

What Can the Coworking Movement Bring to the Design of the Corporate Workplace?

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“In the new world, it is not the big fish which eats the small fish, but the fast fish which eats the slow fish.”

Klaus Schwab
World Economic Forum

Why Coworking?

Coworking is an emergent form of workspace provision which can be considered to be a disruptive innovation with an influence that reaches beyond its market share.¹ Since it emerged in 2005, it has experienced significant growth and diversification, with wider interest in coworking driven by a highly responsive model of space provision, the association between diverse encounters and innovation, and reportedly high levels of engagement and productivity. The potential for coworking to be used as a lens for looking at the wider workplace is driven by its flexible, short-term business model; as a market offering, spaces which don't meet the needs or expectations of their members can go out of business very quickly. The rise of these spaces therefore emphasizes the quality of user experience in ways that organizational space has not always had to consider. In this sense, coworking is more than a self-contained market segment; it sheds light on wider preferences around work and place.

As Melissa Marsh of New York consultancy Plastarc has remarked, “Coworking creates a mechanism by which we can truly see what is a desirable workplace.”

The Study

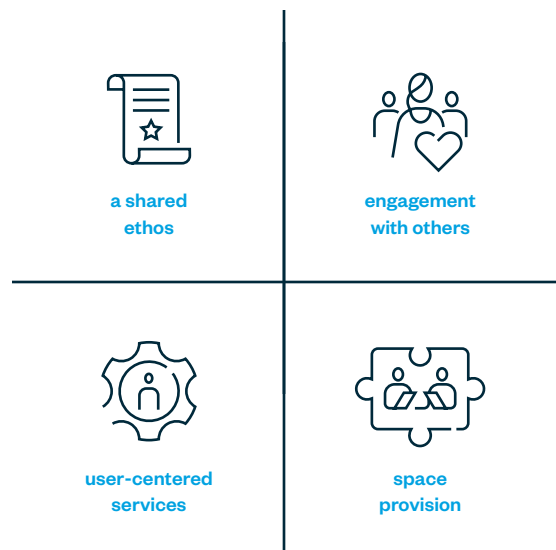
In a PhD study supported by Haworth, we analyzed over 70 floorplans of coworking spaces around the world to look at common spatial strategies, conducted in-depth ethnographic research to examine the relationship between space and behaviors at two coworking spaces, and cross-referenced

the findings against a corporate workplace that was seeking a redesign to enhance community and collaboration. The study led to a new definition of the central pillars of coworking as an experience of work, and several key principles that are transferable to the corporate workplace.

Defining Coworking

The success of a coworking space depends on the success of the experience that it creates, relying on complex interactions between space, support and service infrastructures, brand identification, and community management. Crucially, the membership community has a high degree of autonomy to shape their day-to-day working lives. The study's thesis developed a definition of coworking that identifies these key aspects and highlights coworking as an experience of work that is defined by its membership community:

An experience of work that is defined by the members, based on:



1. Christensen, 2015.



Ethos: This refers to a sense of shared values, consistently expressed through the hosting, space, events, and literature around membership.



Engagement: This aspect describes the active curation of community and interactions through the presence of a host (or equivalent figure) and a program of regular events that are tailored to the membership group to generate encounters between people who don't naturally work together during the course of the day, and support a sense of shared culture.



Services: These can vary widely, from the provision of basic tools to business support, childcare, external partnerships and benefits, and educational opportunities, but are consistently centered on the needs of the member community.



Space: Offering a range of settings designed to meet the needs of their members, the spatial allocation of coworking spaces varies widely, typically providing a relatively large proportion of multi-functional social spaces in which people can meet, relax, and work. The space also plays an important symbolic role in reflecting the core principles and values of the community, helping to create a clear and distinct identity.

All four aspects have a digital layer, with spaces regularly using digital space management tools, offering virtual support, and actively engaging with members across social media, online networks, and internal apps or forums.

Key Design Principles

The extent to which coworking spaces are tailored to their membership communities means that—with the exception of some common practices—there are no hard and fast rules as to how a space might be designed or run. However, there are a number of overarching principles that are transferable to the wider workplace.

Experience

Providing members with an experience that they value is the central component of coworking. Experience needs to be understood as a holistic, end-to-end process that extends beyond the physical walls of the coworking space to all of the potential touchpoints and interactions with members. This is much closer to the kind of model used by a retail or hospitality provider, needing traditionally separate aspects of space and people management to work much more closely together to curate the overall experience.

Shared Practices

Sharing best—and worst—practices was an early principle of coworking, with space managers sharing their experiences and research on a non-competitive basis with other spaces. Creating successful workplaces requires user-centered design to be balanced with a robust body of evidence around behaviors in use; while success stories are easy to find, failures are less frequently publicized, resulting in the potential for the same mistakes to be repeated.

Beta Space

This principle is about a shift in perspective from viewing space as an object that can be perfected in a single design phase, to the inevitable need to make small, continuing changes to adapt to fluid contexts or unexpected user behaviors. This requires new models for design and construction; for example, building a “beta” budget that allows changes to be made following evaluation of a completed program.

Community-Centered

It is not unusual for the community to form before the coworking space is even built, with members given a voice in its design and management. This represents a bottom-up rather than top-down approach to the design of space and services and suggests a need for new tools and approaches for understanding experience, needs, and values from the end-user's perspective.

Hybrid Models

Coworking is fundamentally a hybrid model that draws variously on hospitality, members clubs, educational spaces, and leisure environments in addition to workspace settings. This allows spaces to provide value-added services to their members and extend the use of the space beyond traditional working hours. It also has the potential to introduce new knowledge streams into workplace design—for example, learning from retail choice architectures, or the way in which service industries craft customer experiences.

Curation

While culture and community are often left to chance in organizational spaces where people have to come together to work, coworking spaces actively curate community and interactions through events, apps and internal messaging, and introductions by hosts. Members are free to decide on the extent to which they want to take up these opportunities; some are very active participants, while others simply appreciate the sense that there is something interesting going on.

Multi-Functional Space

Coworking spaces typically provide members with a variety of potential work settings that suit different needs and tasks. They also create spaces for social activity at a variety of scales through the use of multi-functional areas that can accommodate varying activities and group sizes with minimal readjustment to furniture, ambience, or partitions. These are commonly located adjacent to the main entrance, creating a permeable and inviting meeting area for both members and external visitors.

This research brief is based on a PhD thesis by Imogen Privett entitled "Experience Unbound: The Effects of Coworking on Workplace Design Practice," supported by Haworth, undertaken at the Royal College of Art in London.

Contributor

Imogen Privett is a design researcher and recent PhD graduate from the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art, where she explored the effects of coworking on existing models of workspace design. Prior to this, she worked in architectural practice focusing on workplace design with projects including UK headquarters for Barclays, Macquarie Bank, and Reuters before taking up a research associate role at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design on a long-term research project supported by Haworth. With the additional support of Philips Lighting, this three-year research collaboration culminated in the publication of a book called *Life of Work: What Office Design Can Learn from the World Around Us*, co-authored by Professor Jeremy Myerson.

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Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit haworth.com.

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