



**A THEORY OF COWORKING:
ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES, IMMATERIAL
COMMONS AND WORKING FUTURES**

A thesis submitted
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I also acknowledge the support I received through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Julian Maurice Waters-Lynch,

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Publications

The following three articles, book chapter and conference proceeding were developed from material presented in this thesis.

- Waters-Lynch, J., Potts, J., Butcher, T., Dodson, J., & Hurley, J., (2016). *Coworking: A transdisciplinary overview*. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2712217
- Waters-Lynch, J., & Potts, J. (2017). The social economy of Coworking spaces: a focal point model of coordination. *Review of Social Economy*, 75(4), 417-433.
- Waters-Lynch, J., & Duff, C. (2017). *The Affective Commons*. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3036727
- Waters-Lynch, J., Coworking: challenges and opportunities for a prosperous and fair new economy. (2016) In Ramos, J. (Ed.) *The city as commons, a policy reader*. Available at: <https://cdn5-blog.p2pfoundation.net/wp-content/uploads/city-as-commons.pdf>
- Waters-Lynch, J., (2016) *'It's more like a hive than a hub': Stigmergic activity and governance dilemmas in contemporary Coworking spaces*. Presented at SCOS (Standing Conference on Organisational Symbolism), July 14, 2016 in Uppsala, Sweden.

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary experiences of entrepreneurial knowledge work in emerging and rapidly changing areas of economy and society through a detailed ethnographic analysis of the motivations, social practices and changing experiences of a pioneering Coworking community in Melbourne, Australia. Coworking is a complex social phenomenon. Whilst 'Coworking spaces' are open plan office environments that mobile, independent knowledge workers share as places of work, 'Coworking practices' are the methods by which these independent actors choose to work in close proximity, interact socially and sometimes collaborate on shared projects. Since its emergence in 2005, the rapid global expansion of Coworking has been regarded as both an expression of, and response to, significant changes in how knowledge work is performed and organised. As the processes of globalisation and technological innovation continue to transform working practices and cultures, 'Coworkers' have been held up as early adopters of disruptive trends in mobile and distributed knowledge work, and 'Coworking spaces' have been regarded as emblematic sites within evolving entrepreneurial knowledge economies. These claims present Coworking spaces as compelling sites in which to conduct social inquiry.

Curiously, 'community' has been advanced as the central organising construct around which Coworking has rapidly expanded, and yet many scholarly analyses have problematised this construct in examining specific Coworking arrangements. This thesis takes up this theme by offering a comprehensive theoretical treatment of the 'concept of community' within Coworking and wider entrepreneurial cultures, and a careful empirical examination of the 'community constructing practices' that may be said to characterise these cultures. This investigation is grounded in a rigorous ethnographic analysis of the *social practices* of a pioneering Coworking community in Melbourne, conducted between 2012 and 2017. The ethnography is guided by three key questions, 'why people Cowork', 'how they Cowork' and 'how Coworking experiences change over time'. Although the literature investigating Coworking has

grown during the period of this research, a thorough examination of the core social practices that constitute Coworking, and especially the tensions evoked as Coworking experiences change over time, has not been accomplished until now.

Methodologically, this thesis comprises a 'grounded theory ethnography' dedicated to empirically describing and analysing the core social practices that constituted Coworking for this pioneering Melbourne community. The analysis is informed by theories of 'communities of practice', 'immaterial labour' and 'the commons', which I use to conceptualise the collective product of Coworking labour as a shared '*immaterial commons*' that is subject to a distinct set of social dilemmas germane to 'commons-based peer production'. Hence, the central finding of this thesis is that *entrepreneurial communities* produce *immaterial commons* that require *appropriate governance arrangements* to be sustained and renewed. This finding makes two contributions to the scholarly literature. Empirically, the thesis contributes to the emerging literature on Coworking by providing a detailed examination of social practices observed within a Coworking community as it evolved over time. Theoretically, it proposes a novel conception of the collective product of immaterial labour as a commonly pooled resource, and in doing so proposes a pathway for research that examines the organisation and governance dilemmas that are likely to emerge in the future within specific 'entrepreneurial communities' and the knowledge work they produce.

Chapter 1: The puzzle of entrepreneurial communities

This thesis is about the changing nature of work. More specifically it explores contemporary experiences of entrepreneurial knowledge work in emerging and rapidly changing areas of the economy. The study is grounded in an ethnographic analysis of the motivations, social practices and changing experiences of a cluster of 'non-standard' workers engaged in the practice of Coworking. Coworking spaces and practices provide an arena in which to explore the emergence and organisation of an *entrepreneurial community* within the shifting context of a *new economy*¹. The core finding of this ethnography is that entrepreneurial communities collectively produce a shared set of resources conceptualised in this thesis as an *immaterial commons*. A detailed description of the co-constitution of these common resources through Coworking, instantiated via distributed acts of immaterial labour from Coworkers themselves, and the attendant governance dilemmas these arrangements provoke within the community, are the primary contributions this thesis makes to the emerging empirical literature on Coworking, and the theoretical literature concerning commons-based governance.

At first sight, the term 'entrepreneurial community' might appear an odd conjunction, given the near archetypal vestiges each word carries from the past. Since the time of Schumpeter (1934) the figure of 'the entrepreneur' has been imagined at the vanguard of social disruption, conceived of as ruggedly individualistic, heroically

¹ Terms like 'entrepreneurial community' and 'new economy' certainly warrant definitions, justifications and an anchoring to current questions within the scholarly literature. The purpose of this introduction is to offer an overview of the argument ahead, and so these important points will be addressed in more detail in [Chapter 2](#).

shouldering risk in pursuit of opportunities poorly perceived by the masses². The pursuit of innovation is frequently positioned as necessitating liberation from the constraints of the group, where enterprising individuals act in spite of, rather than enabled by, the tight cluster of social relationships and norms frequently associated with the word 'community'. Since the time of Tonnies (1887) 'communities' have been associated with small scale, village-like, enduring sets of relationships held in contrast to the fast pace, fluid social relations, and more transactional norms of urban societies³. Thus it has been easy to imagine that the slow tempo and quaint collectivism of community life only hinders entrepreneurial pursuits, bridling the individual dynamism that generates innovation.

This thesis is not the first work to observe the tension between entrepreneurial individualism and relational communitarianism. Scholarly analysis of lived experience has long observed how individuals combine both the stronger ties of close social relationships with the weaker ties of professional contacts to solve a wide variety of problems (Granovetter 1973; 2005; Wellman and Leighton 1979; Fischer 1982; Wellman 1996; 2002; Roberts et al. 2014). Whether in 'traditional' or 'late-modern' contexts, human experience is multifaceted and can accommodate both the agentic drives towards individuation and the communal drives towards collectivism⁴. Indeed, much of the drama of social life lies in negotiating the apparent trade offs between the freedom of individualism and the security of the group⁵. For most of us, the

² Indeed Schumpeter himself leant on J.S. Mill's liberalism and its centrality of individualism in defending entrepreneurial innovation, further cementing the notion of the individual as the atomic unit of entrepreneurship.

³ Here I am referring to Tonnies' terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* which are usually translated from the German as *community* and *society*. Although Tonnies' terms have been criticised by sociologists since their inception, not least by Weber and Durkheim, the concepts still haunt contemporary discussions of the social, even if only as a misleadingly binary shibboleth to be exorcised.

⁴ The philosophical underpinning of *agency* and *communion*, and their employment in literature on work and meaning will be unpacked in Chapter 5.3 searching for meaning through work.

⁵ This sense of a trade off between these two competing values is, in the opinion of the late Zygmunt Bauman, the fundament riddle of social life.

worlds of work and organisational life provide broad backdrops against which this drama unfolds. However this thesis presents a distinct variant of this drama by focusing on the curious social world of Coworking, and its role in the informal organisation of entrepreneurial and 'non-standard' work.

Much of the empirical content of this thesis is concerned with directing the spotlight of attention across various dimensions of this small social world. Yet the larger questions regarding what people seek through working and organisational life are never far from centre stage. The empirical story reveals some of the persistent conundrums that accompany any attempts at social organisation, but also some of the novel troubles surrounding entrepreneurial work that might peculiarly belong to this period. In fact, the very ambiguity of expectations that suffused these early years of Coworking in Melbourne appeared to be the cause of both enthusiastic early experimentations and later moments of tragicomedy, where assumptions and expectations ultimately misaligned. The question of what is actually *new* about Coworking, or at least what insights its close interrogation reveal that might be transferable to other contexts, is part of the puzzle this thesis seeks to resolve.

1.1 The changing worlds of work

Some fundamental aspects of how we work and organise are undergoing important changes. The timeline of the last three decades of technological development is so familiar it can belie how radically it has transformed our relationship with information. The advent of the internet and World Wide Web, the growth of WiFi, cheap and powerful laptops, the rise of social media and cloud computing, smartphones and connected devices have all become so ubiquitous they now make up the essential infrastructure of knowledge work. There have been bold claims about the technologically driven structural transformation of work tasks, modes of organising and concomitant social institutions for decades. Authors have alerted us to 'future shocks' (Toffler 1970), 'post-industrial societies' (Bell 1974), 'third waves' (Toffler

1980), 'post-capitalist knowledge societies' (Drucker 1994), 'network societies' (Castells 1996), 'free agent nations' (Pink 2001), a 'supercapitalism transforming business, democracy and everyday life' (Reich 2007), 'an emerging entrepreneurial society' (Audretsch 2007), a 'collaborative economy' (Botsman and Rogers 2011), 'peer to peer futures' (Kostakis and Bauwens 2014), 'exponential organisations' (Ismael et al. 2014), 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek 2016) and emerging forms of 'post-capitalist entrepreneurship' (Cohen 2017). This list stops far short of being exhaustive. Despite their considerable differences in analysis and projections, all these texts agree on one point, that the dominant managerial principles that organised working lives for much of the 20th century are largely obsolete. The early foundations of industrialism, the scientific management of Taylor (1911), the administrative logic of Fayol (1916) and the bureaucratic principles outlined by Weber (1922) were not designed for the operating environment of today. In tandem with relevant technological trends have been a variety of managerial candidates vying to replace the familiar models. More recent modalities like 'design thinking', 'agile development', 'lean startups', 'holacracies' and 'responsive orgs' all claim to offer methods of organising that are better suited to our times⁶. The bureaucratic

⁶ These approaches generally all share a view that older management systems were developed for more stable and predictable external circumstances, whereas these new approaches are more applicable to the less predictable contexts of today. Generally they are advanced as more suitable for organising work that involves discovery, creativity and innovation.

- Design Thinking (Brown 2009 is a good example of these ideas applied as to organisational management, but the body of work associated with this term has been developed by many individuals over decades)
- The Agile Manifesto (published in 1999 and available at www.agilemanifesto.org)
- The Lean Startup (Ries 2011)
- Holacracy (Robertson 2015)
- The Responsive Org Manifesto (published in 2013 and available at www.responsive.org)
- 'Teal Organisations' from (Laloux 2014) is also popular among enthusiasts of these approaches.

It should be noted that despite the enthusiastic claims of their proponents, their underpinning assumption is not a particular new idea in management theory. It is markedly similar to the

core that lingers in our organisational imagination is increasingly being challenged by workplace networks that are ‘all edge’ (Spinuzzi 2015).

The nature of our work and methods of organising might be changing, yet work itself persists as a central feature of contemporary life. In fact, by some accounts it is more important than ever (Gregg 2013)⁷. Where many tradition-based institutions and forms of association are said to be in decline (Putnam 1995), work can offer the routine social contact, the ‘human moments’ (Hallowell 1999) in which bodies and faces still regularly encounter each other. For others, notions of ‘purposeful work’, increasingly signalled through social enterprises, for-benefit-corporations (B corps) and a renewed interest in mutuals and cooperatives, help anchor a ‘cosmology of meaning’ (Pratt and Ashforth 2003) to work that coordinates life goals previously attended to through religious, community or other civic commitments. Work in this sense is not only about productive output and economic livelihoods, but is also a conduit for a variety of other enduring psychological and social human needs.

1.2 What Coworking reveals about work

These are the reasons that Coworking spaces are such interesting sites in which to conduct social inquiry. Coworkers, almost by definition⁸, have been recognised as

mechanistic and organic management systems advanced by Burns and Stalker (1961) that formed the basis of ‘contingency theory’.

⁷ This proposition will be further discussed in [Chapter 6.3: Declaring purpose over profit](#). The substance includes both qualitative hours spent working and the increasing role of work as a primary vehicle for status recognition and social contribution as other channels for these needs recede.

