14 Perspectives on the dynamics of third spaces

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Introduction

Coworking spaces (CSs) challenge traditional offices and the way we think about work. The recent pandemic and ubiquitous rule of working from home have shaken traditional views on productivity when working from home (Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021), giving the existing tendency to work remotely (Felstead & Henseke, 2017) a huge boost.

The digital transformation, in which people and production become less dependent on distance, location, and time, is viewed as one of the factors that has spurred the development and spread of new workspaces such as coworking spaces (Mariotti et al., 2021). The development of ICT has also allowed for changes in work patterns. Through the implementation of ICT, the time, place, and method of working have become more flexible, and, paradoxically, much *more* dependent on distance, space, and time. The traditional view is that location is irrelevant for some workers: in theory, knowledge workers can work from anywhere and at any time when their office consists of their mobile device (Bizzarri, 2014). Yet even though ICT has reduced transaction costs considerably (Rodriguez-Pose & Crescenzi, 2008; Di Marino & Lapintie, 2018; Di Marino et al., 2018), tacit knowledge still plays an important role and face-to-face contact is still necessary. Nevertheless, the current level of technology has made it possible to reinvent work content and the way in which we work, opening new possibilities besides the traditional division between home and work and allowing for the use of third spaces (Fuzi, 2015).

In this way, rapidly changing technological opportunities would lead to the disappearance of offices as the ultimate and only location to perform work-related tasks, as already signalled by Shamir and Salomon in 1985. At the time, it was widely believed that all future technological innovations in telecommunications would be able to shift millions of jobs out of the office and back into the home. Moreover, there was a strong belief that innovations in telecommunications could completely replace the need to physically travel to a central workplace (Olsen & Primps, 1984). Nevertheless, until recently, there was general acknowledgement that telecommunications could not fully replace the need for physical presence. There was ongoing debate about the increase or decrease

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in productivity levels of employees and workers. Some believed that distractions at home while performing work tasks would decrease productivity over time (Cable & Elsbach, 2012), while other research indicated that more work time is available when travel is not necessary, and a quiet environment can also boost overall production. At the same time, face-to-face contact is considered highly important in economic interactions and innovations (Bathelt & Turi, 2011). With new possibilities for communication, but constraints in working in complete isolation, a new model of the work location was needed and coworking spaces emerged. According to Mitev et al. (2018), these spaces were primarily designed for lonely entrepreneurs suffering from the drawback of working alone at home. Therefore, better than any other model of work organization, coworking places address four conditions that characterize knowledge work: access to information, access to knowledge, access to symbolic resources, and access to social capital (Moriset, 2017; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2016).

Workers who use the third place as a work location tend to be more place independent than dependent, since they do not require a particular place to work. However, their tasks vary on the level of dependence on time. For example, face-to-face meetings require a particular time (Poelsema, 2019; Spinuzzi, 2012). The increasing mobility of workers has led to three changing spatial patterns. The first is diffusion: people can work everywhere with a good Internet connection. The second is spots: people meet at certain spots, and work nomads mainly concentrate at spots with a wide variety of facilities. The third is home: the home acts as a first or second workplace (OECD, 2018).

Halford (2005) argues that there are very few purely home-based workers, nor are there purely mobile teleworkers; hence hybridity is necessary. Hislop and Axtell (2007) extend this to a three-dimensional framework of the work location (Figure 14.1), illustrating the contradictory processes of teleworking. In the 'third space' at the top, they visually show that mobile workers are required to balance their time and effort across a number of different locations and different balances.

Methods

We describe the situation regarding teleworking and third spaces in the Netherlands and Sweden before and during the pandemic, and offer perspectives for the post-pandemic world. Besides existing data sources and the literature, we base our analysis on fieldwork before the pandemic by Kim Poelsema, who focused on the role of third spaces for users in Groningen (Poelsema, 2019), and fieldwork during the pandemic by Ilse Noteboom, who focused on rural teleworkers in Tholen (Noteboom, 2020).

