

11 Virtual coworking and remote working

Lessons and perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic from Estonia and Norway

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Introduction

In the last decade, scholars from several disciplines have investigated new ways of working and the implications for our cities and society. In the Nordic countries before the COVID-19 pandemic, people were increasingly choosing non-traditional workplaces, such as the home, coworking spaces (CSs), coffee shops, and public libraries in addition to the office (Koroma et al., 2014; Di Marino & Lapintie, 2018). This shift occurred due to the emergence of the knowledge-driven economy (Clarke, 2001), the growing flexibility of workspaces and practices, and the high degree of digitization (Hardill & Green, 2003; Felstead & Henseke, 2017). One of the key elements of non-traditional workplaces is their flexibility (e.g. in terms of time and space) and the opportunity for social and professional interaction. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the ways of working, limiting most social contact. In response to unforeseen changes, virtual coworking spaces have emerged. Virtual coworking spaces (VCS) are an extension of coworking spaces into the virtual world where ‘emerging collaborative activity’ takes place online (Hofeditz et al., 2020). To date, very little academic research has been done in this area, although the topic is being debated on social media. One of the reasons behind this is that VCSs are a recent phenomenon. Thus, the aim of the study is twofold: (i) to clarify the concept of virtual coworking and reveal possible relationships with remote working practices; and (ii) to explore perspectives of the development of VCSs and remote working during and after the pandemic.

Previous studies have mainly focused on the concept of remote working, which is used by both employees and self-employed workers and occurs when work is fully or partially done outside the regular place of work (ILO, 2020). Before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars have mainly analyzed the increase in remote working and its implications, such as virtual and physical locations, virtual presence, and social isolation (Koroma et al., 2014; Kong et al., 2019; Morrow, 2020).

We assume that remote working and coworking spaces (CSs), both virtual and physical, can support people’s adjustment to global shifts and allow the integration of traditional and new work habits. In order to explore possible

relationships between VCSs and remote working, we conduct a comparative case study between Estonia and Norway. These two Nordic countries present a high degree of digitization (more than 90% of the population use the Internet regularly). In both countries, remote working has traditionally been accepted as a flexible way of working among several organizations, with some local variation between job sectors. However, during the pandemic, remote working has increased in both countries. In addition to a theoretical background on remote working, virtual coworking, and related concepts, this study presents a comparative analysis that focuses on six high-tech-oriented CSs located in Tallinn (Estonia) and Oslo (Norway) and semi-structured interviews with their managers. The study then discusses the main outcomes, including new ways of working, and concludes by suggesting further paths of research.

Theoretical background

The pandemic has forced CSs to consider whether to continue renting spaces or to replace (or complement) them with more flexible services and work practices, such as remote working and CSs using digital platforms. Coworkers expect to benefit from the coworking community and the advantages of particular services (for example, advice, start-up supervision, and legal consultation) (Spinuzzi, 2012; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2016). However, during the pandemic, these expectations have become intertwined with high standards of hygiene and social distancing measures. CSs are required to provide safe workplaces with good ventilation and other work conditions that reduce the threats of the pandemic. As a compromise between the advantages of CSs and their customers' requirements, the owners of coworking spaces have been encouraged to replicate coworking practices virtually (Holland & Brewster, 2021).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, high levels of technology use and the rapid adoption of new ICT solutions produced a favourable environment for supporting virtual human relationships (Cappel & Windsor, 2000; Morris, 2008). High levels of digitization boosted both remote working and VCSs, which have similar drivers, such as the rapid growth of digitization and the growing spatial and temporal flexibility of work (Golden & Fromen, 2011).

VCSs and remote working have much in common. Both are new ways of working that are conducted virtually, providing alternatives to co-locational or traditional ways of working (Gerke, 2006). Neither remote working nor virtual coworking are limited to particular workplaces, and they may be done from non-traditional places (ILO, 2020) by both self-employed workers and employees. In this sense, virtual coworking and remote working, if done as a team, have some similarities. The principles of working and management in virtual reality differ from traditional co-locational work (Morris, 2008; Mikhailova, 2009). Initially, trust and recognition are issues when working online. Team members or coworkers often do not know each other and, hence, do not trust each other. A lack of trust significantly reduces knowledge spillover (Guinalú & Jordán, 2016; Parker et al., 2020).