⁸ The fact that someone has the freedom to ‘Cowork’ suggests they are able to work in any location with internet access. This is still not the case for many knowledge workers for either technical reasons - they require access to location dependent information or equipment; or managerial reasons - they are expected to be physically present in an office and demonstrate ‘office face time’.

early adopters of trends in mobile knowledge work, and as displaying emblematic features of work in the new economy (early media articles that exemplify this claim include Grossman 2007 and Fost 2008). As such, Coworking spaces were first presented as something of a 'petri dish' for the 'future of work', an association eagerly embraced by leading actors of the then nascent Coworking industry (as evidenced for example in Sundsted et al. 2009; DeGuzman and Tang 2011; Coonerty and Neuner 2013; Jones 2014). However the broader 'project' of Coworking, at least the version presented amongst the empirical material in this thesis, can be understood as a response to some consequential underlying trends affecting work at large. These include the elevated stature of creative knowledge work in the new economy; the rolling digitisation of economic activity; the rise in 'non-standard' work arrangements; the cultural valorisation of entrepreneurship and self-employment; the social tensions that arise when working from home, and, perhaps most importantly, the variety of psychological, social and instrumental reasons entrepreneurs and the self-employed need to access each other⁹. But what order of response is Coworking to these trends? What prospects does Coworking hold to resolve some of the tensions arising from contemporary configurations of knowledge work?

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the nature of the Coworking project as a response to these changing conditions affecting work, organisational and social life. It documents the curious hybridity of 'institutional logics' at play within the Coworking arena, logics that blend elements of community relations, professional networks, market transactions and even 'firm-like' coordinating arrangements evoked through various *Coworking practices*¹⁰. To conceptualise these interactions as an '*entrepreneurial community*' is not to offer an anodyne analysis of the politics underpinning them, nor to gloss over the contested nature of human relations within the social world of Coworking. Rather, it is employed here to focus the spotlight of

⁹ These trends are all discussed in detail in [Chapter 2](#).

¹⁰ A fuller description of the theory of institutional logics, and the various social practices within Coworking that evoke these different logics is offered in [Chapter 6.6 Shaping the institutional logic](#).

attention on the often contradictory intuitions animating the social field, where the competing logics of individual ambition, relational reciprocity and sense of allegiance to an abstract collective¹¹ often collide, sometimes unable to be fully resolved. As signalled in the title of the first major scholarly work on Coworking, '*working alone, together*' (Spinuzzi 2012), it is this apparent contradiction at the heart of Coworking that offers both an intriguing empirical drama and a fruitful arena for theoretical inquiry.

In order to comprehend Coworking as a response to changing conditions surrounding work, the primary goal this thesis pursues is a rigorous ethnographic analysis of the *social practices* of a pioneering Coworking community. The ethnography is guided by three fundamental questions - why people Cowork, how they Cowork and how their experiences change over time. Although a literature has emerged investigating the Coworking phenomenon from various scholarly vantage points over the course of this doctoral thesis¹², such a thorough examination of core social practices that constitute Coworking, and perhaps more pointedly, the tensions evoked as Coworking *experiences change over time*, has not been accomplished until now.

Methodologically, this thesis comprises a grounded theory ethnography. The research design drew upon inspiration and techniques from scholars working in each tradition. Ethnography, or the analytical description of a culture gathered through the long term participation within a group, is a well recognised field of inquiry in

¹¹ The term 'collective' is used here to represent the affective commitment to a group rather than the mere collection of dyadic relationships revealed by social network analysis. Various scholars describe this phenomenon in different ways, for example as 'clans' (Ouchi 1980), or 'tribes' (Ronfeldt 2007; Spinuzzi 2015) to differentiate this relational mode from market exchanges or bureaucratic hierarchies. For simplicity in this chapter I am using the word 'community' for which I offer a scholarly definition in [Chapter 2.4](#). In [Chapter 8](#), towards the end of this I draw together the relationship between an *entrepreneurial community* and the '*immaterial commons*' they produce to highlight how the product of distributed immaterial labour functions as a collective resource.

¹² Among which, it should be acknowledged, many papers do address the question 'why Cowork' (e.g. Spinuzzi 2012; Merkel 2015; Butcher 2018)

organisational studies (Ybema et al. 2009). Ethnographic methods can however, almost notoriously, generate large and heterogeneous sets of data. This research project has been no different, and the empirical material gathered over four years of field immersion and analysed in the following chapters is drawn from participation in, and observations of, Coworking practices, forty-eight formally recorded interviews - twenty-four of these recurring with the same Coworkers over a period of four years and twenty-four single interviews - innumerable informal conversations with Coworkers in a variety of contexts, analysis of images, videos and documents, participation in a variety of digital media interactions with Coworkers and auto-ethnographic reflections on my own experiences. I have drawn upon the methods outlined in 'constructivist grounded theory' (Charmaz 2014) to guide analysis of this data. These methods include the initial fragmentation of qualitative data into 'open codes', the reflective writing of 'memos' to explore noteworthy themes observed in the field, 'theoretical sampling' to guide subsequent gathering of empirical material, and later a small number of 'focused codes' that help to identify 'core categories' and construct underlying theoretical propositions that seek to explain the phenomenon.

This doctoral thesis is presented within the domain of 'organisational studies', itself a highly heterogeneous discipline that employs theories drawn originally from psychology, sociology, economics and anthropology. The theoretical framework guiding the inquiry is principally the 'community of practice theory' outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger 1998), although their model is significantly bolstered here by insights from the wider field of practice theory (such as Bourdieu 1972; Ortner 1983; Schatzki 2001; Gherardi et al. 1998; Orlikowski 2009; Nicolini 2012)¹³. Finally, as many ethnographies employ a wide range of social theory in analysing observations and interactions in the field, insights from disciplines outside of organisational studies and practice theory are occasionally drawn upon in the service

¹³ A discussion on the relevant relationship between community of practice theory and the wider field of practice theory within organisational studies and how these orientations are employed in this thesis is provided in [Chapter 6 On practice theory](#).

comprehending the various dimensions of the complex phenomenon of Coworking¹⁴. The majority of this thesis is dedicated to the project of empirically describing and analysing the *core social practices that constitute Coworking*, and constructing a rigorous theoretical account of how Coworking practices create value for the central actors. The final section of the thesis however advances a conception of the collective product of Coworking labour as a *shared immaterial resource*, which is subject to some of the distinct social dilemmas of commons-based peer production (Benkler 2017). The thesis concludes by arguing that this shared resource evoked a governance challenge that was never fully resolved in the case examined here, and that future research should help clarify how similar dilemmas might be resolved in other ‘entrepreneurial community-like’ configurations of knowledge work in the future.

1.3 Outline and summary of the thesis

Nicolini (2009; 2012) proposes a ‘zooming in and out’ strategy when investigating social practices. This can be applied both to the historical and geographical ‘altitude’ in which phenomena are contextualised and in switching the theoretical lens of analysis in service of a fuller or more detailed picture. The structure of this thesis leans heavily upon this approach. The overarching design is ‘U shaped’, beginning with a broad discussion of macro level changes to economy and society which have exerted pressures on bureaucratic forms of work and organising. From there it progressively descends and ‘zooms in’ to focus on the practices and interactions of a small group of Coworkers in Melbourne over the span of several years. Towards the end it ascends again, ‘zooming out’ to consider what the findings might mean for the future of work and subsequent directions in research regarding Coworking and entrepreneurial communities. There are also higher velocity changes of focus within the empirical chapters, as specific findings from the field are discussed in the context

¹⁴ These chiefly include anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics.

of wider theoretical debates that extend far beyond Coworking. The structure of this thesis is as follows¹⁵.

Chapter two opens with a broad consideration of how globalisation and technological changes have affected routine forms of work in bureaucratically structured organisations, leading to another ‘new economy’ wave that pushes work towards more digital, creative and entrepreneurial forms. It sets the stage for the rise of Coworking by tracing the resurgence of ‘non-standard work’ and in particular the ‘solo self-employed’, the formal category that describes the freelancers, consultants and nascent entrepreneurs that made up the bulk of the pioneering Coworking community examined in this thesis. This chapter also establishes the broad theoretical context in which this research is situated and reviews the extant literature on Coworking. The chapter concludes by outlining the specific problem addressed through the research aims of the thesis.

Chapter three covers the methodology of the research, outlining the case for ethnography as a research strategy and constructivist grounded theory as an appropriate mode of analysis. Here I anchor the research strategy to both traditions, discuss entering the field and methods of data collection, the coding procedures, memo writing, theoretical sampling and process of assembling abstract theory from the empirical material. Whilst there are diverse views regarding what constitutes ‘validity’ in qualitative inquiry, given that so much openly hinges on ‘interpretation’, many methodological scholars encourage researchers to make their personal background and motivations for undertaking research transparent in order to reveal how potential cognitive or social biases may shape analysis (Denzin 2007; Gallagher 2008; Guba and Lincoln 2013; Bryant and Charmaz 2014). As such, this chapter also offers an account of my own background, experience and motivations for

¹⁵ Of the four empirical chapters, [Chapter 4](#) and [Chapter 7](#) are significantly shorter in length than others as they are primarily contextual, providing an opening and closing of the empirical story, whereas the most important material for analysis is covered in detail in the interposing chapters (chapters five and six).

undertaking this study, including an attempt to render my interests and ‘politics’ transparent¹⁶.

Chapter four is the first of the ‘empirical chapters’, and offers a brief overview of the context in which the subsequent human interactions unfold by examining the inner urban, creative sites of the early Coworking spaces and introducing some of the recurring participants in the study by briefly describing who they are and what they do. For ethical discretion they have been given pseudonyms, and occasionally small details such as company names have been altered to conceal identity while minimally impacting the relevant variables and insights. This chapter is brief, but provides a general account of ‘who’ Coworks and ‘where’.

Chapter five is organised around the question ‘why they Cowork’. Accordingly it analyses motivations, both those directly stated in formal interviews, implied through participant-observation and interpreted from the wider analysis of changing conditions surrounding work and organisations. The findings are structured in four parts, each anchored around a specific theoretical terrain. The first focuses on Coworker’s tendencies towards ‘problematizing standard work’, exacerbated by a wider ‘legitimation crisis’ (Habermas 1975) in the confidence of existing institutions and organisational orders to meet their life goals. The second section examines decisions around ‘leaving standard employment’, considered in terms of the trade offs between remaining ‘loyal’, ‘voicing’ concerns or ‘exiting’ organisational employment altogether (Hirschman 1970). The third section explores the ‘search for greater meaning through work’ that many Coworkers were pursuing. Given the broad scope of this title, this section unpacks how meaning through work has been considered in various strands of the literature, reviewing how founding sociological

¹⁶ Within the narrower domain of ethnography, there have been influential demands for ‘reflexivity’ where researchers maximally reveal their own subjective thoughts and feelings about the field research throughout the written account (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Although what is now called ‘the reflexive-turn’ marked some important conceptual and methodological ground in ethnographic thought, I have spared readers the more extreme interpretation of this maxim, where authors subject themselves to a rolling kind of self-psychoanalysis woven through an ethnographic monograph.

concepts such as 'alienation', 'instrumental rationality' and 'anomie' continue to shape contemporary debates about work, but also more recent theory that emphasises the importance of 'autonomy', 'contribution', 'self-connection' and 'belonging' (Rosso et al. 2010). As this section introduces a number of concepts that become important analytical tools in the subsequent chapters, substantial space is dedicated to covering this terrain. The final section focuses on how the pioneering Coworking spaces featured as 'portals to new worlds of work' for many participants. In one sense this point can be taken literally, newcomers passed through physical doors into large rooms of people who shared an interest in 'working differently'. More metaphorically however, Coworking spaces and practices provided a context in which to encounter new ideas and foster relationships perceived as important to the work and life goals of participants. These aspects of Coworking spaces are analysed here in terms of theories of 'focal points' (Schelling 1960) and 'boundary objects' (Star 1989).

Chapter six investigates 'how' they Cowork. As the focus here is on 'social practices', it opens with a brief review of practice theory, and discusses the relationship between communities of practice theory, the broader practice literature and some of the criticisms levelled at community of practice theory by some organisational scholars. The empirical findings are then divided into six subsections that describe a collection of Coworking practices analysed through the lens of a specific theory area. 'Welcoming, introducing and curating' practices are discussed in term of theories of 'organisational socialisation' (Van Maanen and Schein 1977; Bauer et al. 2007). 'Connecting and establishing shared heuristics', are presented by way of a brief discussion of theories of 'optimal cognitive distance' (Nooteboom 2000b; 2012), which are considered advantageous for innovation and entrepreneurial activity. The practice of 'declaring purpose over profit', is examined through theories of personal meaning and motivation such as 'self-determination theory' (Gagne and Deci 2005), but also the wider social movement away from the cosmologies of meaning conferred through traditional institutions such as religions, and the historically unusual pressures on contemporary individuals to 'find' and communicate their 'life purpose' in ways less determined by past traditions (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991;

Bauman 2000; Gregg 2013). The next section highlights the wilful embrace within Coworking culture of 'blending the personal and professional', examined through the lens of 'boundary work and play' (Nippert-Eng 2008). The section on 'sharing and working out loud', reflects on the examples of 'asking', 'offering', 'receiving' considered in terms of theories of 'the gift' (Mauss 1925), 'relational model theory' (Fiske 1992) and theories that describe conversions between 'social, cultural and economic capital' (Bourdieu 1985). If what constitutes meaningful work was the theoretical core of chapter five, the various motivations underpinning 'voluntary sharing practices' are at the heart of chapter six, and consequently these themes provoke the most substantial theoretical reflections. Finally, chapter six closes with a discussion of participants' attempts to shape the competing 'institutional logics' (Thornton et al. 2012) of Coworking, and reflects on its curious blend of community and commercially oriented practices, expressed through various experiments in 'troubling forms of participation' (Kelty 2017) that ended in unsatisfactory experiences for many.

