

5 Community bonds in new working spaces of a small town

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has created dramatic changes in people's ways of living and working. Flexible working arrangements have become widespread and encourage more distributed work practices in countries where they were formerly less common. In the US, the abandonment of densely populated areas for less dense areas has been increasingly common since the COVID-19 outbreak. After nearly a year of remote work because of the pandemic, 31% of Americans, also including young people, prefer to live in rural areas and 17% in towns (Gallup, 2021), looking for nature, a relaxed pace of life, and a comfortable community atmosphere. This chapter explores how new working spaces (NWSs), including coworking spaces, maker spaces, and incubators in small towns have been impacted by COVID-19 and it discusses their future after the crisis.

Coworking spaces (CSs) in small towns

A growing number of scholars argue that CSs can become an important economic factor in rural regions (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020; Manzini Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021; Mariotti et al., 2021). Despite the limited awareness of the term 'coworking', notably by rural communities (Engstler et al., 2020), the percentage of CSs in towns with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants increased from 9% in 2012 to 16% in 2019. The concentration of CSs in inner cities is common, especially in Europe, whereas in the US, two thirds of CSs are in cities with fewer than a million residents, suburban areas, and rural areas. About 65% of American coworkers are settled in towns and peripheral areas (Deskmag, 2019).

CSs have been studied primarily in urban locations and less is known about how they function in sparse regions and small towns (Fuzi, 2015; Micek et al., 2020). To date, CSs have been identified and studied predominantly as an urban phenomenon (Merkel, 2015; Shearmur, 2017). Most of the coworking spaces surveyed by Deskmag (2019) are in cities with more than a million inhabitants. Several of the few available studies about NWSs in non-urban areas are in

languages other than English (e.g. Salgueiro et al., 2017; Krauss, 2019; Flipo, 2020), suggesting that this phenomenon is still under-explored in the US.

Although CSs are important for a small town's economy, previous studies have shown that they tend to struggle with attractiveness, insufficient local market demand, financial balance, workload, ability to hire staff, and community engagement (Deskmag, 2019, p. 529). Authors advocating public policies to support the development of shared workspaces and hubs in remote areas (e.g. Avdikos & Merkel, 2019; Engstler et al., 2020) list a number of priorities. These include acknowledging diversity in shared workspaces; fostering their contribution to local economic growth by means of skills development and networking opportunities; recognizing their function as community infrastructures that create the social fabric within rural areas; and building the capacities of facilitators and agents.

Although most research focuses on CSs, other NWSs follow similar dynamics. It is worth investigating the struggles and needs of NWSs in lower density areas to outline long-term perspectives for their development. Moreover, many NWSs were severely affected by the pandemic and social distancing measures intervened on daily practices. Studying NWSs in small towns in America may be helpful since it exemplifies a phenomenon that is becoming more significant.

Coworking and community

Definitions of 'coworking' stress community as the key factor in creating value, which is fostered by sharing, interaction, collaboration, co-competition, and 'organizationality' (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Blagoev et al., 2019). One key aspect of a community is the organization of events, which may also be open to the public and are useful for increasing the revenue of the space (Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020). The composition of CSs tends to be more consciously determined in metropolitan areas than in rural and small towns, where they develop 'mostly on the basis of personal relationships and networks of the operators or the initial users' (Knapp & Sawy, 2021, p. 124). CS managers and staff play a fundamental role in co-building a sense of community and creating attachment to the space as they promote relationships of trust and friendship, foster domestic feelings, and generate new business opportunities (Pais, 2012). However, considering alternative community types such as *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, and Collaborative (Adler & Heckscher, 2007, building on Tönnies, 2011), most CSs are characterized as *Gesellschaft* communities; that is, members focus on their own businesses, providing each other only with emotional support and not usually coworking on a common objective (Spinuzzi et al., 2019).

Few studies have specifically looked into the community component in small-town and rural NWSs. The most prominent example is Garrett et al. (2017) who investigated how a sense of community was created by working in a North American suburban town. The authors argue that a sense of community in CSs boosts motivation to help, emotional investment in the future

of the space and its reputation, and a willingness to ensure its survival, which is especially salient given financial challenges. However, their study addresses the community from the perspective of CS members and their motivation to choose coworking over other locations for work. There are no studies on the sense of community as a means to grow the business and make it more resilient from the managers' point of view.