Teleworking in the post-pandemic world

The Netherlands and Sweden are the two European countries where teleworking is the most frequent. In 2019 and 2020, almost 40% of workers in these two

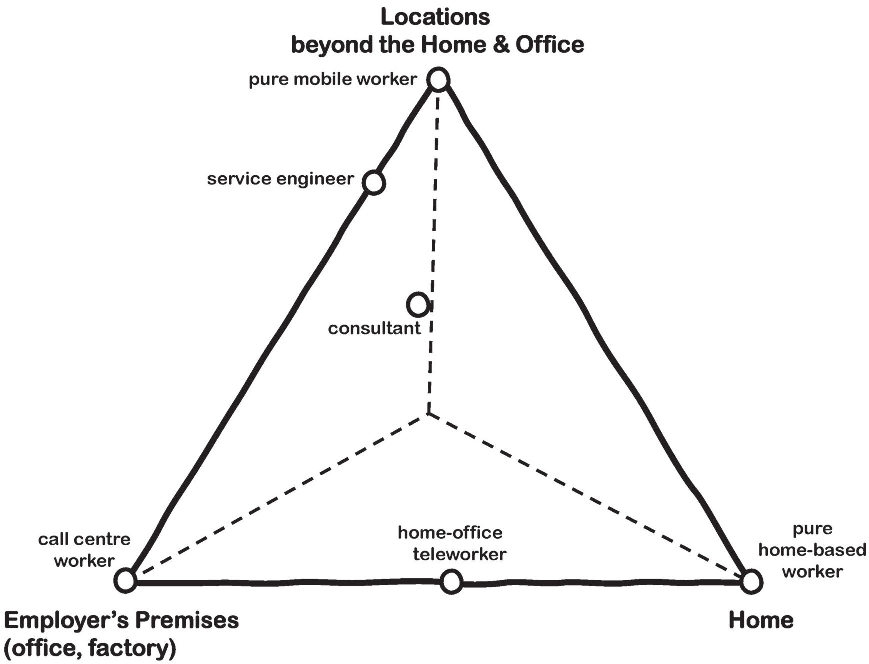

Figure 14.1 Framework conceptualizing the location of work (remade after Hislop & Axtell, 2007).

countries usually or sometimes teleworked, as shown in Figure 14.2. This, compared to the EU average of only 14%; in 7 of the 27 EU countries, the share of teleworkers was under 5%.[1] Remote working has a long history in Scandinavia. Distance working from the periphery was a popular project for a while in the 1980s – very early compared to other places – wherein employees were encouraged to work in so-called 'telecottages' in the countryside (Qvortrup, 1989), effectively precursors of today's CSs. This phenomenon was even exported, for example to Hungary in 1994 (Kovács, 2001).

The Swedish experience

In the third quarter of 2020 (July–September, i.e. between the first and second waves of the pandemic) 43% of Swedish Internet users teleworked at least part of the time (Internetstiftelsen, 2020). A survey of a stratified sample of 2,055 working individuals in January 2021 showed that 53% teleworked either full or part time (Netigate, 2021). Of those employed at national government agencies, about 60% were teleworking as of January 2021 (publikt.se, 2021).

Will things go back to 'normal' when the pandemic is over or has the pandemic caused enduring changes in work life? In Sweden, no scientific studies have hitherto been made on this issue, but a number of survey results have

