



Collaboration in Co-Working Space in Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

Co-working space is a growing phenomenon gaining popularity amongst managers of companies, digital and independent workers. These co-working spaces are designed to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among independent workers who are usually a part of the growing knowledge economy. Although this information is well documented from developing countries, there is still limited research on the effectiveness of co-working spaces in encouraging collaboration among independent workers in South Africa. This has hindered co-working space from being explored as a viable alternative to traditional office space.

Design/methodology/approach

The target population in this study is employees within the built environment profession, such as architects, property developers, construction professionals and town planners. These professionals work in a co-working space in Johannesburg, South Africa. Out of the six participants, one used a traditional office most of the time and only used a co-working space sometimes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit information on collaboration and knowledge sharing. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select six built environment professionals.

Findings

The findings of this paper show that co-working space encourages collaboration between co-workers, which leads to the establishment of professional relationships. The findings also revealed how idea-sharing and productivity increased because of effective collaboration in co-working spaces. The built environment professionals working in co-working spaces are happy with the outcome of being in a co-working space of the many benefits that come with it.

Originality/value.

This study is one of the few studies exploring co-working spaces in South Africa. It is a valuable study that will hopefully spike discussions and more research in this area, especially now when most companies are trying to cut costs on office space. Due to COVID-19, many employees are working from home and coming to the office a few days a week, and co-working space can be something that companies can explore.

Keywords

Co-working space, Collaboration, Knowledge sharing, Built environment professionals, workspace design.

1 INTRODUCTION

Co-working space is a growing phenomenon that is growing in popularity. Modern shared workspaces, also known as co-working spaces, were designed to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among independent workers who are usually a part of the growing knowledge economy (Orel and Almeida, 2019). As such, co-working spaces is seen as centres of innovation,

creativity and area of concentrated human talent (Kubátová, 2016). Co-working spaces are not only growing in popularity among digital and independent workers; others are interested in this kind of office design too. These include managers of companies looking at spotting talent among the users of co-working spaces to enhance communication and quicken the process of transferring knowledge and improve the level of interaction to ignite the process of innovation between co-workers.

Collaboration in co-working spaces gives digital workers access to human and social capital and the available knowledge bases (Orel and Almeida, 2019). It also allows co-workers to establish networks with each other and transfer knowledge and experience (Yang, Bisson, and Sanborn, 2019). This transfer of knowledge and experience between co-workers may generate new sources of information and new financial sources.

With co-working spaces growing in popularity among independent workers, more research is needed to assess if co-working space encourages collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst independent professionals. This research is necessary as encouraging collaboration and sharing knowledge and resources among independent users is one of the main goals of co-working spaces (Spinuzzi, 2012; Rus and Orel, 2015; Bianchi et al., 2018). The limited amount of research on the effectiveness of co-working spaces in encouraging collaboration among independent workers in South Africa has hindered co-working spaces from being explored as a viable alternative to traditional office spaces.

After the introduction, the paper reviewed related literature. This was followed by methods used in the study. After this, the results were presented and discussed. The last section concludes the paper.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Co-working spaces of different kinds have been established as economic and social mediators in urban economic growth (Fiorentino, 2019). Fiorentino (2019) identified three main kinds of co-working spaces. The first kind is a co-working space known to host social activities, and they have an educational role and may even have ties to local public authorities. The second kind of co-working space is for aspiring entrepreneurs as it provides economic and technical support to those starting businesses. This type of co-working space is like the business telecentres that Kojo and Nenonen (2019) mention, as they are geared toward generating economic and financial profit. The third kind of co-working space is a space that exists as a commercial product, such as a type of office space provided in an office block. These three typologies form the umbrella terms for the co-working space models that exist today.

Apart from the three typologies given by Fiorentino (2019), there are other types of co-working spaces. Each type has different uses, determining the nature and level of collaboration in those co-working space types. These are the revenue (Ivaldi, 2019; Kojo and Nenonen, 2019; Yang, Bisson, and Sanborn, 2019), synergistic (Fiorentino, 2019; Ivaldi, 2019; Sanborn, 2015; Yang, Bisson and Sanborn, 2019), customer contact (Fiorentino, 2019; Ivaldi, 2019; Yang, Bisson, and Sanborn, 2019), Fab Lab (Capdevila, 2019; Scaillerez and Tremblay, 2017; Scattoni et al., 2019), Living Lab (Capdevila, 2019; Scaillerez and Tremblay, 2017), social innovation (Capdevila, 2019;

Fiorentino, 2019), telecenters (Kojo and Nenonen, 2019) and hackerspace co-working space models (Capdevila, 2019).