Moreover, it is worth examining how communities have reacted to the pandemic. NWSs have been challenged by COVID-19, since the number of people working at CSs dropped on a global scale (-71.67% average), with a consequent loss of membership and contract renewals and a reduction in new memberships (Coworker.com, 2020). The newest data collected during the pandemic mostly regard CSs business models, changes in demand, rent renegotiations, and estimates on survival rates. Nevertheless, with COVID-19, CS managers needed to keep their communities connected more than ever with virtual events, home-delivery services, and support for remote work (Manzini Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021). Not all CSs though had the possibility to develop such services, which highlighted their fragility. This chapter investigates the community dimension of NWSs and its potential in times of crisis.

Aim and approach

This chapter focuses on the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic on NWSs in an American college town. By exploring how these spaces reacted to the pandemic and how community bonds evolved within and around them, this chapter draws attention to NWSs outside metropolitan cities and discusses potential strategies for NWSs to recover in the post-pandemic world.

We take Ithaca, NY, as an interesting case because it is a small town (about 30,000 inhabitants according to the 2019 census) located in an area whose economy is mostly based on agriculture and farming. Ithaca is also a typical college town since it benefits from higher education institutions such as Cornell University and Ithaca College, which make it an attractive place for young people who want to establish their work lives as university employees or entrepreneurs in the Finger Lakes region. Technology companies such as Singlebrook, a custom web development agency founded in Ithaca nearly a decade ago, took advantage of the proximity to the universities and the talented workforce they attracted to an otherwise isolated part of upstate New York. Over the past several years, Ithaca has seen numerous coworking spaces open for business. The university's closure due to the pandemic marked a devastating impact for Ithaca's economy, with 9,500 jobs lost in April 2020 alone (Stal-necker, 2021). Therefore, a severe impact was expected on local NWSs, which is analyzed in the following sections by investigating all the existing spaces.

Firstly, five NWSs in Ithaca were identified by word of mouth, including three coworking spaces, one incubator and one maker space (see Table 5.1). The latter two were run by the same person, so four interviewees (managers and/or owners) were involved in the investigation, and a total of eight phone interviews were

Table 5.1 Interviews.

<i>Code</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male (same as E)	Male (same as D)
Role of interviewee	Owner and manager	Owner and manager	Manager	Manager	Founder and board member
Type of space	Coworking	Coworking	Coworking	Incubator	Maker space
Governance	Private	Private	Cooperative	University-led	Non-profit
Space tenure	Owned	Leased from private landlord	Leased form private landlord	Paid by university to private landlord	Leased
Capacity	20–25	10–12	10–12	About 70	10–15
Number of members (usual)	10 (5–7 at the same time)	5–10	6–10	45 companies (from 1 to 50 people each)	75
Mission	Boosting entrepreneurial spirit and creative activities	Fostering environmental and social justice	Supporting the cooperative community CoLab focusing on digital design	Retaining talent to make an impact in the town	Encouraging creative endeavors of common people (not for business)
Date of creation	2019	2015	2010	2014	2010
Active 2020	Yes	Yes	Until March	Yes	Yes
Active 2021	Yes	To be defined	No	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors.

conducted in two rounds. The first was held in April–May 2020 and the second in March–April 2021. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, following a semi-structured guide to cover specific topics of interest for this study: (a) the impacts of COVID-19 on the business and its community; (b) the short-term effects of the pandemic and ability to react to the lockdown; (c) long-term perspectives for NWSs in small rural towns. The interviews were video-recorded or transcribed on paper (depending on the interviewee's permission) and subsequently analyzed according to the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach (Hill et al., 2005). A critical interpretation of the results is presented in the next section. Domains and core ideas were coded by the authors' consensus followed by cross-analysis to identify common themes across participants.