Chapter seven closes the empirical story by considering why some research participants 'remained' while others 'left' formal Coworking memberships over the course of the field research. It discusses how most participants altered their relationship with Coworking over time. Of those that remained, many moved towards more transactional relationships, primarily seeking the 'material' benefits of high quality office amenities in convenient locations. Of those that left, a salient subset became frustrated or disillusioned with the 'troubling' participative dimensions of Coworking. This chapter is brief, primarily serving to finalise the empirical story and highlight the frustrations that provide the launching point for the key theoretical proposition of the following and final chapter of the thesis.

Chapter eight begins the 'zooming back out' to a higher altitude, opening by reflecting upon the aggregate findings of the prior four empirical chapters. After briefing restating the core insights of each section, it assembles them to argue that these social and cultural dimensions of Coworking amounted to a *co-constituted resource*. This resource was significantly created and maintained through the

distributed social practices of Coworkers themselves, and as such Coworking practices can be conceived of as a form of ‘immaterial labour’¹⁷. The theoretical underpinnings of immaterial labour and the significance of its key cognitive, affective and emotional qualities are discussed here. Chapter eight closes by arguing that this commonly created resource ultimately led to a *governance* problem, and that sustainable projects of distributed immaterial labour, at least when aggregated as a ‘commons’, will likely need to involve the creators of this value in more cooperative relationships. In short, in the absence of commons-based governance arrangements, the ‘immaterial commons’ that Coworking practices were found to evince a *social dilemma* that, if unaddressed, renders ongoing community based production untenable over time. This dilemma stems from an interregnum between conventional modes of recording and accounting for value, and the creation of immaterial value within a distributed community like the one closely examined in this research. The chapter then offers a macro-level reflection on projects like Coworking as examples of the relationship between shifting ‘techno-economic paradigms’ (Perez 2003; 2010) and the emergence of ‘new value regimes’ (Arvidson and Peitersen 2013; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014). The chapter then offers some reflections on the governance problem arising from the co-constitution of immaterial commons, why these troubles will likely continue given projections regarding the future directions of work, and what projects or emerging technologies lie on the horizon that offer potential solutions to attenuate these social dilemmas in the future. The thesis closes by acknowledging the limitations of this study, specifically the distinct features of Melbourne during the years of the field work, and points to some questions for future research.

1.4 Contributions

This thesis makes two primary contributions to the literature. Empirically, it contributes to the emerging literature on Coworking by providing a detailed account

¹⁷ This significance of this term will be explored in detail in chapter eight. It is worth stating here that the adjective ‘immaterial’ is not a claim about the ultimate ontological status of phenomena, immaterial labour and value clearly have underlying causal mechanism that are ‘material’.

and theoretical examination of social practices observed within a Coworking community over time. These practices themselves are transferable, and no doubt already present, within other network forms of organising knowledge work. Theoretically, it advances a new conception of the collective product of immaterial labour as a commonly pooled resource, and proposes a pathway of research for examining the governance arrangements of collectively produced immaterial resources needed to steward more sustainable and ethically sound projects for organising entrepreneurial communities in the future.

Ultimately, this thesis finds that even amid the most turbulent and transient experiences of contemporary knowledge work, a desire for a sense of community still lingers, not only as a nostalgic remnant from the past, but as a vehicle for creating and managing resources vital for contemporary life projects and the future of work.

Chapter 2: The emergence of Coworking

This chapter will describe and explain the emergence of Coworking by reviewing the extant literature on the phenomenon and fundamental concepts employed in the thesis. The first section draws together underlying trends that are argued to explain the rise of ‘Coworking as a solution’ to a novel set of problems encountered by entrepreneurial knowledge workers. The second section offers a brief account of the social history of Coworking and differentiates it from the evolving variety of spatial concepts that blend ‘work, learning and play’. The third section reviews the scholarly literature on Coworking by offering an account of what we currently know, the direction of recent invitations for further research and how the contributions of this thesis respond to these calls. As these calls largely suggest more nuanced interrogation of what the concept of ‘community’ really means in the context of Coworking, the fourth section introduces ‘Communities of Practice’ as the overarching theoretical framework that guides the subsequent empirical analysis. The final section conveys the specific problem this research addresses and closes with a statement of the thesis purpose.

2.1 Globalisation, technological disruption and work

Over recent decades, the pace of globalisation and technological change has disrupted many industries and altered fundamental aspects of work culture. The word globalisation refers to a complex combination of factors that has driven ‘an expansion and intensification of consciousness and social relations across world-space and world-time’ (Steger 2010:18)¹⁸. These factors are numerous, but broadly include the increased economic integration between nation-states through the intensification of free trade (Feenstra 1998), increasing mobility of financial capital (Sassen 2007; Hudson 2010; Bonanno et al. 2011); decentralisation of

¹⁸ For more on the complexities and evolving definitions of globalisation, see Giddens (1991); Robertson (1992); Held et al. (1999); Held and McGrew (2007); Lechner and Boli (2014).

production processes (Harvey 1989; Dicken 1998); and increased flows of people, through travel and migration, both regular and irregular (Freeman 2006).

These dimensions of globalisation have been legitimised through the widespread expansion of free market ideology under the rubric of democratic capitalism (Hollingsworth 1998). Nevertheless, their complex interactions often result in a set of 'material and lived contradictions' (James 2006:20), such as the 'glocalising' pressures that see the intensified presence of both cultural homogeneity *and* local forms of resistance (Robertson 1992); or the persistent, even rising importance of local places and face-to-face relations (Storper and Venables 2004; Amin and Cohendet 2004; Scott 2008) that have followed pronouncements of the geographical 'death of distance' (Cairncross 1997; Friedman 2006).

The rapidity of technological change has been one of the most visible drivers of these disruptive processes, most notably the sustained exponential increases in performance of computing capability (Moore 1965; Gratton 2011; Hagel et al. 2012). In the world of work, globalisation, enabled through technological innovation, has also encompassed a pattern of 'offshoring' and 'outsourcing' routine tasks in manufacturing and service industries from higher to lower wage economies (Lonsdale and Cox 2000; Levy 2005; Marin 2006; Levy and Murnane 2012). Such routine tasks are increasingly susceptible to automation through software and hardware 'robosourcing' (Gore 2013; Autor 2014). These changes have resulted in faster cycles of organisational instability and job obsolescence (Audretsch 1995; Caves 1998; Audretsch and Thurik 2001). For example, the 'topple rate', where market leaders lose their position, is said to have doubled over the past twenty years (Hagel et al. 2010; Ismael et al. 2014). In Australia, a recent national report modelling future employment prospects estimates that up to 40% of the workforce face a high probability of being replaced by automated processes in the next 10 to 15 years (CEDA 2015). Such changes force decision makers within organisations to confront different challenges from those that characterised much of the industrial, 'high fordist' 20th century (Harvey 1989; Boyer 2001; Antonio and Bonanno 2006; Lundvall 2010). Traditional 'communities', held together by geographically bounded collective forms

of identity, have appeared less durable in the face of the individualising pressures such mobility affords (Beck 1992; Bauman 2000). Consequently individuals must plan and organise their work lives and craft professional identities amid more turbulent circumstances, less guided by past practice. Such contradictory pressures can create untenable tensions in the everyday experience of actors. The German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier¹⁹, provides an articulate summary of the challenges these developments provoke for life in the late-modern era:

“The human longing for identity and meaning in contexts that are as straightforward, clearly outlined, and timeless as possible is growing in parallel to the advancing dissolution of boundaries, and is directly counteracting it.”

(Steinmeier 2014)

The new knowledge economy

At the heart of these broad social changes has been the consolidation of a ‘new knowledge economy’. In simple terms, a knowledge economy is characterised by the increasing importance of knowledge intensive activities in the production of goods and services (Powell and Snellman 2004). In contrast to previous eras, knowledge itself is said to have become the primary source of competitive advantage over other economic inputs, such as land, labour and capital (OECD 1996; Audretsch and Thurik 2001; Smith 2002). Thus, in a knowledge economy, ‘intangible capital’ underpins an increasing share of gross domestic product (Abramovitz and David 1996; Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013). Some concrete forms of ‘knowledge capital’ are visible through indicators such as the growth in patent applications (Smith 2002; Powell and Snellman 2004). However, as knowledge creation processes continue to intensify, the relative value of stocks of knowledge, such as existing patents, are thought to diminish compared to the value of knowledge flows, or the creation and

¹⁹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier was Germany’s Foreign Minister in 2014 when he wrote this article.

diffusion of new forms of knowing (Machlup 1984; Al-Laham et al. 2011; Hagel et al. 2012).

The increasing competitive value of new knowledge brings to the foreground three interrelated concepts, *creativity*, *innovation* and *learning* (Scott 2014). Learning is the act of modifying existing or acquiring new knowledge or skills; creativity the generation of novelty that is useful and innovation the translation of this novelty into practical outcomes that add value to an activity. These three processes overlap and interact in complex adaptive iterations between codified ('know-what' and 'know-why') and tacit knowledge ('know-how') (Garud 1997; Gertler 2001), circulating through social networks and embedded in particular, local places (Gertler 2003; Neff 2005; Faulconbridge 2006). The non-linear nature of knowledge development, especially when working in concert with new technology, has begun to outstrip the capacity of education institutions to formalise and disseminate it. Actors in knowledge intensive contexts therefore face pressure to continually 'learn by doing', and to regularly engage in knowledge producing activities that foster learning, creativity and innovation (OECD 1996; Gratton 2011; Ito and Howe 2016).

We have established that a knowledge economy is one in which knowledge plays the leading role, but what is 'new' about claims of a 'new knowledge economy'? Although the term 'knowledge worker' has been used since the 1950s (Drucker 1959), knowledge producing processes have intensified in recent years (Dunning 1997; Hagel et al. 2012). One of the most salient features of this intensification is the ongoing 'digitisation of the economy' - the penetration of internet-mediated digital technology into everyday social and economic life. An extensive array of research offers empirical examples and theoretical models demonstrating how this 'digitisation' is fundamentally reordering socioeconomic relations, causing patterns of organisation and behaviour that are distinct from, rather than a mere extension, of the past (Castells 2002; 2010; Moriset and Malecki 2009; Botsman and Rogers 2010; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014; Citron and Pasquale 2014; Keen 2015). Consequently, there are a variety of different conceptual descriptions that emphasise particular features of the new knowledge economy. Authors employ terms like 'digital

capitalism' (Schiller 1999), 'cognitive capitalism' (Rinderman 2012; Moulier-Boutang 2012) 'cognitive-cultural capitalism' (Storper and Scott 2009; Scott 2014), the 'network economy' (Castells 2011), the 'collaborative economy' (Botsman and Rogers 2010) and even 'netarchical capitalism' (Bauwens 2006; 2009; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014) to make sense of these emerging phenomena.

Two enterprises that are emblematic of the tensions these debates evoke are the Californian 'based' companies Airbnb and Uber. Both have taken advantage of near ubiquitous smartphone penetration in high density urban contexts to facilitate new forms of 'sharing' resources that were previously considered private goods. The ingenuity of their algorithms enable them to profit merely by linking buyers and sellers of accommodation and transport services in new ways. They do this without owning the physical capital required to operate their services, and both ventures are globally 'disrupting' their local extant industry competitors, short term accommodation industries in Airbnb's case (Guttentag 2015; Zervas et al. 2017) and local taxi industries in Uber's case (Rogers 2015; Cramer and Krueger 2016).