Of the different co-working space models listed above, the model that offers maximum collaboration, which, in turn, maximizes productivity and innovation, is the synergistic and Fab Labs co-working space model. These models do not only add value for the owners of the co-working spaces, but they also create the most appropriate environment for effective collaboration (Scaillerez and Tremblay, 2017). The synergistic co-working space model is limited to certain types of users with similar or specific disciplines depending on which types of services are offered in that type of co-working space (Yang, Bisson, and Sanborn, 2019). Fab Lab co-working space offers services to a specific field of research which encourages collaboration and networking among the users (Capdevila, 2019). They encourage effective collaboration because they succeed in creating spaces aligned to the goals of the users of the space (Kojo and Nenonen, 2019). These two co-working spaces also offer the necessary resources and amenities for the users. These resources can be maintained more quickly because of the restrictions concerning the type of independent users permitted to use the space (Scaillerez and Tremblay, 2017). The restriction to these two types of co-working space models will also increase user satisfaction which can enhance the efficiency of the co-workers and may positively affect the level of effective collaboration.

When it comes to collaboration, one needs to note that it can be interpreted differently depending on the types of users or organizations. Castilho and Quandt (2017) listed different collaboration approaches in co-working spaces. Some of the collaboration approaches are cost-based collaboration, resource-based collaboration, and relational collaboration. The cost-based collaboration approach aims to reduce operational costs or transaction costs incurred in office spaces. Changes in a knowledge-based economy drive a Resource-based collaboration approach, and it aims to amalgamate resources from co-working users to develop new projects and services. The focus is mainly on the integration and coordination of resources among co-workers. The relational collaboration approach is about building community and exploring collaboration instead of focusing on gaining knowledge or untapped resources. The critical elements of this approach are specialization, transmitting a vision and strengthening the community (Ivaldi, Galuppo, Calvanese and Scaratti, 2020). The relational collaboration approach is one of the best approaches because it builds community and explores collaboration instead of minimizing operational costs or gaining knowledge. In addition, it offers specialization and encourages high collaboration in co-working spaces, which is the most common reason people join co-working spaces (Ivaldi, Galuppo, Calvanese and Scaratti, 2020).

Research conducted in different countries indicated many changes that have taken place wherein many countries witnessed a drop in number of coworkers because of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (Akhavan, 2022). The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on office occupancy is being felt worldwide due to the shift in work modality. Employees no longer work in the office five days a week. Therefore, it does not make sense to maintain individual offices' traditional, pre-pandemic layout. When employees go hybrid, spaces become vacant multiple days in the week. So, to avoid having drastically underutilized office space, companies should re-think their workspace and enter co-working space (Wonnink, 2022).

3 METHODEDOLOGY

The target population in this study is employees within the built environment profession, such as architects, property developers, construction professionals and town planners. These professionals work in a co-working space in Johannesburg, South Africa. Johannesburg is one of the major cities located in the smallest Province out of the nine provinces in South Africa. However, it is the most significant contributor to the national economic product. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit information on collaboration and knowledge sharing. Interviews were conducted during COVID-19 and conducted online because of lockdown regulations. However, during the time of interviews, some employees were back in offices. The participants use co-working space few days a week while they work from home or other places for the other days. Purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select six built environment professionals. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes from the interviews.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Participants' Knowledge of co-working space

Participants of the study have a different understanding of co-working space. Below is a list of what was gained from participants: P1 understood co-working space as an open-plan type of office space that fast-growing companies mainly use at a low cost. For P2, co-working spaces are beneficial among start-up ventures, and affordable office spaces are available for sharing with other workers. P3 believed that co-working spaces are only for businesses looking to cut costs by entering into shorter-term leases and sharing facilities. P4 stipulated that a co-working space is a working ecosystem that promotes shared resources, flexibility and a community-like work environment. P5 and P6 thought that co-working spaces present the best possible working environments where professionals from different organizations work in one place. Altogether, co-working spaces are seen by participants as affordable office spaces available to businesses for sharing resources. Consequently, many positives come with the utilization of co-working spaces.

Only one participant, that is, P3 did not utilize a co-working space because it would cost the company much money to convert the traditional office space into a co-working space, especially with the considerable number of tenants already occupying the building. All the other five participants embrace co-working. P1 specified that it makes financial sense to use co-working space, which has short-term leases: "The use of co-working space may not work for larger corporates who are more established. Large corporates may use co-working space for smaller projects with a finite life span and use conventional office space for most of their operations". P2 said that: "the company that I work for has embarked on co-working schemes with business partners in Botswana. We have been co-working for projects and have experienced co-working space for a long time". P4, P5 and P6 agreed that sharing office space has afforded them space to grow professionally and more time for engagement with other co-workers. All these activities have benefited their businesses in several ways.