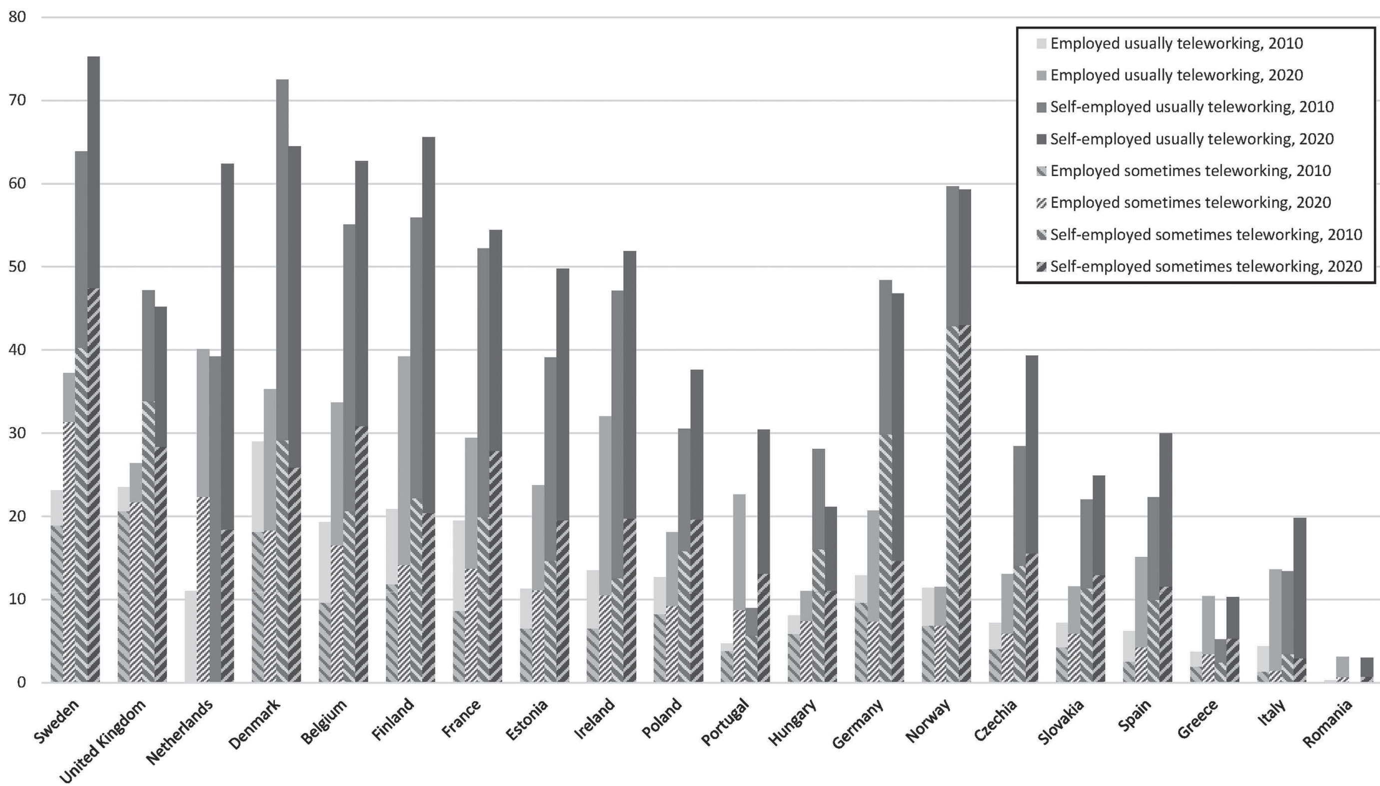

Figure 14.2 Prevalence of telework across EU member states 2020 (Sweden, UK, 2019) and 2010.

Source: Eurostat lfsa_ehomp data and European Commission (2020).

been presented. The daily newspaper *Dagens Industri* and the newsletter *Aktuell Hållbarhet* published a report in December 2020 based on a survey of the 100 biggest companies on the Stockholm Stock Exchange (response rate 27%). Eighty-four percent of responding companies said that they would reduce the number of business trips in the future compared to before the pandemic, and instead encourage more travel-free meetings. Sixty-five percent said that they would offer their employees greater freedom to choose remote working (Di Mobility Insights, 2020).

The aforementioned survey by Netigate (2021) presented a number of results concerning Swedes' attitudes to distance work after the pandemic. Seventy percent of respondents said they would like to continue teleworking (full or part time) after the pandemic and only 24% would like to work solely at their regular workplace after the pandemic. When the respondents were asked to define how much work time they would like to spend at their regular workplace and at home, the average was very close to 50/50. The positive attitude to working from home shows a slight increase with increasing distance between workplace and home. Women are slightly more positive about working from home than men. Seventy percent are satisfied with how their employers have handled working from home during the pandemic. Somewhat less than a third thought that working from home had negative effects on internal communication and collaboration, but 58% were of the opinion that working from home had a negative impact on social interaction with colleagues. Seventy-three percent thought that their work life would change due to the pandemic and only 13% thought it would not.

The positive attitude to working from home among Swedish employees does not seem to be shared equally by employers. In a report by The Remote Lab (2020) in which 366 employers and 1,076 employees were interviewed, 71% of employers stated that they did not want their employees to work remotely after the pandemic, while only 4% of employees felt negatively about some form of distance work after the pandemic.