The astonishingly rapid 'success' of such companies, and the larger movement they are claimed to represent, have been widely discussed, initially celebrated (for example by Gansky 2010; Botsman and Rogers 2010; Belk 2014) but more recently criticised (Greenfield 2015; Pick and Dreher 2015; Dreyer et al. 2017; Murillo et al. 2017; Arcidiacono et al. 2018). Certainly such globally mobile, 'peer-to-peer' innovations pose new challenges for local regulators (Sundararajan 2014; Pasquale 2015). However a large portion of these critiques stems from a growing concern that the 'new knowledge economy' is witnessing a dramatic recalculation of the relationship between labour inputs, productivity and profitability, where high wages for skills in demand, such as software engineering, exist alongside persistently high unemployment and low wages for low demand skills, resulting in troubling inequality (Audretsch and Thurik 2001; Powell 2004; Credit Suisse 2014; Piketty 2014). The concerns with 'new economy' luminaries like Airbnb, Uber and a host of other startups eager to 'disrupt the status quo' are not only that their operating models may exacerbate inequality, but that their 'platform ambitions' are often alarmingly

monopolistic (Srniczek 2016), and are furthering the divide between the small cohort of investors, owners and designers of these platform services and the vast numbers that merely ‘use’ them²⁰.

Accordingly, social theorists have been advancing new conceptual classes of workers that better represent contemporary work relations. Not simply ‘knowledge workers’ and ‘service workers’ (Drucker 1994), but a privileged ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002; Storper and Scott 2009), served by a vulnerable ‘precariat class’ (Standing 2011). Others describe an innovating ‘hacker class’ creating new content on media platforms owned by a ‘vectoralist class’ (Wark 2004). Finally, in addition to questions of economic inequality, many view the emerging ‘new economy’ as an opportunity to evolve the economic arena to accommodate a wider sphere of ethical concerns, such as how to better align productive activity with the ecological constraints of the planet (Kallis et al. 2012; Marglin 2013).

These diverse aspects - the disruptive role of digital technology on economic activity, the rising social inequality between the winners and losers of such disruptions, and the pressures on growing urban populations to more effectively pool resources and acknowledge ecological constraints - are all key features of the new knowledge economy as it is used in this thesis. But it is not simply the accelerated production of knowledge that is channeling resources towards new actors with remarkable alacrity, it

²⁰ Concerns about the link between digital disruption and social inequality have been cited as one of the factors in recent political upheavals such as ‘Brexit’ and the election of President Trump. Although ultimately unsuccessful, even the ‘mainstream’ US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton acknowledged the ambivalence such innovations can provoke during the campaign:

“Meanwhile, many Americans are making extra money renting out a small room, designing websites, selling products they design themselves at home, or even driving their own car. This on demand, or so-called gig economy is creating exciting economies and unleashing innovation. But it is also raising hard questions about workplace protections and what a good job will look like in the future”

(Clinton 2015)

is the translation and commercialisation of this new knowledge into *entrepreneurial activity*. This is why the new economy can be understood more fundamentally as an ‘entrepreneurial’ knowledge economy, in contrast to the older ‘managed industrial economy’ (Audretsch and Thurik 2001). What is rewarded is not just the creation, but the *commercialisation* of new knowledge²¹. It is this ‘entrepreneurial’ dimension of the new knowledge economy that is of critical relevance to this thesis, not simply as a frame for economic analysis, but as a broader discursive field that shapes social relations, especially during the empirical examination of Coworking practices as early expressions of a growing ‘entrepreneurial society’ (Audretsch 2009; Weiers 2014). Whether welcomed or maligned, few argue that this ‘Schumpeterian wave’ of creative destruction is subsiding, and many make the case that such cycles will only intensify in the future (Perez 2010; Rifkin 2014; Eichhorst 2015; CEDA 2015; Ismael et al. 2014).

Bureaucratic cages, Schumpeterian waves and flexible firms

These changes have pressured bureaucratic organisations to become more creative, flexible and innovative. The formal, ideal type of organising labelled ‘bureaucratic’ by Weber (1946) was conceptualised as featuring hierarchical structures, fixed reporting lines, rule based management, impersonal procedures and divisions based on functional speciality (Weber 1946; Gouldner 1954). Scholars have argued that under the stable economic conditions of the ‘Fordist 20th century’ (Grahl and Teague 2000), bureaucratic principles enabled large organisations to plan for the long term, efficiently allocate resources, and offer employment certainty for employees, thereby ascending to become the dominant mode of organising during this period (Whyte 1956; Chandler 1993; Marsden et al. 1994; Adler and Borys 1996). Consequently the image of bureaucracy as an inescapable ‘iron cage’ dominated by an instrumental rationality became one of the more enduring metaphors in organisational studies (Barker 1993; Courpasson and Clegg 2006; Clegg and Baumeler 2010).

²¹ This gap between resources channelled towards the creation of knowledge through research and development, and the commercial realisation of value from this creation has been variously called the ‘European’ or ‘Swedish’ paradox (Fragkandreas 2015).

Although the bureaucratic form has long been critiqued (not least by Weber himself but also for example by McGregor 1960; Burns and Stalker 1961; Bennis 1965), the globalising pressures noted since the 1980s have led many scholars to argue for a review of the influence of the bureaucratic mode. For example the 'hyperturbulence' (McCann and Selsky 1984) and 'hypercompetition' (D'Aveni 1994) of contemporary organising environments have been said to require 'frame breaking' (Mitroff et al. 1994) interventions in order to 'reinvent the corporation' (Brown 1991). Perhaps ironically, early organisational attempts at incremental innovation by, for example, reducing lead-times, have been found to only increase these cycles of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the competitive environment, further exacerbating the very pressures to which they were responding (Rothwell 1992; Horney et al. 2010; Bennett and Lemoine 2014). Amid these circumstances, the bureaucratic form itself has been held up by some as obsolete or ill-suited to the more recent environments that organisations face (Levary 1992; Mintzberg 1993). Large organisations have thus been urged to fundamentally change the way they operate, to become 'networked' (Powell 1990), 'learning organisations' (Senge 1990), 'post-bureaucratic' (Heckscher 1994), 'responsive' (Coulson-Thomas 1995), 'virtual' (Handy 1995), 'entrepreneurial' (Osborne and Plastrik 1997), 'flexible' (Volberda 1999), 'agile' (Cockburn 2006), and even 'velcro-like' (Bower 2003).

A persistent theme amid such advice is for organisations to encourage creativity and innovation amongst workers over the performance of predictable, routine tasks, often accompanied by a transition away from offering fixed employment roles towards more flexible labour strategies and temporary roles. Consequently workers have been asked to become less dependent on formal procedures and stable routines, more open to risk, and more prepared to change at short notice (Sennett 1999). Work itself, especially in knowledge intensive contexts, is increasingly said to consist of a collection of 'projects' (Morris 1994; Hodgson 2004). While some have embraced these changes (Schuster and Zingheim 1996) as self-motivated 'portfolio employees' (Handy 1994) able to quickly form 'flexible, fluid collaborations' with new teams (Edmondson 2012), the spectre of organisational restructures and 'downsizing' has

persistently accompanied a failure to adapt to this new work culture (Thomas and Dunkerley 1994; McElroy et al. 2001). Those that remained in senior positions are said to have been offered 'new deals' (Herriot and Permeation 1995). In place of the former exchange of organisational loyalty for employment security, higher pay has been offered for exercising valorised 'entrepreneurial' skills, often accompanied by increased workloads and a tolerance for continual change (Jacoby 1999).

Pressure to fundamentally change organisational cultures, processes and even the professional identities of workers has also been found to result in contradictory and highly ambivalent experiences for some workers (Huy 2002; Eriksson 2004). Numerous recent industry reports, for example, record employee engagement levels at record lows, with high proportions of employees 'actively disengaged' and 'looking to change employers' (O'Boyle and Harter 2013; Towers Watson 2014). One persistently cited cause of frustration, anxiety and ultimately disengagement, is the exposure to constant changes in organisational strategies, policies and structures, a phenomenon that has been labelled 'change fatigue' (Garside, 2004; Beaudan 2006; Bernerth et al. 2011). Whether specific changes have been embraced or resented by employees, labour theorists observe a fundamental shift in the social compact underpinning organisational employment, where individuals are increasingly required to shoulder the burden of responsibility for their own learning, development and professional goals (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Gratton 2011).

The resurgence of non-standard work and self-employment

The changing social compact of employment has been moving in tandem with another conspicuous feature of the new knowledge economy, particularly the rise in 'non-standard' work arrangements. Standard employment refers to full-time work performed on a fixed schedule (usually) at a location of the organisation's choosing and (often) following processes that the organisation controls (Kalleberg et al. 2000: 257). Perhaps the most significant feature of standard work arrangements is the mutual expectation of continued employment (Capelli 1999). Non-standard work refers

to all other work arrangements, including self-employment, temporary and fixed term contracts, permanent part-time work and marginal part-time work (Casale 2011).

Since at least the early 1980s there has been a sustained rise in the diverse array of non-standard work arrangements, in particular self-employment, across OECD countries (OECD 2000, 2015; Wennekers et al. 2010; Casale 2011; Gaile 2014; Singer et al. 2014; Bögenhold 2015 et al.; Eichhorst and Marx 2015; Buddelmeyer 2015; CEDA 2015). Labour statistics tend to divide self-employment into three main classes: 'self-employed without employees, or own-account workers; self-employed with employees, or employers; and unpaid family workers' (OECD 2000: 2). Research observes non-trivial differences in the aspirations of workers between these categories of self-employment. For example many solo-self employed have been categorised as 'lifestyle entrepreneurs', having little ambition to grow their enterprises beyond providing personal income for themselves and immediate dependents (Ateljevic and Doorne 2000; Mottiar 2007). This is contrasted with 'innovative', 'ambitious' or 'high growth' entrepreneurs who aspire to expand their businesses and become employers themselves (Kirchhoff 1994; Acs 2008; Baumol 2008). The largest increases over recent years have been in self-employment without employees, particularly in high skilled, fast growing, creative areas of the economy (Wennekers et al. 2010).

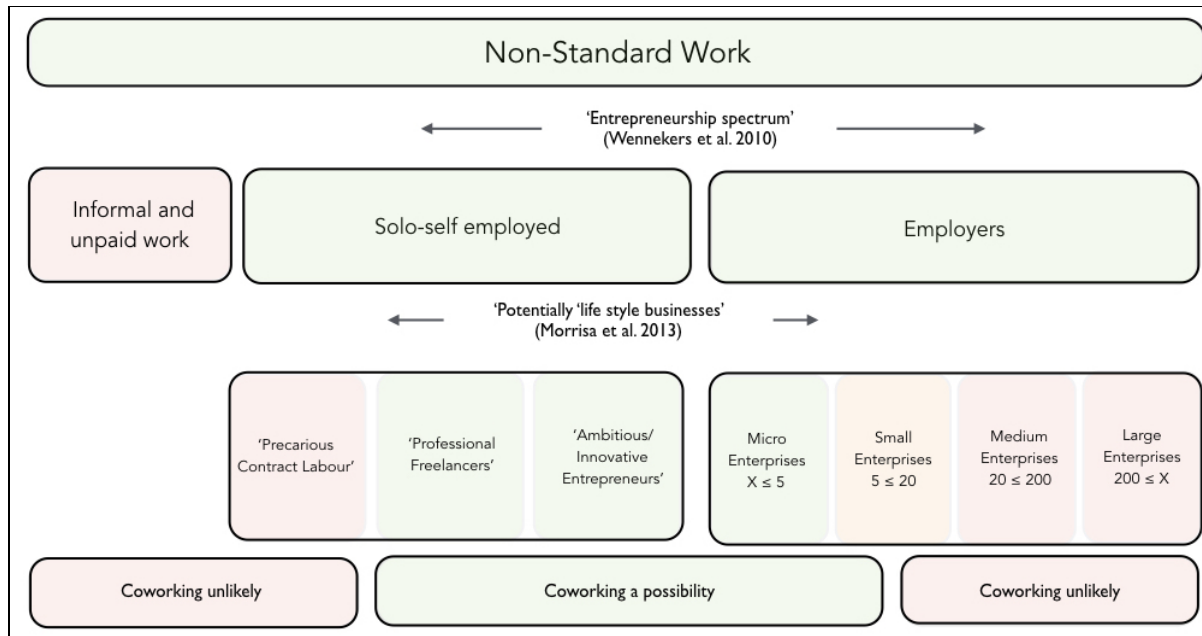


Figure 1: Categorising work in the new economy

There are a wide and colourful variety of terms used in popular literature to refer to such forms of solo-self employment, and while the word 'freelancer' is common in the Anglo-American vernacular, other labels have included 'lone eagles' (Beyers and Lindahl 1996), 'free agents' (Pink 2001) and even 'lattepreneurs' (Dunstan 2015)²². Whilst different terms foregrounds various features of such work, the normative connotations of the popular language (such as 'free') may be problematic if merely adopted uncritically. This is compounded by the presence of what has been termed 'fake' or 'bogus' self-employment (Dombois and Osterland 1987; Kuhl 1990). These are forms of contract labour sometimes used by employers to avoid taxes or other legal obligations that accompany employment. These workers are officially categorised as 'independent contractors', but in reality only contract to a single firm and have little control over work schedules and processes (VandenHeuvel 1997; Kalleberg 2001; 2009).