Furthermore, both remote working and virtual coworking are similar in terms of flexibility (time and space). VCSs (and physical CSs) provide users with 24-hour access to online platforms from any place. Remote workers benefit from the same advantages of unlimited access to online platforms and flexibility of place. Working online provides the substantial advantage of access to global knowledge and, hence, widens the audience, connecting people from across the globe (Maskell, 2014).

Nonetheless, remote working and virtual coworking present some negative side effects. Online communication typically requires more effort and is less intensive and spontaneous (Kraut et al., 2002). For management tasks, the efficiency of online work in terms of ease of collaboration and knowledge spillovers are not as successful as in a physical space (Kratzer et al., 2006). The absence of a physical space generates problems common to remote working and VCS. In particular, both virtual ways of working target non-verbal communication (Robelski et al., 2019), ignoring the importance of body language in effective social communication. Remote working and virtual coworking overlap in terms of challenges; in particular, both have imbalanced work-home loads (Vartiainen & Andriessen, 2006; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Wang et al., 2021).

However, remote working and VCSs also have distinctive features. VCSs are recognized as a combination of CSs and remote working, combining the best practices of both (Hofeditz et al., 2020). Despite its practical importance, the concept of virtual coworking has not been developed in previous studies. There is a lack of common understanding about virtual coworking. Among coworking communities (e.g. coworkers), virtual coworking is defined as ‘coming together to work online’ (<https://blog.coworkies.com/everything-about-virtual-coworking/>). This can happen by facilitating work sessions, guest lectures, well-being sessions, and workout sessions between coworking members (<https://remote-how.com/blog/what-is-a-virtual-coworking>). In the concept of virtual coworking, social and communication functions (and dimensions) are highly emphasized. In contrast, the concept of remote working lacks the social aspects of communication, instead mainly referring to flexitime and flexispace (Hardill & Green, 2003; Charalampous et al., 2019). VCSs aim to provide a sense of community that in turn boosts productivity and knowledge sharing. Remote working prioritizes task-solving goals and does not aim for online community meetings (Ayache et al., 2021).

New paths for these new forms of working and their combination rely heavily on a variety of factors, including the level of digitization and digital skills, the structure of the economy, and legal regulations. The Nordic region of Europe relies on cultural and managerial practices indicating low power distances. As Morris (2008) pointed out, negative past experiences of cross-cultural misunderstanding have decreased the possibility of further implementing virtual practices. Thus, national cultural values and practices (Lim et al., 2004), as well organizational culture and leadership style (Nayani et al., 2018), create the conditions for the expansion or limitation of remote working and VCSs (Nenonen & Lindhal, 2017).

Tallinn and Oslo: the six coworking spaces and methods

The cities of Tallinn and Oslo were used as case studies for various reasons. Both cities are among the most digitally developed and urbanized areas in Estonia and Norway, with the highest concentration of IT, fintech, and creative industries. Therefore, the need to adapt to remote working as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic was not a shock for either Tallinn or Oslo. In addition, there is a high demand for flexible working places in both Tallinn and Oslo, since the share of freelancers and remote workers was significantly high and stable even before the pandemic; this share has increased during the pandemic. Furthermore, in both countries, there is a growing interest among academics, policymakers, and stakeholders in the growth of CSs as well as a good availability of quantitative and qualitative data.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 9% of people in Norway used to work remotely as a permanent solution and 27% did so when necessary (Nergaard et al., 2018). During the pandemic, the statistics have reported an overall share of 39%. For managers and professionals, the shares were 70% and 60%, respectively, compared to a share of around 16% for blue-collar workers (Holgersen et al., 2020). Similar patterns were found in Estonia. Due to the pandemic, the number of remote workers in Estonia has increased by approximately 200,000 people. During the pandemic, every fifth employed person has had experience working remotely, although remote working was used only partially. Around half of remote workers spent at least one day at their physical office, since Estonia has not experienced a complete lockdown. The prevalence of remote work is associated with high-skills occupations. While 42% of white-collar employees worked remotely, the 10% share for blue-collar workers was modest (Statistics Estonia, 2020).