The Dutch experience

In the Netherlands, developments in both demand and supply have fuelled the increasing influence of third places as a work location. Coworking spaces are located primarily in the dense Randstad area (see Chapter 12 by La Fleur, Smit, and Pais for details). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a strict lockdown from March 2020 onwards, in which all workers that could do so were asked to work from home. Primary school closures were used as a tool to enforce working from home.

Obviously, those who could work from home at all were primarily white-collar workers, and the public sector applied the rules most strictly. However, by the end of spring 2020, a moderate office presence was allowed once again. As the pandemic then reached a second wave in fall 2020, the rules were tightened again, with the closure of primary schools in winter. Increased vaccinations then led to a gradual removal of restrictions in late spring of 2021, with terraces opening in May and indoor restaurants and cafes in June.

It is important to acknowledge that this country has experienced a rapidly growing share of self-employed people compared to total employment in the last decade. This increase can be related to increased entrepreneurial activities, innovation, and a more flexible labour market (OECD, 2018). This rise of self-employed people can also be seen in light of the growing presence of the third place as a work location, and research shows that the main users of coworking spaces are self-employed people or freelancers (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2017).

During the pandemic, many companies paid considerable attention to the well-being of their employees. In particular, those that already had a caring mentality increased their efforts even more. Since working from home increased employee well-being, labour union FNV, with both the green party and one of the liberal parties, strove to embed the right to telework in the 'Werken waar je wilt' law ('Work where you want to'; Parool, 2021).

A user perspective

According to Van Ham et al. (2017), the philosophy behind the formation of coworking spaces is to create a platform for three types of workers: independent professionals, entrepreneurs, and teleworkers. Entrepreneurs and self-employed people are keen to work in coworking spaces since these locations are known for their creative and innovative atmosphere. The openness and sharing in these spaces stimulate interaction and collaboration (Bouncken et al., 2018). Nevertheless, a study in the Netherlands found that even though third spaces are popular for users due to such characteristics, they are not considered a substitute for traditional offices or working from home, but rather an *additional* place to work. Moreover, they also function as places to meet with friends or for private activities (Poelsema, 2019). Below, we evaluate the different types of users and consider their motives in the context of the pandemic.

Companies as users of coworking spaces

Traditionally, meeting fellow workers in third spaces was not a priority for employees at SMEs and large companies; they met their colleagues at the office, and often enjoyed the physical and mental separation between place of work and place of residence. However, in increasing numbers of countries, companies have seen the usefulness of flexible third spaces, such as with famous examples in Milan (e.g. WeWork). The pandemic has accelerated this development, with several companies leaving their large central headquarters and downsizing to a more affordable location, in the expectation that employees will no longer visit the office every day. Examples of such decisions include the largest Dutch bank, ABN Amro, which headed the development of Amsterdam's financial district around Zuid station, but announced they were leaving the area in the midst of the pandemic, settling for an older office building a few kilometres away (Flinders, 2020). It remains to be seen how large companies will now reorganize their teams, and whether team managers will want to regain control over the employees they barely saw in person during the lockdown, or whether more flexible relationships will become the de facto standard. Moreover, companies will have to reorganize the many spontaneous knowledge flows that exist within companies and company buildings (Kabo et al., 2014). Coworking spaces form an interesting platform for encouraging such flows around physical coffee machines, not only within companies, but also with competitors. The pandemic did not slow the development of coworking spaces; rather, most took the opportunity to grow even further. Due to more flexible space organization, coworking became – especially in denser cities – a solution for people who could not work from home due to space limitations and could not work at inflexible office spaces. It is expected that the trend of more flexible working will continue in the Netherlands (Daalder, 2021).

A case in point are the organized CSs in Stockholm. Before the pandemic began, Sweden had shown a steady increase in coworking spaces, primarily in Stockholm. (di.se, 2019). As the capital and the biggest city-region of Sweden, Stockholm provides the most accessible place for conferences and meetings, not only for people in the Stockholm region, but also for actors in other parts of Sweden. It has therefore been important for many companies outside Stockholm to have an office or workplace in the capital. CSs with shared office equipment and infrastructure became the choice for many nonresident companies and the pandemic implied a rapidly shrinking demand for these services (svd.se, 2020).