²² Pink illustrates this absence of consistent terminology for the solo-self employed by providing a number of florid terms: 'self-employed knowledge workers, proprietors of home based business, temps and permatemps, freelancers and e-lancers, independent contractors and independent professionals, micropreneurs and infopreneurs, part-time consultants, interim executives, on-call trouble shooters, and full-time soloists.' (Pink 2001:22).

Nevertheless, the empirical data on rising self-employment is clear, even if the causes and consequences of these trends are contentious. There is little doubt that highly precarious forms of work, characterised by low pay, and short, unpredictable hours is of little long-term benefit to workers, and in fact appear to erode many of the employment conditions established by labour movements in OECD countries over the 20th century (Standing 2011). However research also indicates that many workers do choose forms of self-employment over standard work relations (Povlika 1996; Arum and Muller 2004; Sorensen and Sharkey 2014), and scholars have consequently called for a reassessment of the assumed relationship between standard employment as 'good jobs' and non-standard work as 'bad jobs' (Cappelli 1999; Kalleberg et al. 2000).

This debate largely turns on diverging assessments of the agency of actors in 'choosing' forms of self-employment, and the quality of their subsequent experiences (or choices). Some see the (re)emergence of flexible work, entrepreneurship and self-employment as signifying greater freedom, satisfaction and 'self-actualisation' through work (Taylor 1996; Kunda et al. 2002; Mettler and Williams 2011; Carland et al. 2015). Others see an erosion of the foundations of job security and stability which supported the growth of the middle class (Hakim 1989; Sennett 1999; Arnold and Bongiovi 2012), or at least a range of contradictory and ambivalent experiences (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Gandini and Graham 2017). A few studies explicitly highlight these puzzles, such as the decline in real incomes, increased experience of anxiety and insecurity accompanied by a range of 'non-pecuniary' benefits - usually variations on autonomy or 'being one's own boss' - among the self-employed (Lindh and Ohlsson 1998; Hamilton 2000).

Despite the complex dimensions of this research, it is worth noting that the rise in non-standard work represents a remarkable reversal of the trend towards standard employment that began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as agricultural workers moved towards urban based forms of waged labour (Wennekers et al. 2010; Cappelli and Keller 2013a; 2013b). This significant pattern in the structure of labour relations

offers support for the hypothesised transition from 'managed' to 'entrepreneurial' capitalism proposed by some scholars (Audretsch and Thurik 2001; Audretsch 2009).

Entrepreneurial discourse and millennial aspirations

Whatever disagreements exist over the consequences of these trends, the interest in entrepreneurship and self-employment shows little sign of abating. There are two interrelated premises offered here to support this claim. The first is the elevated legitimacy of self-employment fostered through a burgeoning 'entrepreneurial discourse', the second is the noted enthusiasm for non-standard work demonstrated by many young people.

The rising numbers of self-employed has been accompanied by a cited increase in the 'political and cognitive legitimacy' (Aldrich and Fiol 1994) and 'moral approval' (Etzioni 1987) of the social status of self-employment, often facilitated through acts of 'entrepreneurial storytelling' (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Martens et al. 2007; Garud et al. 2014). A range of scholars draw on critical, constructivist and narratological approaches to interrogate the public celebration of these 'heroic' stories of individual commercial success²³. The most critical see a thinly veiled ideological project underpinning the elevated stature of 'entrepreneurialism', an orchestrated collusion between government policies, academics and 'right wing think tanks' to ingrain neoliberal philosophy into the public imagination (Armstrong 2005:49).

The elevated legitimacy of 'entrepreneurialism', is seen by others to exert pressure on existing employees, such as academics and public sector workers, to be more 'enterprising' in their practices and professional identities (Sundin and Tillman 2007; 2008; Baines et al. 2010). The figure of the entrepreneur has even been interpreted in mythological terms, as a postmodern religious figure, a creative saviour able to guide a path through contemporary experiences of turbulence and disruption (Sorensen 2008). Accordingly, the circulation and veneration of 'entrepreneurial

²³ This article in The Economist (Wooldridge 2009) is one example of such a heroic account.

narratives' (Gartner 2007) contribute to the crafting of the 'hegemonic allure of entrepreneurial discourse' (Gill 2013:50). Such discursive practices are claimed to promote a shift in the socially imagined 'ideal worker', from the loyal and conforming 'organisation man' (Whyte 1956) to the rugged, adventurous and individual 'entrepreneurial man' (Ahl 2004; Gill 2013). This Pollyannaish portrayal of entrepreneurship has become part of the available cultural repertoire drawn upon in the construction of individual identities, practices and career decisions.

Some evidence for this can be seen in the enthusiasm many young people profess for self-employment or employment in small, 'innovative' start-up enterprises. The generation born between 1980 and 2000 have been referred to by various names, 'generation Y' (Reed 2007), 'generation next' (Durkin 2008), the 'net generation' (Tyler 2008), and the 'millennial generation' (Howe and Strauss 1992); but the latter term will be adopted here. As the 'last generation born in the 20th century' (Reed 2007), several studies have proposed that the social, economic and technological context of millennials' 'formative years' has resulted in distinct patterns of skills, values and orientation towards work (Mackay 1997; Smith and Clurman 1998). For example, unsurprisingly, millennials have been found to be more comfortable with collaborative and social technologies than previous generations (Bradley 2007; Oblinger 2003; Tapscott, 2009). Industry reports have also noted higher levels of turnover for millennial staff (Salt 2007), lower levels of engagement for millennials as a generation and generally lower engagement levels for employees of lower rank or less time with an employer, a cohort which disproportionately represents young workers (Blessingwhite 2013). Hira (2007) and Durkin (2008) note lower employer loyalty levels among millennials, who are said to often feel compelled to leave their current positions in order to pursue their work and life aspirations. Tulgan (2009) noted millennial expectations of meaningful work, and quick rewards for individual performance are seldom met in their 'entry level' experiences of organisational employment. Chudzikowski (2012) found that younger cohorts felt the need to initiate role transitions to maintain employability, flexibility and their market value. In summary the research on work-life aspirations of the millennial generation suggest increased employee churn amongst younger workers and greater likelihood of

younger workers to exit organisational employment in favour of self-employment or employment in smaller startup teams, albeit underpinned by a complex intermingling of necessity and opportunity, or 'push and pull' factors.

Workers without a home

One of the consequences of this structural shift towards self-employment and the growth in digital and creative knowledge work has seen the presence of a large cohort of workers without a fixed place of work outside of the home. Working from home, when connected to the 'outside world' through communications technologies has been called 'telework'. The term was first discussed in the 1970s, largely as a 'future work' scenario then considered likely to become commonplace (Toffler 1970; Nilles 1976; Schiff 1979). The expansion of personal computers in the 1980s and the internet in the 1990s enabled scholars to study the lived experiences of pioneering teleworkers. Like many studies of lived experience, the picture is complex and somewhat contradictory.

There are two categories of research on telework, those of existing organisational employees and the self-employed. The employee research reports a general increase in satisfaction associated with working from home (Fonner and Roloff 2010; Maruyama and Tietze 2012), but also that telework can be accompanied by increasing role ambiguity, reduced support and feedback (Sardeshmukh et al. 2012), eroded relationships with other 'coworkers' (Gajendran and Harrison 2007), expanded working hours (Noonan and Glass 2012), and poor separation between home and work environments (Mcnaughton et al. 2014). For the self-employed, Baines (1999) discusses the 'onerous' demands teleworkers can place on family members. In response, Mustafa et al. (2013) find that many self-employed teleworkers actively structure temporal and spatial boundaries in order to separate work and home life, and that the challenges in balancing or blending these divergent interests often result in conflicted, ambivalent experiences (Mustafa 2012).

The research on telework experience illustrates that working from home poses a range of distinct challenges for both employed and self-employed knowledge workers. In response to the observed tensions of work-home separation, several authors have called for the development of a 'third' kind of work place. For example, Chan et al. (2003) suggests that 'telecenters' or distributed 'third' workspaces that are positioned in between a worker's home and employer's office might be part of the answer. Others have made similar calls for a focus on 'satellite offices' or 'neighbourhood work centres' (Gurstein 1996; 2002; Johnson 1999). Finally, Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) argue that such physical spaces should not be conceived separately from the relationships that actually constitute a worker's experience of 'place', and that 'relationally' should be incorporated into the conceptual discussion of the 'workplace'.

Workers need other workers

In addition to a physical place of work outside of the home, independent knowledge workers need access to other independent knowledge workers for a variety of personal, practical and professional reasons. The reasons for this are outlined in a broad field of theoretical and empirical research that links entrepreneurial success with participation in relevant social networks (Powell 1990; Larson 1992; Scarbrough et al. 2013; Hoang and Yi 2015).

In theory, social networks are conceptually separated into 'stronger ties' of family and friends with whom one's contact is frequent, and 'weaker ties' or acquaintances, with whom one shares fewer mutual contacts (Granovetter 1973; 1983). Social network structures are thus conceptualised as consisting of 'tight knit clumps' of mutually strong ties connected by bridging, 'weak ties' that form links with other tight clusters. These weaker, 'bridging ties' are considered important because they enable novel information to travel between the tighter social clusters, throughout which information quickly spreads (Granovetter 1985; 2005). Although social networks can be sources of information that shape business practices and economic outcomes, social network

relations are not conceptually constrained by the binary hierarchical or market logic that governs economic relations in the classical theory of the firm proposed by Coase (1937). Instead, such social relations are theorised to operate via norms of trust, reciprocity, collaboration, complementary independence and 'an informal climate toward mutual gain' (Larson 1992:3; Adler 2001). Relevant social networks, and their facilitation of novel and useful information, are thus considered particularly important in knowledge intensive contexts, where rapid cycles of learning and the creation and modification of knowledge make it difficult to codify and store (Powell 1990). The aggregation of one's social network, and the opportunities they afford, can be conceptualised as '*social capital*' (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 1995).

In practice researchers have consistently found informal social networks to influence entrepreneurial activity in a wide variety of ways. For example, Bryson (1996) found that informal networking and temporary partnerships were an essential part of work practices for founding entrepreneurs of professional service firms. Baines (1999) found that self-employed teleworkers in the media industry maintained extensive personal networks that contributed both emotional support, relevant information and professional collaborations. Allen (2000) found the decision to choose self-employment is itself influenced by the presence of other entrepreneurs, including failed entrepreneurs, in an individual's social network. Martinez and Aldrich (2011) found that as entrepreneurs' lives progress, the nature of their social network needs change, from the importance of strong ties in the formative stages, to weaker and more diverse networks in later stages. Overall, whether as sources of material or psychological support, informal 'collaborators' or formal 'partners', the empirical evidence suggests that social ties play a critical role in the success of entrepreneurial activity and the social lives of the self-employed (Semrau and Werner 2014).

The relationship between participation in social networks and entrepreneurial learning is of particular interest for two reasons. The first is that research has consistently problematised the ability of formal education institutions to impart the skills associated with entrepreneurial success (Fredland and Little 1981; Vesper and Gartner 1997; Shane 2003; 2010; Wagner 2008; Martin et al. 2013; Rideout and

Gray 2013). This point is acute for many fields in the new knowledge economy, where skill domains, such as digital product innovation and social media practices, are recent developments which have not been credibly incorporated into tertiary education programs (Rideout and Gray 2013; Laurell and Sandstorm 2014).

The second reason is that a wide range of learning theories emphasise the fundamentally social dimension of learning (Freire 1970; Barrows 1986; Findley 1989; Argyris 1992; Mezirow 2000; Anderson et al. 2001; Hmelo-Silver and Barrows 2006; Kolb 2014). In particular, social dimensions of learning form a critical part of innovation practice and systems (Lundvall 2010). The translation of theoretical knowledge into practical skill involves repetitive social activity, within what has been conceptualised as a 'community of practitioners' (Brown and Duguid 1991; Lave 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991; Gherardi et al. 1998; Wenger 1998; Fox 2000; Swann et al. 2002; Bechky 2003; Keikotlhailela et al. 2015). The conceptual boundary that identifies an area of craft or recognised domain of skill has been theorised as a 'field of practice' (Lave 1988; Bourdieu 1992; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997; Reed-Danahay 2005). The craft of entrepreneurship and self-employment can in these respects be understood as one such practice field, in which a 'community' of actors interact in order to learn and improve their skills. In such contexts learning results from the iterative relationship between observation, experimentation and receiving explicit and implicit feedback on performance (Wenger and Lave 1991; Granovetter 2005).