The following information was given about how often the participants use co-working spaces. As a broker, P1 utilizes co-working space monthly when operating with clients. P2 utilizes a co-working space weekly. While P4 goes to work three days per week, P5 and P6's office space utilization depends on the workload and projects. It appears P3 prefers privacy in a smaller enclosed environment. Despite the company's operation from a traditional office space, the participant desires to experience the co-working space environment shortly. In addition, the participant felt that co-working space is innovative and effective in collaborative environments.

4.2 Collaboration amongst co-workers in co-working spaces

Several questions were asked in order to source information on collaboration. Often, participants find themselves collaborating with self-employed built environment consultants, self-employed professionals, small business owners, architects, quantity surveyors, project managers and real estate agents. Except for P3, who uses breakout rooms and boardrooms to collaborate with other co-workers, the rest of the participants revealed that they collaborate with co-workers every working day through constant interaction, knowledge sharing meetings, client referrals, industry workshops and group activities.

Whereas P1 thought that collaboration between co-workers depends on the company culture, the consensus is that co-working spaces foster collaboration that builds strong professional communities and encourages synergies, adding more excellent value to everyone who utilizes them. P1 thought that "good synergy between professionals can be established internationally through co-working space". P4 thought that "it is the intended purpose, and so far, I believe collaboration is being achieved to a very high standard compared to a normal office space setting". While P5 thought co-working spaces enables strong business relations, P6 said that co-working spaces build strong professional relationships through knowledge sharing.

P1 further gave an impression that the leadership style provides co-workers with knowledge-sharing opportunities. Thus, idea-sharing is not necessarily dependent on the type of office space provided. P2's opinion was that co-working spaces could aid companies that need their workers to be near each other while working to collaborate more effectively. Sharing office space is considered an effective alternative to working from home. P4 acknowledged that "there is always a lot of industry information circulating, which enhances the opportunity and chances to get more clients through business referrals from people we share the co-working spaces with".

In some cases, companies have also expanded their client base ever since they moved to co-working spaces (P5). In other cases, co-working spaces have allowed corporations to create relationships with other businesses (P6). Other benefits derived from collaboration with other professionals in a co-working space include business expansion (p4).

4.3 Influence of collaboration in co-working spaces

In terms of the influence of collaboration, participants were asked related questions, and the following information was revealed:

- It depends on the project and the company goals (P1),
- Utilizes a goal-setting exercise to get the co-workers excited about the task. This requires that they decide what the most challenging task they want to achieve in a day and what is the most exciting thing to achieve in a day. This daily goal-setting increases productivity (P2),
- We draw inspiration from other co-workers; this keeps us on our toes, motivated and dedicated. We are always learning from and sharing ideas with other professionals with the same goals as ours (P4),
- The spaces host many people working on different projects, which gives us exposure (P5), and
- It broadens your perspective as you learn from other co-workers (P6).

In addition, co-working spaces appear to affect the level of interaction among co-workers positively (P4, P5). There is much positive interaction, mainly because "we are in the same field, so our work is closely related, which makes it easier to interact and reach out should one need any professional assistance" (P6).

However, there are mixed results on whether co-working spaces increase productivity compared to traditional office spaces. On a positive note, P1 mentioned, "Co-working space offers improved space usage, adopts modern facilities and is more efficient, unlike boardrooms which are not used regularly and are monopolized". P3 added that "Maybe harder to foster an idea-sharing environment in conventional office space than in co-working space. Tedious to walk to another office cubicle to talk with co-workers whereas, in co-working space, people are closer to each other because they share a space". P4 and P5 agreed that being in the same space with people from different organizations with different work ethics and approaches to delivering projects encourages them to become a lot more productive than they would have been in a typical traditional office. P6 admitted that a lot has since improved.

On the negative side, P1 believed that everything depends on the type of generation of people sharing co-working space. As an older generation (50+ years), P1 does not enjoy using co-working space and does not perform better in a co-working environment compared to traditional office space. It appears co-working spaces are ideal for younger generations because they are more social and interactive. Thus, they perform better in co-working spaces than in conventional office spaces. It also depends on the personalities of the employees. So, those who prefer privacy to do their work may not perform well in a co-working space.

P3 thought that adaptation to a co-working space might improve individual performance because it is possible to collaborate efficiently. However, the participant cautioned that co-working space does not always work if business deals are kept secret or if company information is supposed to be kept confidential. So, if a deal or project is not too important, then a co-working space could benefit collaboration. In well-established companies that have mastered their relationships with other companies, P3 understood that there is no need to adapt to co-working spaces for collaboration purposes.