There is, however, evidence of increasing demand for coworking places in certain areas in Sweden. This holds especially for rural tourist destinations, for example the ski resort of Åre and the winter sport city of Östersund, where CS providers have seen increased demand. A certain portion of the large share of the labour force that has been forced to work from home has left the city for country cottages or hotels. Vacation homes have become permanent homes and coworking places have become new, temporary offices.

Self-employed workers

When the concept of coworking was first developed in the USA by Brad Neuberg in 2005 (Mitev et al., 2018), the spaces were primarily designed for lonely self-employed workers suffering from the drawback of working alone at home. Self-employed people still dominate the coworking scene in many countries.

In the Netherlands, the number of CSs grew from 640 locations in 2019 (ZZP Barometer, 2019) to 707 in 2020 (Vastgoedjournaal, 2020). This quick growth of coworking spaces is due to the high percentage of self-employed people, i.e. workers without personnel; about 10% of workers in the Netherlands are currently self-employed (CBS, 2019a, 2019b). These people often work from home, but there is a steady increase in the share of self-employed workers

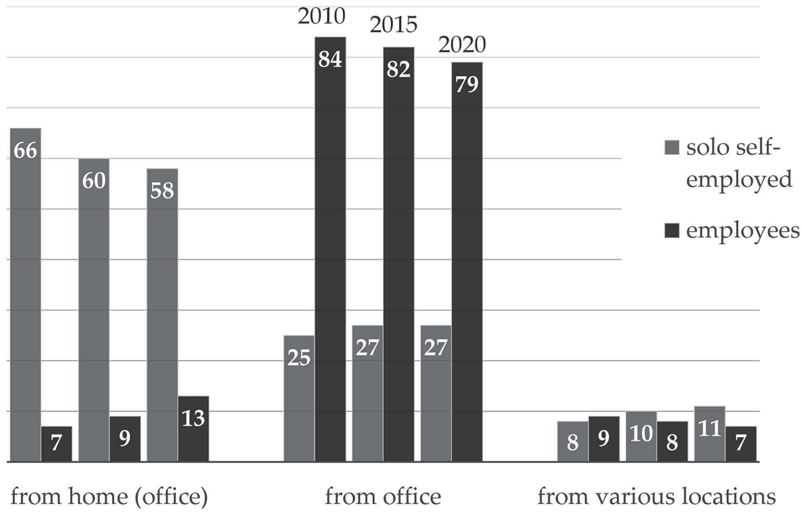

Figure 14.3 Changing working locations for self-employed workers in the period 2010–2020 in the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2021).

at 'third places' (Figure 14.3), which shows up at CSs. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most CS users in the Netherlands were self-employed, either as entrepreneurs or flexible 'dependent' workers. Moreover, they were and are still highly educated, relatively young, and primarily working in business services and consultation. Most workers have some flexibility and/or control over their working hours and the place where they work. Most users are between 20 and 30 years old, and most can be regarded as starters or workers with a medium amount of experience (up to 10 years). This indicates that the third place is to some extent fulfilling the role of the first work location. Interestingly, coworking locations and third places are not used as fixed full-day locations, but more often as a place to work 'in between' transitions (Poelsema, 2019).

Workers who cannot work at home

Coworking has faced a new challenge with the pandemic forcing people to work from home. In fact, when working from *home* is compulsory, the concept of coworking seems counterintuitive; working in close proximity in enclosed spaces is not feasible, and working from home seems to be the only available option.

Nevertheless, many CSs have an advantage that many permanent offices and home working locations do not have: adjustable space dividers and options for rearranging the work layout, generating work conditions that are healthy and good for well-being during such pressing times (Todd, 2020). Furthermore, CSs have altered their services and created new solutions and changed their business models to contain the spread of COVID-19. These include offering membership for individuals, as well as renting office equipment to work from home better, and online workshops or courses (Manzini Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021). These aspects have made CSs a viable alternative for white-collar workers of all kinds.