Summary of the problem so far

So far this chapter has outlined research that supports six independent claims that are worth briefly reviewing. First, that the 'new knowledge economy' elevates forms of creative knowledge work to an increasingly privileged position. Second, that the rolling 'digitisation of economic activity' renders much of this 'cognitive-cultural' work 'location independent', that is workers only need access to a computer and the

internet to perform the technical tasks that constitute it. Third, that the proportion of self-employed, early stage entrepreneurs and (by logical extension) employees of early stage startups compose an increasing share of the labour force. Fourth, that there is a discernible enthusiasm for entrepreneurship and self-employment present in the younger generations. Fifth, that working from home, for both employees and the self-employed, creates a distinct range of psychological and social tensions for many workers. Sixth, that entrepreneurs and independent knowledge workers require access to other independent knowledge workers for a variety of reasons, ranging from psychological and social support, assistance with informal learning to improve their craft, and as sources of formal collaboration and partnerships.

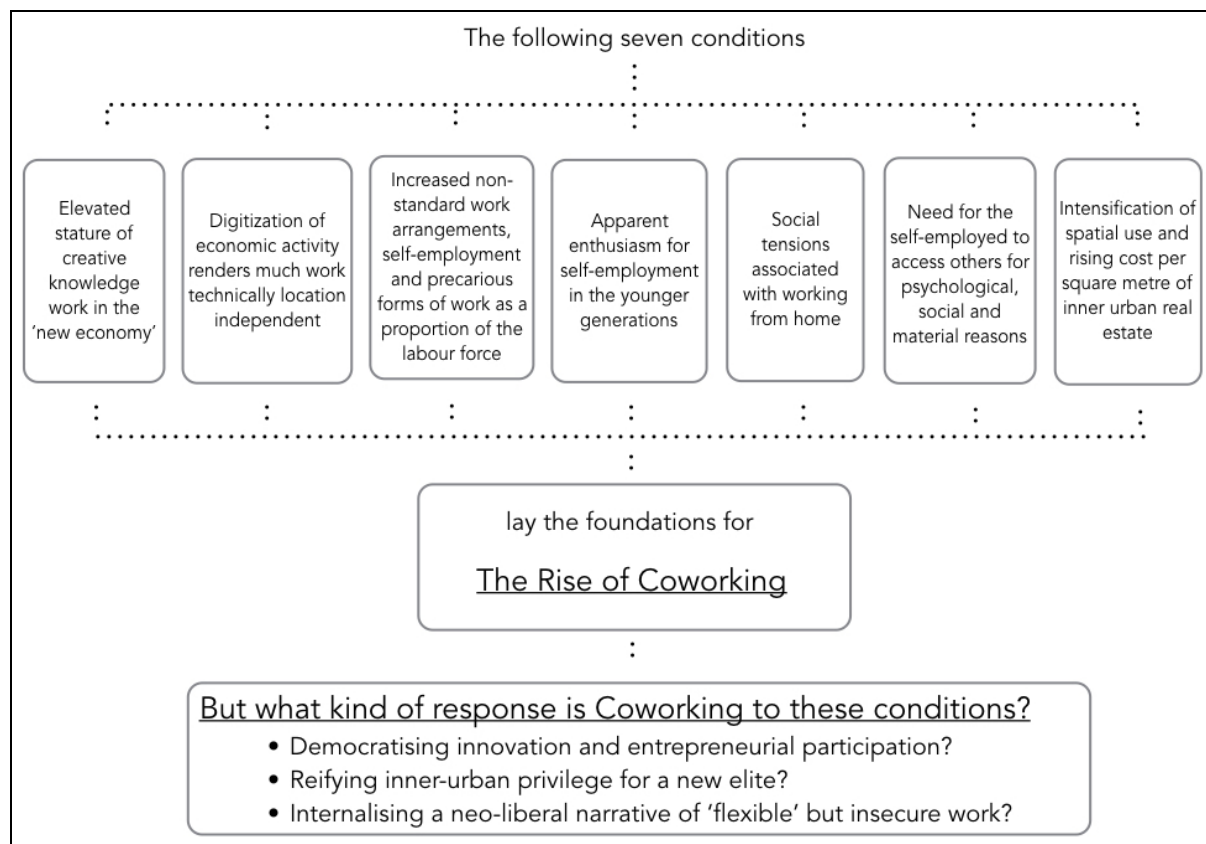


Figure 2: The underlying trends that gave rise to Coworking

The combination of these premises²⁴ logically points to a significant cohort of workers engaged in learning the 'craft' of entrepreneurship and self-employment under the particular conditions of the new economy, while facing the distinct personal and social challenges for work-life management such undertakings demands. Moreover, many of these actors themselves are relatively young and engage in this activity without extensive work histories to guide their choices. Consideration of these points alone might lead an analyst to predict the emergence of a new form of workplace, incorporating participatory activity designed to foster social connections and learning, structured around the field of entrepreneurship and self-employment in the new knowledge economy. This was the vision first proposed through 'Coworking'.

2.2 'Coworking is the solution to the problem'



Figure 3: Coworking spaces and practices

Coworking is a complex social phenomenon. Coworking spaces are open plan offices that mobile, independent knowledge workers share as places of work. But

²⁴ The diagram contains a seventh claim, the intensification of spatial use and rising costs in inner urban environments that will be addressed more comprehensively in [Chapter 4.1 The spatial distribution of Coworking within the cities](#)

Coworking is usually defined as more than access to space and facilities. The widely recognised originator of the term ‘Coworking’ is the computer programmer and open-source enthusiast Brad Neuberg who, in 2005 in San Francisco, “decided to create a new kind of space to support the community and structure that I hungered for and gave it a new name: Coworking” (Neuberg 2014)²⁵. He rented a ‘beautifully converted Victorian’ in San Francisco’s Mission District called Spiral Muse that was operating as a feminist collective at the time, and published an invitation on his blog that has become a celebrated founding moment for the Coworking movement:

“Traditionally, society forces us to choose between working at home for ourselves or working at an office for a company. If we work at a traditional 9 to 5 company job, we get community and structure, but lose freedom and the ability to control our own lives. If we work for ourselves at home, we gain independence but suffer loneliness and bad habits from not being surrounded by a work community.

Coworking is a solution to this problem. In Coworking, independent writers, programmers, and creators come together in community a few days a week. Coworking provides the "office of a traditional corporate job, but in a very unique way.”

(Neuberg 2005)

Although the word ‘Coworking’ may have first been coined in 2005, the practice of co-locating creative workers and enterprises has a long history. [Figure 4](#) illustrates the evolving variety of spatial concepts that integrate different forms of ‘sharing’ within their operations. One theoretical formulation initially invoked to categorise spaces such as Coworking, ‘hacker’ and ‘maker’ spaces was the concept of ‘third places’. The sociologist Ray Oldenburg first coined the term ‘third place’ to refer to

²⁵ Game designer and theorist Bernard DeKoven also used the word ‘Coworking’ to describe a practice of “working together as equals” and “a deep appreciation of the joy of participating in a creative, playful community” in 1999 (DeKoven, 2013). However DeKoven never applied the word to to characterise shared workspace enterprises.

informal meeting places between the domestic home, the 'first place' and the productive workplace, the 'second place' (Oldenburg 1989). For Oldenburg, 'third places' such as cafes, bars and bookstores, are "homes away from home" where unrelated people relate' (Oldenburg 1999: 1) in an 'inclusively sociable' atmosphere, 'offering both the basis of community and celebration of it' (Oldenburg 1999:14). However in Oldenburg's conception, third places are not sites for 'gainful or productive' work, but contexts that facilitate the informal social relations and civic engagement that foster a sense of local place and form the foundations for a healthy democratic culture. This neat separation between spheres of domestic, productive and social activity has however, become significantly blurred in recent years, and as Coworking spaces have grown to become primary sites of work for many, it is less clear how this formulation clarifies our understanding of the significance of Coworking (Moriset and Malecki 2009; Fonner and Stache 2012; Gold and Mustafa 2013).

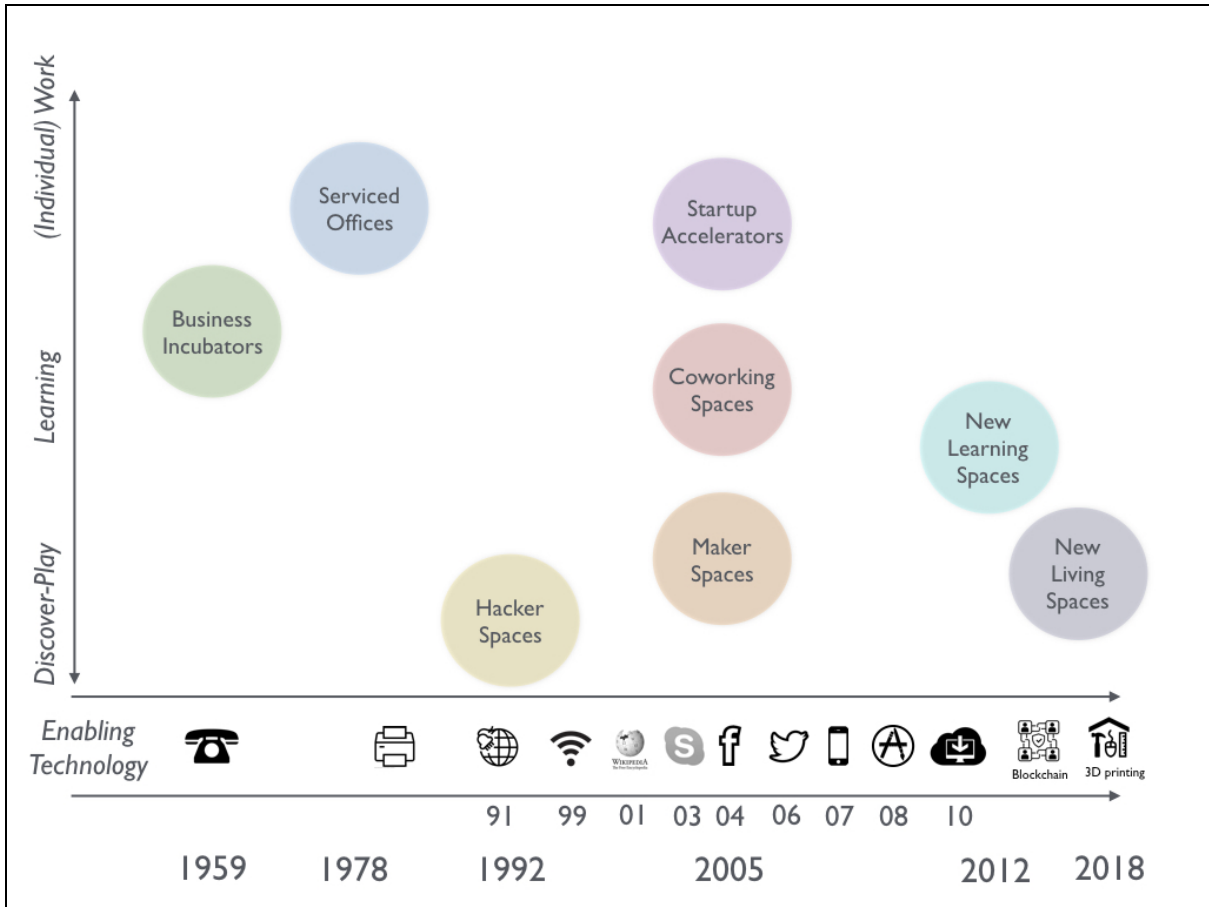


Figure 4: Work-learn-play ‘third spaces’

The ‘unwiring’ of information technology afforded knowledge workers a new mobility, and Neuberg was not the only one experimenting with novel spatial configurations of creative and entrepreneurial at the time²⁶. Nevertheless, Neuberg’s two paragraphs were highly influential, inspiring other Coworking entrepreneurs to follow his call and open spaces in San Francisco and other major cities around the world. Whilst Neuberg’s description of Coworking foregrounds the notion of community and clearly portrays it as a social activity, precisely defining Coworking posed challenges for both journalistic descriptions and academic analyses. Early descriptions highlighted the apparently contradictory orientations - Coworkers were said to be ‘working on their own, just side by side’ (Fost 2008) or ‘working alone together’ (Spinuzzi 2012).

²⁶ In a remarkable case of parallel invention, 2005 was also the year ‘jellies’ were pioneered in NYC and ‘the hub’ in London. There are also some earlier similar experiments in Europe such as Vienna’s Schraubenfabrik (originally UnternehmerInnenzentrum) and Denmark’s LYNfabriikken. A fuller account of this social history is offered in Waters-Lynch et al. (2016).

