed workers.

Our research also shows the importance of financial, material and human resources made available in the coworking space, in particular the crucial role of organizational resources. A space that is created without these resources is less likely to generate exchanges, collaboration and even to survive as a business, given the increasing competition between coworking spaces over the years.

Finally, neither does professional proximity necessarily foster cooperation. We observed spaces which are said to be specialized in the cultural field, but which, in the end, welcome very few or no coworkers in this field. Even if the objective is sometimes different, most of the managers of coworking spaces end up needing to accommodate all types of workers. Indeed, without this more inclusive vision, there would not be enough customers to maintain their activity, as has also been noted by other recent studies on the subject (Deskmag, 2019). While, at the time the coworking space is created, the founders may wish to specialize in a specific field. Once the place is created they need to find customers quickly and this reality can make managers more pragmatic and lead them to make their space a place open to all, without any specialization.

Coworking Spaces as Individual Workspaces at Reduced Cost

Moreover, the relationship of trust may not be established between all coworkers. In fact, coworking spaces can also be attended by people who prefer to work alone, or who already have their clientele and only seek a professional address, or even the use of a room for business meetings in order to appear more professional in front of their clients. Others may also use a coworking space to take advantage of the benefits they provide such as reduced costs, sharing of human resources (such as common secretarial resources) or materials (printer, photocopier, meeting rooms...), or comfortable premises. It can also sometimes be difficult to exchange with coworkers who have the same type of business or who do the same type of job. Some may perceive themselves as competitors and fear that others will steal their clients or one of their ideas. Some coworking spaces refuse to accept new people if their activity can compete with some of the users already present. Given these limits, it appears that knowledge sharing related to open innovation cannot always occur. However, many small firms and their employees consider that coworking spaces do offer interesting options for small businesses in order to access knowledge and benefit from access to knowledge, as is suggested in open innovation theory.

Conclusion

To conclude, collaboration and trust are not necessarily developed spontaneously in a coworking space. Some of the factors identified in our research on firms in coworking spaces, such as the role of the manager, the facilitator, and spatial planning, confirm some of the results of previous research on self-employed workers (Dorley, Witthoft, 2012; Sailer, McCulloh, 2012; Merkel, 2015). On the other hand, we also highlight the importance of other factors, such as the various types of resources (human and financial), as well as a number of strategies designed to increase cooperation and open innovation, and this contributes to existing research.

Our results are useful for managers and facilitators, companies and employees interested in using coworking spaces as they identify the factors and strategies that facilitate collaboration in coworking spaces and the possible positive impact on business activity.

The development of this environment that is conducive to cooperation is important as it plays a major role in the development of business activities, as well as in the innovation process of small businesses, as suggested in the

Open Innovation theory presented above. However, presence in a coworking space does not automatically translate into cooperation between coworkers or firms who are present in this environment. Firms that use these spaces will not necessarily see an increase in their business, since business opportunities are not guaranteed to multiply. However, if some conditions are met, such as those mentioned above concerning resources, infrastructures and organization, firms and coworkers can find opportunities to develop their activity. In any case, there are never any guarantees and coworking space managers can only offer to create the conditions that are conducive to cooperation and innovation, without any guarantees. The rest has to be done by the firms and coworkers themselves, who have to be open to cooperation with others in the first place. In short, while there is an abundant literature on the positive effects of collaborations, on knowledge sharing and on entrepreneurial successes associated with coworking spaces, these assertions need to be nuanced, and the identification of some factors or preconditions constitutes an important contribution to the literature.

In any case, as this is one of a few investigations on coworking and business development, and given the limited number of cases studied, research needs to be pursued in order to confirm to what extent coworking spaces can contribute to entrepreneurial and business opportunities, and to determine the most important factors and strategies that are useful for cooperation and business development to occur. In the future, a quantitative study could also validate the relative importance of the different factors. We will also do more research in small cities and peripheral regions to determine if these places can attract more business creators and employees.

Thus, while it appears that knowledge sharing and open innovation cannot always emerge in a given context, many small firms and their employees consider that coworking spaces do offer interesting options for small businesses in order to access knowledge and benefit from open innovation.

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