4.4 Preference for co-working space over traditional office space

Participants appeared to have favoured co-working spaces over traditional office spaces. P4 exclusively thought that open space "has definitely been a great experience and has improved my professionalism tremendously". Nevertheless, P1 stated that big corporates that have considerable investments in office space would continue utilizing that space. However, they could be re-imagining their working space due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic which has affected the way we use offices (Akhavan, 2022; Wonnink, 2022). P3 argued that co-working space makes sense for small businesses with fewer workers because the company's number of employees is essential in deciding to have a traditional office space or co-working space.

The level of interaction in a co-working space also brings more open and creative spaces that foster more significant interaction between co-workers (P2). P3 said in co-working spaces, "we are a pool of different individuals from different organizations, so our skill sets are different, the projects we are working on are different, the clients we have are also different, which makes it a lot easier

to collaborate and share all these aspects". P5: "the eagerness to understand/gain knowledge in what other industry professionals are working on has improved collaboration in co-working space".

4.5 Challenges that hinder the ability to collaborate in a co-working environment with co-workers

In general, not much hinders participants' ability to collaborate with their co-workers in a co-working environment. P4 "Well, there are not many obstacles hindering collaboration" P5 "I cannot think of any at the moment" P6 "There have not been any inconveniences so far". Some challenges raised include clashes between co-workers due to different cultural backgrounds and personalities, ill-mannered behaviour, struggling to establish boundaries among co-workers (P1; P2; P3), and clients struggling with rental payments for using that space its facilities (P1).

5 DISCUSSION

The study results indicate that participants are well aware of co-working spaces. Although one participant did not use a co-working space, the participant knew of a co-working space. However, their employer only uses traditional office space units, breakout rooms and boardrooms since the employer is a big corporate company. The participant reasons that co-working space is most suitable for small and fast-growing companies. However, in their company, the kind of co-working space provided is the boardroom and break out rooms are the spaces for collaboration.

There are many reasons these built environment professionals use co-working spaces. The reason given is similar to the findings from other studies that co-working space is an affordable office space for a start-up business, it enables them to cut rental cost, it allows them to share resources, knowledge sharing happens within this space, foster engagement and give room for co-workers to grow professionally (Babatunde and Khalighi, 2018; Bueno, Rodriguez-Baltanás and Gallego, 2018; Castilho & Quandt, 2017; Kojo and Nenonen, 2017; Orel and Almeida, 2019; Yang, Bisson, and Sanborn, 2019). This indicates that the findings amongst built environment professionals in Johannesburg are similar to the findings from previous studies as indicated by different scholars above.

Participants of this study wanted their businesses to grow, and they saw co-working space as a suitable working space to facilitate their growth. The level of collaboration within the co-working space is phenomenal, and it is one of the main reasons for creating or working in a co-working space (Orel and Almeida, 2019). Participants reported constant interaction that increases knowledge sharing, and it is from this interaction that they can do client referrals amongst each other, thereby expanding each other's business. As part of collaboration practices within this co-working space, they formulate and encourage synergies.

Most of the participants have said that their performance in co-working space has improved compared to standard office space. The reasons given were that the motivation to work is higher in a co-working space. At the same time, another participant said that they have more excellent proximity to the co-workers that they need to partner within a co-working space. Co-working space is an area of concentrated human talent (Kubátová, 2016), and it is no surprise that co-workers are motivated and are in an environment that facilitates partnership formation. When participants are reporting on motivation, it might be due to the increased level of interaction that ignites the process

of innovation (Laing and Bacevice, 2013; Hills and Levy, 2014), making co-workers more competitive. However, just like office space, there are challenges with using co-working space and have to do with different individual preferences.

6 CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore whether collaboration occurs in co-working spaces in South Africa among built environment professionals. Based on the literature review, there is limited knowledge about collaboration within co-working spaces in South Africa. The literature in this study explores the different types of co-working space working models and the different approaches to collaboration within the different co-working spaces. The literature also sheds light on co-working space models that primarily encourage collaboration, namely synergistic and Fab lab co-working space models, and which collaboration approaches the best suit these models. The findings of this study are that co-working space encourages collaboration between co-workers, which leads to the establishment of professional relationships. These findings also revealed how idea-sharing increased because of effective collaboration in co-working spaces. Although the literature review focused on professionals within the creative industry, their findings were somewhat similar to built environment professionals in South Africa. However, more studies is necessary to understand the co-working space for the different industries in South Africa. In addition, data on the number of co-working space is scattered and a research that can synthesize this information will be helpful. COVID-19 has affected the office space and research on this area is important in a developing country like South Africa. Moreover, researchers should explore co-working and co-living hybrid spaces in South Africa for further study.

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