Results and discussion

Overview of the cases

All the spaces are relatively small with a capacity of 10 to 25 people. Only the incubator hosts up to about 70 people at a time. The coworking spaces in the sample are typically for profit. Their managers and owners were busy with other jobs and managed the coworking spaces as a side job. However, the incubator and maker space are non-profit initiatives, and operated by a dedicated staff hired by Cornell University (the incubator) and a nominated board (the maker space). All the spaces were active until the beginning of the pandemic. Space C was forced to shut down after March 2020 because it could not sustain the lease and it remained closed throughout 2021, although its cooperative was still active. Space B was open throughout the pandemic, but its owner was wondering whether it would still be feasible to run the business. As expected, the pandemic has affected the operation of NWSs in Ithaca. The interview results showed the importance of the community on different levels to help these spaces survive.

Internal community

One general domain emerging from the interview results regarded internal community, which is the most common in previous literature on coworking. This showed more issues than benefits related to both the short-term and long-term strategies of NWSs, showing them to be rather 'flexible'. None of the managers mentioned that their spaces were based on a strong internal community before the pandemic. This might depend on the scope of the space, as well as on the retention and stability of its members. The previous literature suggests that rural coworking spaces differ from metropolitan ones because their composition tends to be less consciously determined (Knapp & Sawy, 2021), and similar results were found in the NWSs in Ithaca. Nevertheless, the idea that the development of rural CSs was mostly based on personal

Table 5.2 Domains, core ideas, and themes emerging from the interviews.

<i>Domains</i>	<i>Core ideas</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Internal community	<p>Composition of the NWS is varied and rotates</p> <p>‘Transient population – artists, software engineers, etc. . . . 75% of people where there only to use the space, 25% were interacting with the cooperative. . . . Relationships were temporary’ [INT-1C]</p> <p>‘The community . . . is varied’ [INT-1D]</p> <p>Turnover is high and impacts returns</p> <p>‘The greatest challenge was turnover of coworkers’ [INT-1C]</p> <p>‘It’s hard to make the numbers work in our town’ [INT-1B]</p> <p>Diversity reflects openness and flexibility</p> <p>‘Some [of the members] are working remotely for larger organizations and non-profits (for example in LA). Most of them are from Ithaca and their companies are not!’ [INT-1B]</p> <p>‘It is domain agnostic’ [INT-1D]</p> <p>‘There is no selection criteria’ [INT-1E]</p> <p>‘Occasionally a few people rent out the meeting rooms on an as-needed basis’ [INT-1B]</p> <p>People leaving Ithaca shows disengagement</p> <p>‘“It was small between 6 and 10 members. They were solopreneurs or visiting professors at Cornell. They went back home’ [INT-1C]</p> <p>‘One of the 2 managers decided to drop out, also because he has a family with 3 children’ [INT-2A]</p>	<p>Ties related to the use of the space</p> <p>Poor stability</p> <p>Gesellschaft</p> <p>community</p>
Local community	<p>Healthy competition</p> <p>‘Ithaca is a very collaborative space in general, so the coworking community is the same’ [INT-1C]</p> <p>‘Every coworking space here has its own specificities’ [INT-1C]</p> <p>NWSs are community activators</p> <p>‘We are a hub of the entrepreneurs’ community in Ithaca [and] the region. There is a lot of commitment’ [INT-1D]</p> <p>‘The space is participating in various Ithaca events, like the Festival, Friday markets, etc.’ [INT-1E]</p> <p>‘We are part of the “Guide to Being Local” . . . We contribute to some auctions in town for fundraising. We provide space for some events. . . . In terms of community impact, we are active as an incubator mostly for non-profits. In the past we provided a free space for people marginalized in the community (people of color, LGBT, etc.)’ [INT-1B]</p> <p>‘The people who attend the workshops are from the community at large’ [INT-2A]</p>	<p>Ties generate from belonging to the town</p> <p>Good stability but hindered by COVID-19</p> <p>Traits of</p> <p>Gemeinschaft</p> <p>community</p>

(Continued)

Table 5.2 (Continued)