In both cities, there is a predominance of high-tech-oriented CSs tied to the growing flexibility of several industries (e.g. business and finances, IT, creative sectors) as well as the high digitization of public and private organizations. On the one hand, Tallinn is an IT-industry centre that strongly supports an innovative ecosystem. Oslo, on the other hand, has solidified its status as one of the most investment-worthy medium-sized cities worldwide and can therefore be considered a technology and data platform which supports the expansion of start-up clusters and entrepreneurs, a supportive ecosystem, and access to funding (Oslo Business Region, 2017).

In total, six CSs were studied during the pandemic between January and February 2021: Spring Hub (tech), Workland (tech), and Lift 99 (tech) in Tallinn, along with the TheFactory (fintech and others), SoCentral (social innovation), and 657 Oslo (different creative industries) in Oslo. The reason for selecting these six CSs was that in addition to providing workspace, they act as incubators and/or communities, helping entrepreneurs grow their start-ups and hosting high-tech companies. The six CSs have several partnerships in ongoing projects both in Estonia and Norway and worldwide. In addition, high-tech CSs have a reasonable technical basis for the rapid transformation of physical activities in the virtual space. It is also important to mention that in addition to coworkers, these

CSs are also used by employees working remotely for their companies. Thus, location is not relevant for every customer.

The qualitative content analysis focused on six semi-structured interviews with the managers of the CSs. The aim was to understand their perspectives in interpreting virtual coworking and the interplay with remote working under the pandemic, as well as envisioning new ways of working after the pandemic. Five categories were selected: (i) understanding of virtual coworking; (ii) interplay between virtual coworking and remote working; (iii) virtual coworking practices (in order to explore social and communication functions and dimensions); (iv) virtual coworking challenges (including difficulties in replicating a CS); and (v) future ways of working (e.g. the combination of new forms of work, flexibility, working from different locations). These categories were considered relevant topics for further exploration based on the theoretical background presented in this study and were thus selected deductively (Mayring, 2014). The contents were analyzed by coding the statements in texts (see Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Selected content analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the managers.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Excerpts from interviews</i>	<i>Preliminary argumentations</i>
REMOTE WORKING	Rwdef1	You can work from any part of the world, but you can work remotely without online connections and participating to the on-line meetings (Manager 1, January. 20, 2021 Oslo)	People can work individually and separately. The location does not matter.
VIRTUAL COWORKING	VCdef1	It is so hard to say for me what it means. I would say it is something like online activities that we provide. . . But this is only part of our coworking (Manager 2, January 12, 2021 Tallinn).	Virtual coworking is part of the coworking.
VIRTUAL COWORKING	VCpr1	Well, we use the same programs as we did before the pandemic. We have a Facebook group, sometimes we chat on Zoom or via Skype (Manager 3, 2021 Tallinn).	The use of platforms did not change during the pandemic.
VIRTUAL COWORKING	VCch1	We tried to replicate something that happened physically with some limitations (Manager 1, 2021 Oslo)	There were difficulties in replicating physical events.

(Continued)

Table 11.1 (Continued)

Category	Code	Excerpts from interviews	Preliminary argumentations
NEW WAYS OF WORKING	NWW1	Foreign customers work in our spaces remotely for their companies. . . And this trend will continue in future (Manager 4, 2021 Tallinn)	There are different ways of working remotely from coworking spaces.
<i>List of codes used within the content analysis and number of examples for each code found</i>			
RWdef	Definitions of remote working = 7		
VCdef	Definitions of virtual coworking = 7		
VCpr	Virtual coworking practices = 18		
VCch	Virtual coworking challenges = 27		
NWW	New ways of working = 15		

Source: Authors.

The semi-structured interviews with the managers dealt with several topics, such as evolving concepts of virtual and remote working and the consequences of unexpected uncertainties for the CS (during and after the pandemic). The managers were also asked about the use and development of digital platforms under the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the lessons from the pandemic and the future of work.

Results

Virtual coworking and relation to remote working

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working was an established concept and practice among the CS managers and users. The common understanding of remote working among managers is that people can work everywhere and anytime. Some consider remote working to be a lifestyle. Moreover, the advantage of working remotely during the pandemic is that people can connect with others worldwide. This has been a significant benefit for everyone according to some managers.