Governments preferring when people work at CSs

Government policy and public efforts can make further use of the special benefits of CSs, which already occurred before the pandemic. CSs beyond prime inner city locations, in particular, can improve quality of life for individual users by shortening commutes and also reducing traffic congestion during peak hours (Choudhury, 2020; Watkins, 2021). As such, the UK government, for example, has stimulated people to use coworking in more peripheral areas to lighten crowded public transport towards the city, not only amid the current need for social distancing, but also for the future (*The Times*, July, 2020). Similar trends are seen in many urban areas across the globe. The pandemic has increased migration away from dense, populous urban centres, effectively putting an end to the back-to-the-city movement for sectors in which it is possible to work remotely (Manzini Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021).

Non-users

Amid heartening stories about the new organization of work in time and space, it is easy to forget that a large class still does not use such concepts. In the Netherlands, the population density is high and houses are small, making a place to work outside the home attractive (Heaslip, 2020). In fact, searches for larger houses, necessarily with a study, increased markedly during the pandemic (Funda, 2020). Moreover, in the Netherlands, it is normal for both partners to have a job, but one partner often holds a part-time job and takes care of the children at home several days of the week. This too makes the house a less feasible place to work.[2] From an urban perspective, and the dominant view of the dense Randstad area, there are thus several factors pushing workers out of the home, even when they cannot or do not want to visit the office.

In the countryside, however, these driving factors are weaker. There is still little research into CSs outside metropolitan areas (a complaint voiced by Fuzi, 2015), but it is clear from the more general literature on teleworking that loneliness plays an important role (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Daniels et al., 2001). Although CSs are ideal for countering loneliness by providing a community of ersatz colleagues, empirical research on the island of Tholen, a 45-minute drive south of Rotterdam's city centre, showed not only no CS users, but also no knowledge of or interest in CSs (Noteboom, 2020).

Of course, a strong sorting process is at work here. Most workers take their current or possible work location(s) into account when choosing a place to live and vice versa (Rouwendal & Meijer, 2001). Those who end up in the countryside have a high appreciation for space, a high tolerance for long commutes, and/or a high personal attachment to a specific area. Research shows they are quite happy with the idea of working more from home after the pandemic, and they feel no need to look for a coworking space.[3]

Conclusion: a new workspace concept

Coworking spaces can be seen as spatial entities in a work ecosystem, adding value by managing knowledge flows and the possibility of networking. For users, coworking spaces are places for entrepreneurship and innovation, to (co-)create and add value; spaces that provide social support, innovation, creativity, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. As such, CS users are diverse, leading to social interactions that add value and boost productivity and knowledge sharing. During the pandemic and most likely in the following period, CSs have and probably will also become places to work for those who need to be more flexible in their work location and are not always able to work from home. As such, workplace decisions may become a *lifestyle choice* rather than a requirement from the work provider.

Future research should first of all investigate whether certain groups are now finally becoming true 'digital nomads'. Secondly, during the pandemic, much research has been done on the well-being of home workers. Of course, stress and uncertainty about the crisis have also played a role. Nevertheless, if we indeed increasingly continue to work outside the office, it is necessary to investigate what the best places are for working most happily and efficiently. Thirdly, a key avenue of research relates to knowledge spillovers. Since these are well known to be necessary for innovation, coworking seems to be a solution for all parties concerned, and may grow considerably compared to the pandemic period, since all workers during the pandemic could rely on pre-existing networks. For example, future research could compare knowledge spillovers between embedded workers and people who switched jobs during the pandemic. Finally, the spatial implications of hybrid workplaces is of interest, for example, if attractive rural places will form new small agglomerations of (part-time) coworkers.

Notes

1 The high Swedish score is contradicted by other sources, however, including the Swedish Internet Foundation, setting the share of employed Internet users that teleworked at least occasionally before the pandemic at 23% (Internetstiftelsen, 2020).

2 In 2018, the share of households with one full-time partner and one part-time partner was 49%; a further 15% had two full-time jobs (more often those without young children at home). The share of households with both partners holding part-time jobs is growing, but was still just below 10% in 2018 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2019).

3 Only one respondent out of the twelve interviewed in the Tholen fieldwork identified as a real teleworker; this person had concluded that moving to be closer to their very mobile job would mean many repeated moves. They had therefore settled for a pied-à-terre in another city, spending three days a week there and the others on their native island of Tholen (Noteboom, 2020).

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