<i>Domains</i>	<i>Core ideas</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Extended community	NWSs support the local economy	
	‘We support local businesses as well as some coffee spaces, so we have the espresso-cappuccino machine and free coffee for the coworkers. We have also snacks from local makers. . . . Most of the workshops are taught by local artists and makers’ [INT-1A]	
	‘Some people around donated money to help companies and businesses in town. We put together a committee to understand what businesses deserve them as “anchors” (i.e. the historical businesses that define the identity of the town and the area)’ [INT-2E]	
	‘Cornell is very sensitive to supporting the [local] community. We are not gonna turn around and beg our landlord for rent reduction. The cleaning company, as well, is just a little company. We are still cleaning the space 3 times a week just to support it’ [INT-1D]	
	The pandemic hit community bonds	
	‘We don’t do the big events that we used to do’ [INT-2E]	
	‘The community of the town is losing contact (not just entrepreneurial) with the space. The evening events do not exist anymore . . . they were very social evenings. People were coming also from the surrounding towns (e.g. Binghamton)’ [INT-2D]	
	A sense of belonging binds a wider community	
	‘In the broad coworking and cooperative community there is a lot of solidarity. . . . I always felt that the door was open to visit other coworking spaces [when I am travelling]’ [INT-1C]	Ties generate from embracing a social model
	‘Personally, when I used to travel around, I would always spend some time and visit similar activities’ [INT-2D]	Became an opportunity with COVID-19
	Developing plans	
	‘We collaborate with many other coops and labor organizations’ [INT-1C]	
	‘Within the Southern Tier Alliance we support each other by sharing our events and we invite everybody. Geography is irrelevant nowadays. We’ll keep doing this in the future for informational/educational events, they’ll be hybrid. [However] The social part needs to be in person’ [INT-2D]	Collaborative community
Future prospects for collaboration		
‘Usually there are consortiums in Upstate New York. I see more collaboration in terms of content than of funding’ [INT-1D]		
‘There would be advantage for small [NWSs] to partner with other small ones’ [INT-2A]		
‘Municipalities and townships are creating spaces for collaborative working in their public halls. The way they are building out their open spaces is increasing and encouraging this phenomenon’ [INT-2A]		

Transverse Managers’ community	<p>‘A lot of people in Ithaca have connection and go to work in NYC, so it’s interesting to have an additional space there, and offer the opportunity to NYC to have a more remote space here’ [INT-1A]</p> <p>‘Wework, Impacthub, and others are different [but] I think they could support smaller coworking spaces’ [INT-1C]</p> <p>NWSs in town are unaware of each other</p> <p>‘I don’t know about other coworking spaces here. I am not in contact with them’ [INT-2C]</p> <p>‘Honestly, I felt like I would love to have a stronger relationship with the other local coworking spaces. It feels weird to be in a town with 3 coworking spaces and we are not talking to one another. . . . But I guess it’s out of busy-ness. We are all too busy and focused on our own stuff to find the time to meet each other’ [INT-1B]</p> <p>Who is not connected struggles the most</p> <p>‘We have kept in touch mostly by email. We have been thinking about scheduling some videocall zoom but haven’t done it yet!’ [INT-1A]</p> <p>‘We are keeping email contact once every couple of weeks with the members. . . . We are not really doing virtual events’ [INT-1B]</p> <p>Virtual connections are crucial</p> <p>‘[We would meet] at least twice a month, when we used to have our breakfasts, now we do them virtually’ [INT-1D]</p> <p>‘All of our member companies became virtual. Some of them are wondering whether to stay virtual forever. Our relationship to the company changed in the sense that we are in contact with the leaders but not with all the staff, much less than before. Probably new employees there don’t even have the idea that we exist’ [INT-2D]</p> <p>Future prospects for NWSs in small rural towns</p> <p>‘People moved from Brooklyn to Ithaca because they wanted to be safer. There should be some opportunities for peripheral and rural areas’ [INT-2C]</p> <p>‘There has been a flight out the city. Ithaca is beautiful. I don’t know how long this will last, but there is much less housing for sale, there is nothing for sale on the lake. . . . Upstate New York is seeing a lot of incoming people. This has the potential to make a vibrant community’ [INT-2D]</p> <p>‘In NYC coworkers don’t care as much if there is a big structure behind. Instead in Ithaca it’s important the community. The local business model supports this community atmosphere but after the pandemic it might become more valuable to partner with one another’ [INT-1A]</p>	Ties generate from facing similar challenges Became more relevant with COVID-19 Potential for collaborative community
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Source: Authors.

relationships (Knapp & Sawy, 2021) was not found in the current study. Conversely, NWSs in Ithaca accommodated members that rotated often and were mostly interested in renting hot desks. An ever-changing member population was a common challenge, not only for community building but also for maintaining stable revenue, even before the pandemic.