Furthermore, remote working can also be done individually and offline. This means that remote workers do not always use virtual tools or are not always forced to communicate with other people. As mentioned by some managers, remote workers might not be interested in building a network within the online community or coworking virtually.

Among the managers interviewed, there was some uncertainty in the definition of virtual coworking. Some were able to identify a virtual coworking space as an online coworking space, while other managers identified VCSs as a part of physical coworking. For other managers, virtual coworking is related to ways of connecting people. VCSs are based on new and prior skills in using

digital platforms (such as digital streaming systems and document sharing). The digital space helps to connect coworkers in their communities to new people and engage them in conversations on digital platforms. To this end, the managers recognized the importance of community and belonging to virtual members of the CS community. The location does not matter, but virtual (or online) coworking is part of CS activities. Thus, coworking is acknowledged as a broader definition that embraces both online and physical work in the spaces.

Unlike remote working, VCSs are grounded on more frequent digital communication and more established online activities. People are further connected: coworkers at least say hello to other coworkers on the digital platforms and they communicate more often with the CS community. This community feeling has evolved throughout the pandemic. In the beginning, managers pointed out that customers were deeply involved in online activities. They used VCSs as a platform for sharing the experience of living under the new pandemic conditions. However, with the increase in the number of online meetings, some customers could not tolerate the high intensity of social communications and declined to be involved in virtual community events.

Virtual coworking practices

During the pandemic, the main aim of the CS managers interviewed was to keep the community alive by reaching their CS members online and by communicating regularly with them. They focused on helping the start-ups hosted at the CS (e.g. lending support in organizing community meetings and conferences, pitching events, maintaining legal support). Furthermore, the managers did not perceive any technical difficulties moving from the physical to the virtual space, since coworkers had already experienced digital forms of working before the pandemic. In this sense, the six selected CSs did not invest in new digital platforms but rather developed existing platforms (Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook, Slack, and so on). The use of digital tools has formed the basis of these communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online activities did not change drastically. The CSs continued to organize them as in previous years. However, both private (online dinner parties, as in the case of 657 Oslo) and open digital events were organized more often and needed more frequent advertisement. These digital events were arranged for socializing and receiving feedback and/or complaints from coworkers.

The managers also organized large workshops (involving between 100 and 300 participants, such as with SoCentral and Lift 99). The managers noticed an increasing number of participants in such events. In addition to regular CS users, there were also members who could not reach the CS due to long-distance travel or conflicts with meetings elsewhere. Some traditional services were transferred to digital forms since most members could not reach the CS (due to the restrictions on mobility and travel). For example, Lift 99 provided some online services such as advertisement and law advisory services. These

services were beneficial for the members and did not require any physical presence. The managers realized that these services worked more efficiently and quickly online, and they will probably offer them online even after the pandemic.

Virtual coworking challenges

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the six CS communities mainly focused on connecting people in a physical space, such as meeting people at the coffee machine or spontaneously in shared spaces. Thus, the main challenge was to replicate this community in the virtual space. For example, the social and work dynamics that occur in the physical space cannot always happen in the online room. Coworkers might struggle to draw inspiration and vibes from home, while the open space of the CS is an essential source of inspiration. Some CSs tried to replicate some social dynamics by organizing ‘coffee calls’. This was tested to support people working from home who feel isolated.

The six managers agreed that keeping members present and engaged in online meetings is demanding. The main challenges of large digital events were, firstly, organization and coordination despite advanced IT skills, and secondly, creating virtual ways of socializing and having fun. More staff energy was invested in engaging people. However, in several online meetings, for example, some managers noticed that some members shut off their cameras, while some were unable to attend entire meetings. This may be due to various reasons, such as the length of the meetings, overlap with other duties and the low degree of engagement in specific meeting topics. However, they also found that the workshop size influenced the degree of socialization in both the physical and virtual spaces.

Despite the advanced IT skills and use of digital platforms, adaptation to the VCS was different among members of the six CSs. Before the pandemic, some CS members had already adopted hybrid forms of coworking. For example, they already coworked online from the physical space (e.g. TheFactory and Spring Hub). However, during the pandemic, some CS users did not really rely on having so many online meetings, and so they returned to the physical space and held face-to-face meetings while respecting social distancing guidelines (e.g. Workland).