Nonetheless, since the origins of the term, the growth of enterprises calling themselves Coworking spaces around the world has been exponential. The primary sources of this data are the periodic global surveys of Coworking spaces coordinated by Deskmag²⁷, the Berlin based online Coworking magazine. These sources estimate that as of 2018, there are approximately 18,900 spaces and 1,690,000 'Coworkers' worldwide (Deskmag 2018). Deskmag also curate a timeline on the early history of Coworking, where significant historical milestones are sequentially mapped

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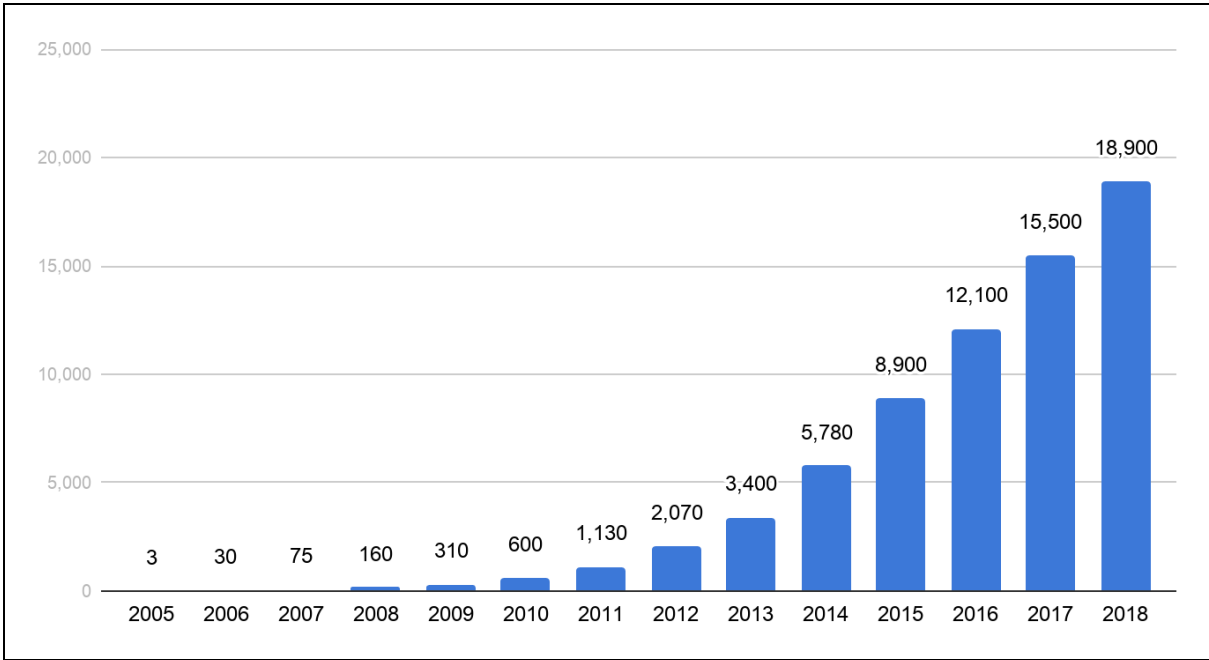


Figure 5: Global growth of Coworking spaces

Coworking spaces are not (just) serviced offices

The elusive definition of 'Coworking' is further compounded by the longer history of the shared office industry. Since at least the 1960s a range of shared office services have appeared under different names, including 'serviced offices', 'business centres',

²⁷ www.deskmag.com

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<http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/156192/The-History-Of-Coworking-Presented-By-Deskmag>

'executive suites' and 'telecentres' (Kojo and Nenonen 2014). In broad terms, these services share a business model based on flexible, low commitment rental access to office space and amenities. A combination of services are exchanged for a single, all inclusive fee, covering the range of expenses associated with office set up and maintenance, such as rent, printing, copying, kitchen equipment, cleaning, maintenance and ongoing utilities. Contracts are typically a minimum of three months, although some enterprises offer longer term agreements and others shorter, even 'pay as you go' services. In general the short term leases are seen to reduce the investment risk associated with the fixed costs of traditional leasing arrangements (Foster 1989; Harrison 2002). Additionally these services may offer access to strategic, attractive, convenient or prestigious locations that would be cost prohibitive for individual users to rent privately. The ability to reduce these costs is enabled through the economics of sharing the space and amenities between multiple users. For simplicity, these services will be referred to in this thesis as the 'serviced office industry'.

Coworking spaces generally share a similar business model to the serviced office industry, where customers pay a flexible, all inclusive, (usually) monthly fee for access to space and amenities. However the Coworking 'movement-industry' has differentiated itself from previous shared office arrangements through the loosely structured social interactions and collaborative activities of its participants, most frequently promoted under the rubric of 'community' (Spinuzzi, 2012; Parrino 2013; Capdevila 2014a).

There are three interrelated features that have visibly distinguished the younger Coworking spaces from the older serviced office industry, admittedly more prominently during the 'early Coworking years' between 2005 and 2012. The first relates to the profiles of the pioneering Coworkers themselves, the second is the centrality of social interactions and the third the aesthetic design of the spaces.

Creatives, not suits

The pioneering Coworkers of creative cities such as San Francisco, New York, London, Paris, Barcelona and Berlin were predominantly young people who identified as 'independent' (largely solo-self employed, creative knowledge) workers looking to address the challenges of social isolation associated with working from their private homes, or other suboptimal public places like cafes and libraries. The principles of the open source software movement were a strong influence, 'community' an organising theme, enabled through a '*do-it-yourself*' ethic (Holtzman et al. 2007) where the early members were often involved in the funding, design and construction of Coworking spaces. In this sense there was little distance in physical or social proximity between the founding entrepreneurs and other Coworking participants. Some of these early Coworking groups framed explicit political commitments around their nascent forms of association²⁹, others simply desired to work alongside each other in an informal, social atmosphere. Accordingly, the early culture of Coworking translated the informal modes of dress, language and sociality typical of inner urban cafes into the organisational culture of the nascent enterprises. This contrasted with the explicit attempts of the older serviced offices to replicate the image, language and dress conventions (such as business suits, jackets and ties) of formal organisations. In the language of the creativity literature, Coworking was established both by and for the 'creatives' and serviced offices predominantly designed for the 'suits' (Thompson 2007; Earl and Potts 2013).

Social interactions and collaborative activity

Second, the Coworking movement distinguished itself from the serviced office industry by emphasising the social interactions of its participants as a core feature of their value proposition. Coworking spaces usually promote themselves as a 'membership community' (Fost 2008; Sundsted et al. 2009; Hunt 2009; Botsman and Rogers 2011; Spinuzzi 2012; Capdevila 2014a; Parrino 2013; Kojo and Nenonen

²⁹ Here are three examples:

- The impact hub (www.impacthub.net)
- The Coworking manifesto (coworkingmanifesto.com)
- Gangplank (gangplankhq.com)

2014; Liegl 2014; Lumley 2014; Bilandzic and Foth 2015; Gandini 2015). Social participation is typically encouraged and enabled through a broad variety of 'organisational platforms' (Parrino 2013), including internal digital social network sites, frequent social events, membership boards, newsletters and 'community hosts, curators or managers' that tend to the social network, facilitating personal introductions and sometimes fostering professional collaboration with other 'likeminded' actors within the membership body. The emphasis is on light, organic forms of social coordination, suggested through the language of 'curation', 'catalysing', even 'community tumbling'³⁰ (Hillman 2014). The presence of material design features, from publicly visible white boards, inspirational quotes, idiosyncratic art and spacious kitchens also encourage such social interactions.

Bespoke aesthetics

The third difference relates to the aesthetics of Coworking spaces. Whilst the serviced office industry traditionally reflected the standardised, corporate, professional aesthetics of 'Fordism' and 'scientific management' (Guillen 1997), unsurprisingly Coworking spaces tend to emphasise their idiosyncratic, bespoke 'Post-Fordist' design aesthetics that blend 'work and play' (van Meel and Vos 2001). Such design choices reflect the early Coworking movement's attempts to contrast their practices with the predominant images of bureaucratic organisations, which many Coworkers had intentionally avoided. A 'google style office for people that don't work at google' was a description used in the early Coworking period (Neuberg 2014). Creativity and novelty tend to be celebrated over routine and predictability, and some spaces frequently change their internal layouts (see for example Elam 2014). The relationship between non-routine, creative work and playful, open and transparent workplaces with distinct identities has been observed as a feature of creative industries more broadly (van Meel, Martens and van Ree 2010; Kojo and Nenonen 2014). Many Coworking spaces themselves are located in former industrial

³⁰ 'The term tumbler comes from the Yiddish word tumlen meaning "to stir, bustle"... It was adopted in English to refer to "a comic entertainer or social director at a Jewish resort"' (Gregg and Lodato 2017:13)

era warehouses or factories, and have repurposed the space for creative knowledge work, sometimes involving 'cocreated' contributions in design and labour from Coworking members. Sometimes the former industrial use of the building is directly referenced in the name and origin story of the new Coworking space in an attempt to position the enterprise as an expression of creative urban renewal amid the obsolete industrial infrastructure³¹. The combination of these factors has seen Coworking spaces described in lay terms as 'cheap and funky offices' (van Meel and Brinkø 2014).

These distinctions notwithstanding, the boundaries between Coworking spaces and serviced offices are not rigid. Figure 6 below depicts how they have become blurred in recent years by hybridising movements from traditional serviced office providers such as Regus and Servcorp now claiming to offer 'Coworking' and other 'Coworking space' enterprises, such as WeWork that largely offer standardised, private offices.

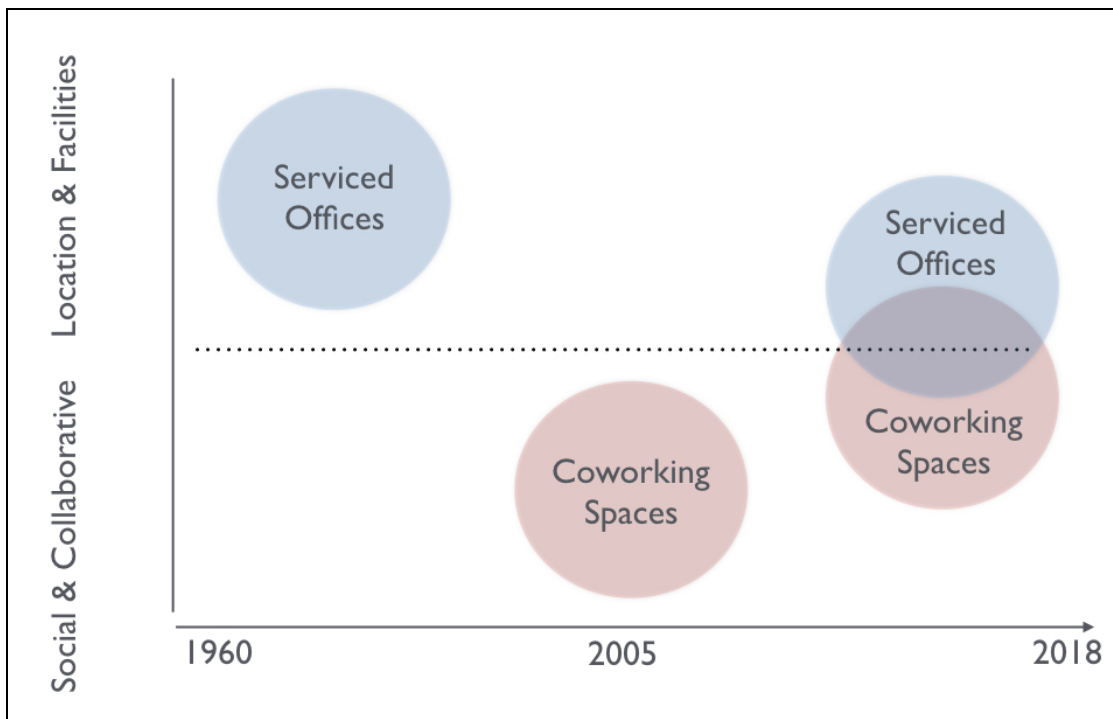


Figure 6: The value propositions of serviced offices and Coworking spaces

³¹ For example:

- Schraubenfabrik [the bolt factory]: <http://www.schraubenfabrik.at/>
- York Butter Factory: <http://ybfventures.com/>

2.3 Coworking as a scholarly problem

Since its inception, the notion of 'community' has been a central theme in the literature on Coworking. If much of the early popular literature celebrated the term, the most recent scholarly literature has problematised the concept, calling for closer attention to its meaning in order to generate more precise definitions to better guide empirical analysis (Garrett et al. 2017; Spinuzzi et al. 2018); closer scrutiny of its enactment through practices (Gregg and Lodato 2017; Jakonen et al. 2017; Butcher 2018); and even the construction of new theory that better situates and accounts for the 'shared fiction' this term evokes (Arvidsson 2018).