Member profiles in all the spaces varied in terms of industry, company size (solopreneurs or small groups), educational background (including affiliates of Cornell University and externals), and need to access the space. Even though each space is characterized by a recognizable mission, member enrolment was not too selective and mostly involved a self-selection process. This was especially common during the pandemic, when ‘people who were risk averse dropped and the people who are there now are more relaxed’ [INT-2A]. This self-selection process resonates with the findings of Garrett et al. (2017). However, in the cases here, it was driven by personal choices, values, and concerns about work and life, rather than by a desire for an internal community.

The pandemic undoubtedly affected all the spaces with a drastic drop in membership due to several reasons, including people leaving Ithaca. Clearly the sense of ownership recognized in the study by Garrett et al. (2017) was not found in the current study. Garrett et al. (2017) observed that members also frequented the CS after abrupt changes in the work situation, which demonstrated members’ commitment and connection to the space. In Ithaca, on the other hand, members typically did not pay their membership fees during COVID-19, which may be interpreted as a sign of an uncommitted relationship with the space. The internal communities of NWSs in Ithaca resemble the Gesellschaft community type (Spinuzzi et al., 2019), meaning that they focus more on individual goals and business interests.

Local community

In contrast to their weak internal bonds, the spaces in Ithaca showed deep connections to the local community. Reciprocal respect created a balanced ecosystem. Since only a few NWSs exist in Ithaca, competition did not appear aggressive. NWSs in Ithaca tend to attract and develop their own niche, despite partial overlap in the member profile. With its specific mission, the spaces were deeply embedded in the town or the region as community activators, for instance by participating in local groups and events including food festivals and farmers’ markets. Participation might entail the presence of NWSs as both co-organizers and space providers. Each space characterized its activities and atmosphere in such a way that they appeared unique when compared to others.

There seems to be support from citizens to promote the spaces, while the spaces serve the local community. Partnerships with local businesses were common both on an occasional and a regular basis, which is in line with the survey results showing that 66% of CSs worldwide have partnerships with purpose-driven organizations and 45% with local service companies (Deskmag, 2019, p. 579). Fruitful collaborations were established to provide comfort products daily and to organize workshops.

On one hand, the pandemic fostered these interactions and reciprocal help. For instance, some groups remained active at Spaces D and E following the start of the pandemic, continuing throughout spring 2021 to produce COVID-related equipment. ‘One group is doing personal protective equipment, so they are working there. They are doing a phenomenal job to support the community. We raised thousands of dollars to equip hospitals and we are still working there for this’ [INT-1E]. In particular, even though Space E lost a few members because of COVID-19, they organized fund-raising campaigns to prevent other local businesses from shutting down. The initiative was very visible thanks to the sponsorship by the maker space and the entire community participated. Space D, run by Cornell, decided to keep the cleaning service active during COVID just to support the service provider’s business. Such initiatives recall Tönnies’s (2011) *Gemeinschaft* community, which in previous studies (Spinuzzi et al., 2019) has been considered extraneous to the realm of CSs. Despite positive interactions, only the maker space and the incubator showed an ability for NWSs to help the local community, which was based on their unique governance and business models. Coworking spaces that operate as private businesses and have a relatively less open attitude benefitted less from their presence in the local environment.

On the other hand, the pandemic hindered social gatherings and thus hampered community building among members. The events organized by the spaces were usually open to everybody before the pandemic and served as opportunities for Ithaca residents at large to come together and share experiences. The spaces worked well as motivators for local citizens to take action and support initiatives in town up until the outbreak. However, during the pandemic, even spaces that saw more participation by town representatives lamented the looser community bonds.