The CS managers were aware that some coworkers live in small apartments or shared flats, and it can be frustrating for them to work from home for such a prolonged time. Arranging a home office might require an extra room, as well as additional furniture and IT equipment, which some coworkers cannot afford. There are also coworkers with kids at home that sometimes worked from the office while complying with hygiene measures. This allowed them to separate their family and work duties and be more productive.

Referring to the short-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on coworkers’ habits and needs, the six managers did not notice a significant decrease in the number of members but instead changes to the work routine. In some

cases, coworkers decided to leave the space and work from home; new coworkers chose the CS for online meetings (see Lift 99 and TheFactory), while other customers returned to the CS after some time. Furthermore, according to the managers, it is difficult to predict the long-term impacts of virtual coworking. Among the positive impacts of virtual coworking, these new forms of coworking would create new networks across the country and worldwide, as well as expand their community.

New ways of working

The managers provided different outlooks about the future of work. The spatial layouts of the CSs may change in the future. Some CSs aim to provide better facilities to coworkers, such as smaller individual rooms and larger meeting rooms. The managers are aware that more people will work virtually after the pandemic. However, they will still work physically in the space, albeit less frequently. Probably coworkers would not work all week from home. They will likely use CSs to attend meetings and work with colleagues.

Likewise, some managers believe that social gatherings, workshops, and meetings will be arranged again in the physical space, though large, shared spaces (open landscapes) will be drastically reduced. Other work activities will be performed from home, from the cabin, or wherever people want. This flexible work still supports the organization of daily life and family duties with kids.

Some managers mentioned the need for a plan B. One of the ideas is to expand their business by opening other premises in other Norwegian cities which have been less affected by the pandemic. Some managers mentioned that it would be strategic to further network with other regions and partners. According to other managers, people have dramatically reduced travel, and flying especially, and they are aware that some work can be done from home. Moreover, work practices will probably change across all industries. Employees of large companies will probably not spend 8 hours at the traditional office but may prefer flexible ways of working and spaces such as CSs. Working remotely and coworking virtually are both considered sustainable ways of working in terms of resource consumption and commutes. Considering these scenarios, some managers have already adjusted membership fees to the new needs.

Discussion and conclusion

The results reveal that VCSs and remote working present some differences in terms of definition and work practices. Our study specifies that virtual coworking is associated with online community building and is considered an extension of physical coworking. In previous studies, such a combination of virtual platforms and physical spaces was recognized as important for users since it provides greater flexibility (Hofeditz et al., 2020). This study in Tallinn and Oslo confirms that virtual coworking provides a substantial advantage in access to global knowledge by connecting people across the world (Maskell, 2014).

Simultaneously, VCSs help to avoid unnecessary commutes (Morris, 2008). Scientific studies on this topic are still very limited, although there is an ongoing debate among coworking communities. Similar to CSs (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016), we found that social interaction and collaboration are of great importance for VCSs. However, the high intensity of virtual social communication reduces users' willingness to participate further in virtual meetings. As revealed previously (Ibell, 2016), user engagement in virtual events is considered one of the most crucial and inherent challenges for all virtual ways of working. Among other challenges of virtual coworking are difficulties in following workplace dynamics and balancing work and family duties, as well as working from small apartments (particularly for young people) or at home with kids around (Hyrknen et al., 2012; Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

The results of our study suggest that after the pandemic, the future seems to belong to a wider hybrid form that combines remote work, VCSs, and CSs. This implies that remote working and VCSs can be complementary, including the aspect of socialization. This is an important finding, since during the pandemic, CSs have experienced a high risk of being closed, and potential competition with remote working might double this risk. However, since this was a qualitative study, the results naturally cannot be generalized to all contexts but rather used to find out where the key challenges in this combination are.

To conclude, new ways of working should be redesigned in response to different peoples' needs and habits after the pandemic (e.g. spending fewer hours at the office, working a few days from home, and avoiding daily commutes, as well as the need for socializing and working from different locations) (Holland & Brewster, 2021). Such hybrid forms that combine remote working, VCSs, and CSs may rapidly adapt to possible future waves of COVID-19 and increasing uncertainties of city life and society, which are generated by unexpected developments and events.

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