

Co-working demystified: Behind the working world revolution

By [Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay](#)

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Co-working spaces have been growing in all the world's major cities for 15 years. But what makes them so popular? Why and when did they appear? Who are their members?



Image source: Gallo/Getty

New technologies such as artificial intelligence and robots are leading employers to rethink the way they work. At the same time, workers want more autonomy and flexibility. Many have chosen self-employment to escape organisational constraints and to determine where and when they will work.

The [aspirations of workers as well as the expectations of employers](#) have therefore changed significantly in recent years. Many employees want to work from home; others want to work outside company headquarters but with other people.

As a specialist in human resources management and sociology of work, I have been researching co-working spaces for the past five years and have identified the main sources of interest and success of these places.



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A neutral and open place

Co-working areas, fab labs and living labs are also called [third places](#). The American sociologist Ray Oldenburg defines them as workplaces outside the office or usual place of work, but also outside the home, as is often the case with teleworking.

A third place is neutral (neither at home nor at the employer's office), open to all, with free and unrestricted access

(especially with regard to activities). It should facilitate conversations and meetings and should also provide meeting rooms and space for coffee breaks, lunch and dinner. Ideally, the space should be regularly used by the same users.

Spaces for co-creation

The first co-working space was created in 2005, in San Francisco, to allow users to develop their creativity, innovation and ideas. The total number of co-working spaces [now exceeds 14,000](#). Some spaces disappear while others are created.

A co-working space allows its users to share the same place with the type of equipment that can be found in an office (photocopier, printer, scanner). Workers can use this equipment and share expenses in exchange for weekly or monthly rental fees.

Offices may be in an open area to facilitate chance meetings. This is preferred by many self-employed workers, but small businesses or startups often prefer closed offices for more confidentiality. Both types of offices can be located in a co-working space, which helps to reduce isolation [through the presence of a kitchen or coffee corner, where workers meet](#).

In this way, the co-working space has become an innovative solution to the desire to work away from a central office, without necessarily being alone at home. It is also attractive for self-employed workers who prefer to work in a space where there are other workers.



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Facilitating networking

Ideally, a co-working space should go beyond cost-sharing or offering services. It should also be a place to share ideas and network, and allow members to develop professional co-operation.

Some co-working spaces bring together particular categories of workers, in the same sector or with professional links. The principle of a co-working space is to rent working space, which helps to reduce costs, but also to encourage networking and exchange of ideas.

To develop this collaboration, people must find a common interest to encourage exchanges. Some spaces emphasise proximity of mission or vocation (all social economy enterprises, for example), which can increase members' interest and desire to collaborate with each other.

By working together in the same space, users can find common solutions to facilitate knowledge sharing and face an

increasingly competitive environment. Even though some self-employed workers prefer to work alone, they still have people to share coffee breaks and lunch with, and sometimes ideas and contacts to support their activity and exchanges.

There is not always an explicit strategy to encourage interaction, but many spaces have a facilitator whose role is precisely to ensure that people get to know each other and end up co-operating on projects.

Our research underscores the importance of available financial, material and human resources, particularly in terms of facilitation resources. A space created without these resources is less likely to encourage knowledge sharing, [collaboration and may even have some difficulty surviving](#).

Diverse realities

Co-working has become popular all over the world, but it refers to diverse realities. Indeed, depending on the city or region where it appears, one will find more individuals, self-employed workers or, on the contrary, small businesses or startups, [with different objectives in setting up there](#).

Co-working spaces can be used by people who want a more professional business address than a home to receive their clients. In addition, they can often have a large meeting room, providing a more formal setting for meetings.

Some *co-workers* may use a space primarily for benefits such as cost reduction, sharing of human resources (administrative support) or equipment (printer, photocopier, meeting rooms), or simply for comfort and services (common kitchen, good coffee maker, comfortable sofas and chairs).



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Fear of competition

It can sometimes be difficult to interact with colleagues in the same field. Some people may perceive these people as competitors who might steal their customers. Some co-working spaces refuse to accept people who could be seen as competitors of other members.

Collaboration does not always happen in a co-working space. Indeed, although it has often been presented as an advantage, no study has so far clearly demonstrated the advantage of co-working spaces to foster more collaboration. This remains to be documented.

Indeed, physical proximity does not necessarily lead to professional proximity, as some people prefer to work in isolation. For example, we have observed spaces that have wanted to specialise in a sector, such as the cultural or social economy sector, but that in fact got very few or no workers in this field.

Even if the discourse or objective is sometimes different, most managers of co-working spaces end up accommodating all categories of workers. Recent studies have shown that without this inclusive vision, there may not be enough clients to keep the space active, especially in small towns or outside the city.

A co-working space can stimulate creativity, innovation, initiative and a sense of belonging to the same community, but this is not always the case. In fact, exchanges and collaboration seem to be easier between self-employed workers than with employees of the same company, who sometimes tend to stay with each other in a co-working space. On the other hand, exchanges can often be helped by the presence of a facilitator.

Co-working spaces are therefore diversified and create opportunities for collaboration, but also certain challenges (profitability, development of exchanges). In any case, interest in this type of space is present in all major cities in the world and also in many small regional towns. This is clearly a new way of working, with the possibility of fostering exchanges, collaboration and networking.

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