Extended community

A third community domain on a larger scale was also recognized. Regional and international ties, which some of the spaces have, are important resources because they develop plans for the future. For those spaces, the system of NWSs worldwide was perceived as a welcoming and inclusive informal community, ready to open their doors to colleagues for sharing space and knowledge. A sense of belonging to a relatively well-established, extended community of like-minded people was acknowledgeable in the interviews. This community, although dispersed geographically, experiences a common ‘social model’, which might contribute to its thriving in the future.

Coworking will have more space both for entrepreneurs and employees that will want to work with likeminded people.

[INT-2A]

The movement to coworking space is a natural societal evolution. . . . Coworking is a business model but also a social model.

[INT-2B]

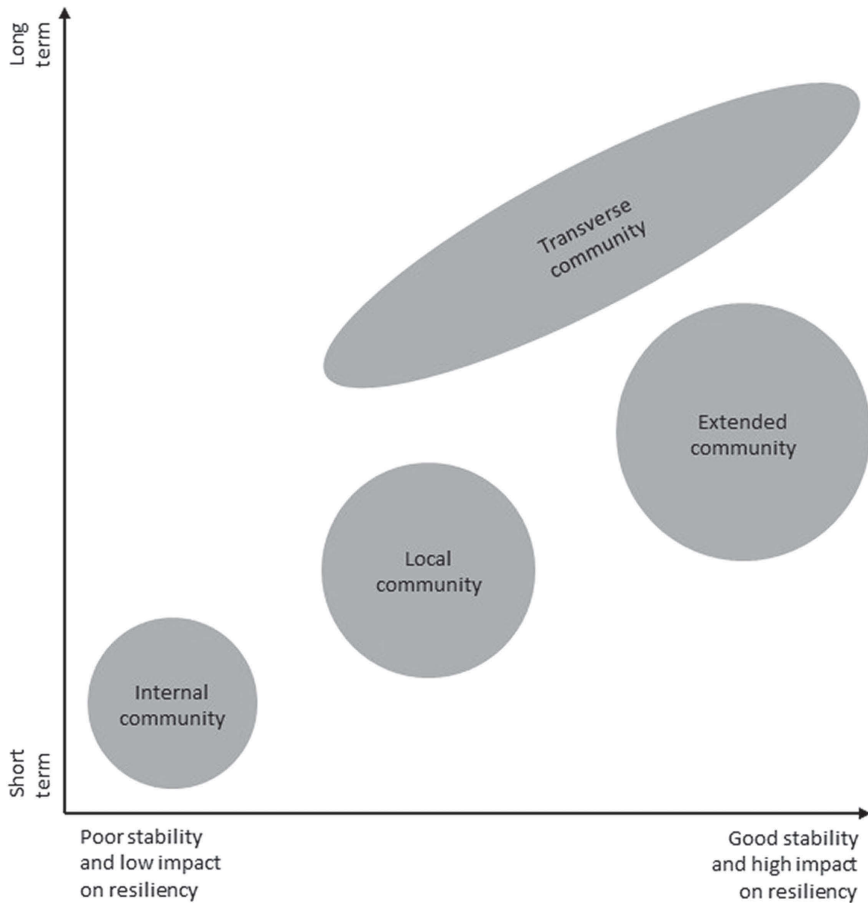


Figure 5.1 Four levels of community in NWSs.

Part of the strength of these spaces was precisely their connection with wider networks. Space C was shut down but the cooperative behind it was still active thanks to connections with other similar organizations. This kept the perspective of a better future for Space C open and encouraged the managers to engage in new visions of coworking and co-living. Larger incubator networks in the region, such as those connected to Space D, functioned as a binder, even more so during the pandemic. The need for stronger mutual support, even across territories, has grown in the past year, but it was also perceived previously as an enriching perspective. ‘Over the years we had a lot of conversations about how to network with similar activities in the area’ [INT-2D]. This had not yet been realized, but expectations for future development of the NWS ecosystem in Ithaca were positive and relied on stronger collaborations among different organizations. Sharing contents and creating a stronger network seemed more feasible among NWSs of similar size. However, for larger

and entrepreneurial-led CSs, there could be benefits in partnering with smaller spaces. According to the interviewees, there are multiple ways that large networked and entrepreneurial-led CSs could support the entire NWSs ecosystem. (1) Coworking giants and large networks could boost coworking as a concept and make it more popular; this would also happen thanks to public shared spaces. (2) Giants could offer shared memberships with a number of affiliates, delocalized over vast territories, with benefits on both sides. (3) Large coworking spaces could offer a lot of courses and support activities, which could be useful if they were accessible to smaller coworking spaces that do not have the same opportunities.

Potential of a transverse managers' community during and beyond the crisis

The good relationship that all the spaces have with the local community and with the extended NWS community at large, do not correspond to relationships of mutual assistance between one NWS and another. When the managers were asked whether they knew how the other spaces in town were doing and how they were dealing with the pandemic, all interviewees seemed to be totally unaware of it. This most likely did not depend on the fear of competition or disinterest, but just on the space managers'/owners' lack of focus. It is not surprising then, that even some space managers left Ithaca or left their jobs to take care of family during COVID-19. The owner of Space A lives most of the time in Huston (TX) and Brooklyn. The owner and manager of Space B moved to Hawaii during the pandemic and managed the space remotely with the help of a cleaning person. This likely occurred because many of these people manage CSs as a side job.

For this reason, the quality of bonds and communication within the NWS ecosystem on a larger scale was especially crucial during the pandemic. The most severe effects were suffered by those that did not manage to organize online events and keep regular connections, except email exchanges, with both internal members and local people. Conversely, the most structured spaces, such as Space D, could count on staff to organize online activities and share them on local and regional networks. Although this strategy cannot become a long-term mode because it depletes the internal community and the role of the space, it is considered positive for 'survival' in the short term, and enables prospects for future collaboration and content sharing.

There is an optimistic vibe when future perspectives for the success of NWS models in a small town like Ithaca are discussed. The increasing attractiveness of rural areas due to the pandemic and the initiatives undertaken by townships to promote shared creative spaces are likely to open the road to promising developments. Besides the internal community dimension, partnerships among similar businesses on different scales are reported to be critical for 'mutual help and support' [INT-1C], which indicates the potential for a collaborative community to be established. As long as the community dimension can be strengthened on different levels, coworking will experience positive momentum.

Conclusions and implications

The aim of this study was to examine the community dimension of NWSs and its potential during a time of crisis. By investigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on NWSs in a small town, this chapter showed the role played by multiple communities to stabilize the NWS business and support resilience. This study complements the limited literature on small town NWSs and advances knowledge on the community of these spaces.

Four levels of community emerged from analysis: internal, local, extended, and transverse communities of NWS managers (see Figure 5.1). All seem to be relevant to the growth of future NWS models with short- and long-term effects on business resilience in the post-pandemic world. The internal community, which consists of ties that only depend on the shared use of space, was the least stable in the cases studied and did not provide much support to the NWSs during the COVID-19 crisis. The local community showed some elements of the so-called *Gemeinschaft* community. Since its ties are generated from belonging to the town, they appeared more stable in times of crisis. The extended community was perceived on a cross-territorial level and emerged from embracing a social model. During the pandemic, it showed potential in becoming a collaborative community. Finally, the managers' community showed transverse spatial boundaries and was motivated by the fact that managers shared similar challenges. This community still requires empowerment, but its professional expertise became more relevant during the pandemic and would benefit from developing a truly collaborative community for rural NWSs to thrive.

This chapter introduced further complexity in the community dimension of NWSs. This can have an impact on how small-town NWS managers deal with different levels of community. One line of future research could stem from testing the conceptual model outlined here by enlarging the sample size. Moreover, the attribution of the *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, and Collaborative types to the different community levels is only a hypothesis that requires in-depth investigation. However, this initial discussion can support the capacity building of operators and hopefully will strengthen their ability to interact more with their internal members, local communities, the global and cross-territorial ecosystem of NWSs, and other peer operators. The public sector or public-private institutions should contribute to this process by facilitating the creation of NWS networks across cities and territories in order to maximize the success of NWSs outside large cities and following the pandemic.

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