The popular veneration of community

Early popular accounts of Coworking highlight the importance of the social and affective dimensions depicted by the term community. Coworking was claimed to 'combine the best parts of an office environment- community, collaboration and access to the right tools - with the benefits of working at home or working for yourself - convenience, flexibility, autonomy.' (Sundsted et al. 2009:8). Coworking 'in a nutshell, is a working style to realise the atmosphere of a fun and fulfilling party' (Nakaya et al. 2012:10). Coworkers 'focus on building community and collaboration, as well as the other values of openness, sustainability and accessibility' (DeGuzman and Tang 2011:37), Tara Hunt, one of the founders of Citizen Space along with Chris Messina, often described Coworking as an experience of 'accelerated serendipity' (Yeung 2008; Hunt 2009). Coworking spaces 'provide hip, comfortable, professional work spaces...along with a professional collaborative community of people who are living, breathing, and succeeding in this new economy' (Coonerty and Neuner, 2013). 'Coworking is the burgeoning movement of people coming together to work' (Sundsted et al. 2014:21). In more florid terms, Dunstan (2015) notes how 'Coworking is like a halfway house for the corporate delinquent. It's a place and a style of working that combines independence and co-dependence. One that allows

you to be a soloist, but still play with the orchestra. To be social when you need to and to hold you accountable for delivering the things you say are important.’ Since the early years of Coworking the website ‘coworking.org’ has remained a relatively neutral site³² that promotes a simple definition alongside a ‘shared set of values’:

“The idea is simple: independent professionals and those with workplace flexibility work better together than they do alone. Coworking spaces are about community-building and sustainability.

The Coworking movement espouses five core values: Community, Openness, Collaboration, Sustainability, and Accessibility”

Scholarly research

Puzzling over just what this persistent veneration of ‘community’ actually signals is one of the most consistent themes discussed in the evolving scholarly literature on Coworking. The question of community cuts across both the critical accounts of the structural conditions surrounding work that have given rise to a perceived ‘need’ for community, and some suspicion towards what is actually shared or ‘held in common’ (Butcher 2013; Gandini 2015; de Peuter et al 2017); and more instrumental accounts of how organising knowledge work as a ‘community’, or at least an informal network of relational contracts, proffers advantages for contemporary forms of project-based work (Johns and Gratton 2013; Spinuzzi 2015; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac 2016). Despite the prevalence of the theme, the following review will demonstrate how the meaning and practices of ‘community’ within Coworking require closer

³² These values originated with Citizen Space, an early and short-lived Coworking space in San Francisco, and now also reside at the web addresses coworking.org and coworking.com, the domain purchases of which were ‘crowd funded’ by early Coworking actors as an attempt to avoid proprietary claims on coworking and its values as intellectual property (Hillman 2011). The site is now maintained by a nonprofit called Open Coworking (opencoworking.org). Despite these efforts, the early commitment to the principles of open source has become less visible in recent years as the concept of Coworking has become integrated within the commercial real estate industry.

empirical examination and firmer theoretical grounding in order to better explain its centrality.

In one of the earliest academic references, Aguiton and Cardon (2007) situate Coworking as an expression of the 'weak cooperation' visible in the emerging 'web 2.0' media practices, where users 'discover cooperative opportunities only by making their individual production public' (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007:3). They propose that such practices represent a 'new articulation between individualism and solidarity' (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007:2). The authors draw a link between user generated web content services and a number of 'spectator free' social practices and gatherings such as Barcamps, Unconferences, Brazil's World Social Forum and Nevada's Burning Man Festival. They describe Coworking spaces, at the time still largely unknown, as an attempt to establish 'third places' that translate these 'contact generating', 'bottom up methodologies' into permanent places (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007:11). This theme of weaving together 'open source' and digital media sharing practices with embodied encounters continued in an account of the spatial organisation and governance of the creative economy in Berlin, where '[Co]-working spaces reflect the collective-driven, networked approach of the open-source-idea translated into physical space' (Lange 2011:16).

Scholars were quick to observe such apparent 'structural paradoxes' (Lange 2011:8) and 'contradictory activities' (Spinuzzi 2012) that appeared present within Coworking. Spinuzzi (2012) interrogated this theme in what is still the most widely cited peer reviewed paper on Coworking, wondering early in his analysis 'if Coworking is even a coherent phenomenon' (Spinuzzi 2012: 428). This observation stemmed partly from the broad diversity of activities transpiring under the rubric of 'Coworking', the range of which has only increased since the time of his original field research in Austin. Spinuzzi partly reconciled these apparent contradictions by distinguishing three types of Coworking models present in his data. 'Community Work Spaces' offer quiet spaces for locals to work alongside each other; 'Unoffices' encourage discussions, meetings and social interactions and generally recreate the office dynamics for independent workers; and 'Federated Spaces' explicitly aim to foster working

relationships and formal collaboration between members. Reflecting this typology, Spinuzzi (2012: 21) notes that “A [C]oworking space is a place to get work done—specifically, knowledge or service work that originates outside the site in other intersecting activities. Although [C]oworkers work together, that work involves different, contradictory objectives, attached to and pulled by the network of activities in which each coworker engages. These intersecting activities perturbed the development of the object at each coworking site”. Spinuzzi observed two further distinct configurations in the mutual expectations of Coworkers: ‘good-neighbours’ who work alone, focussing on their own tasks, but politely alongside others; and ‘good-partners’ that actively foster the trust required that can lead to formal work collaborations. Thus ‘[C]oworking is a superclass that encompasses the good-neighbours and good-partners configurations as well as other possible configurations that similarly attempt to network activities within a given space’ (Spinuzzi 2012:36).

Capdevila (2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b) continued this trajectory of research that distinguished different types of collaborative activity underpinning divergent meanings of ‘community’ in Coworking. Drawing upon the literature on ‘industrial clusters’ (Porter 1990) he conceptualises Coworking spaces as ‘microclusters’, ‘intermediary-configurations between firms and clusters’ (Capdevila 2013b:11) that cultivate knowledge embedded in local places and relationships. Coworking spaces are advanced as ‘hybrid or intermediary’ organisational forms, “characterized by the co-location of economic actors that engage in different forms of collaboration, leading in some cases to the emergence of a highly-collaborative community of freelancers, entrepreneurs and professionals. The inter-firm collaboration in coworking spaces is not based on market nor on hierarchies and thus could be defined as an intermediate organizational form.” (Capdevila 2014a: 132).

Capdevila proposed a nested model that distinguished three kinds of collaborative activity transpiring under the rubric of Coworking. ‘Cost-based collaboration’ aims merely to reduce operational and transaction costs; ‘resource-based collaboration’ is where agents seek access to new knowledge and resources through interactions;

and 'relational collaboration' where agents invest in the dynamics of the 'community as a whole' rather than transactions between individuals. The individual is at the centre of cost-based collaboration, where 'sharing' simply reduces the price of access to a conveniently located workspace. Knowledge is at the core of resource-based collaboration, often exchanged through the structures of dyadic relations. Finally the health, vibrancy and 'absorptive capacity' (Cohen and Levinthal 1990) of the community itself is the focus of relational-collaboration. Although Capdevila acknowledged that maintaining a culture of 'relational collaboration' likely involves interactions grounded in symbols of shared identity and values, his research does not offer a detailed examination of the *Coworking practices* that might invoke such experiences or theorise the labour required for the maintenance of such a culture.

Most subsequent analyses build on the core themes apparent in these early findings, noting that merely sharing office space and amenities are insufficient to facilitate the relational proximity that enables mutual support, social learning, and entrepreneurial collaboration so celebrated by Coworking proponents (Parrino 2013; Bilandzic and Foth 2015). Consequently, the role of the 'community manager' has become a locus of attention for some, frequently held up as a vital actor in 'curating' these experiences by facilitating trustful introductions between Coworkers and hosting an 'atmosphere' of appropriate sociality (Merkel 2015; Cabral and Winden 2016; Gregg and Lodato 2017).

Some scholars are optimistic about the role Coworking spaces and practices might play in promoting entrepreneurial work (Bouncken and Reuschl 2016; Waters-Lynch and Potts 2017), in the construction of 'entrepreneurial ecosystems' with positive 'spillover effects' relating to knowledge (Van Weele et al. 2014; Mulas et al. 2017; Qian 2018) or wider projects of 'urban revitalisation' (Mariotti 2017; Jamal 2018). But others have offered a more critical appraisal of Coworking and its promotion of the concept of 'community'. This literature is largely concerned with the way Coworking culture may (unwittingly) promote 'neoliberal assumptions' about work and precarity under the guise of self-actualising, entrepreneurial adventurism. Coworking is found

to willfully curate nostalgic symbols through a discursive construction of community (Butcher 2013), within which Coworkers are encouraged to live 'nomadic', 'fragmented' and 'precarious' lives (Gandini 2015). This transient, 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001), present within the culture of Coworking is said to breed a deeply 'ambivalent politics', where the putative 'counter-corporate' identity is increasingly commodified and subject to 'neoliberal norms' (de Peuter et al. 2017). These scholars argue that under the guise of 'autonomy', 'self-realisation' and 'community' lurks anxiety-ridden, competitive performances as freelancers, social entrepreneurs and other precarious creative workers who must constantly 'network' to find paid work, or more frequently, 'temporary gigs' (Gandini et al. 2017). Consequently, despite the early public celebration of communal sociality, many contemporary Coworking spaces are 'generally marked by silence' as inhabitants labour 'side by side in front of computer screens, often wearing headsets to mark that they are not available for socialization' (Arvidson 2018: 293).

Both camps of literature acknowledge that the rapid, exponential growth in the numbers of Coworking spaces around the world suggests some consequential changes in both the spatial and social organisation of work, and that 'community' is a central feature of Coworking discourse. However by focusing on the nature of the work conducted in Coworking spaces, it might be argued that the extant literature has provided an inadequate theoretical treatment of the concept of communities, more precisely *how communities can collectively create and manage resources*, and uneven empirical evidence for precisely *how Coworking practices* construct entrepreneurial communities. The thesis responds directly to both of these general problems. Before proceeding to a deeper analysis of scholarly literature on communities, the following section will briefly outline three non-academic audiences to which these problems should be of interest. These are Coworkers themselves, urban policy makers, and Coworking space entrepreneurs.

Coworkers

Of foremost importance here are existing and prospective Coworkers themselves. The beginning of this chapter reviewed the ongoing and hotly contested debates over the prevailing experiences of non-standard workers and nascent entrepreneurs, many of whom aspire to work as ‘free agents’ (Pink 2001) but often find rather ‘complicated versions of freedom’ in their work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). Coworking has been theorised as emerging in response to some of these challenges, yet its potency in addressing them has been questioned, especially when Coworking is packaged as a consumer product that one can simply ‘purchase’ (de Peuter et al. 2017; Butcher 2018; Arvidsson 2018). Coworkers should thus reflect on what they are fundamentally seeking when evaluating Coworking experiences, and make choices that are informed by rigorous research on the experiences and outcomes of Coworking. Research that deepens our understanding of what people are actually searching for when seeking out Coworking, what they subsequently find and how their experiences change over time is thus important, especially given the evolving variety of activities now transpiring under the guise of Coworking. Research may reveal not all Coworking practices are of benefit to participants, and the ongoing close examinations of particular cases can help illuminate the range of options available, and help inform better choices regarding working communities.

Urban policymakers

One of the key priorities of urban policy makers is the attraction and creation of jobs within their jurisdictions, especially given the increasingly competitive relationships between global cities (Cochrane 2007; Kelly and Donegal 2015). Much discussion has focused on how urban infrastructure and cultural amenities might attract a ‘creative class’ that will create jobs (Clark et al. 2002; Florida et al. 2008; Glaeser 2011; Mellander et al. 2013). Others argue that this spatial relationship is not so simple, and that mobile creative workers primarily migrate to cities that already generate jobs (Storper and Scott 2009; Moretti 2012). If the latter is true, public investment in attractive urban amenities in the hope of encouraging the migration of job-generating creative professionals are likely misplaced (Jayne 2004; Evans 2005;

Paquette 2009; Sasaki 2010; O'Connor and Gu 2013; 2014 Scott). However, as these debates have largely centred around the value of large scale investment in 'high grade amenities' such as museums, art galleries and concert halls, it is worth exploring how the presence of 'micro-amenities' like Coworking facilities assist in the creation of meaningful economic work, whether through the attraction of talent, the facilitation of successful self-employment, or the growth of job-generating startups. Some scholars certainly situate Cowork spaces alongside 'maker spaces', 'fab labs' and 'community gardens' as part of the repertoire of techniques for entrepreneurial and urban revitalization (Capdevila 2017; Mariotti et al. 2017; Kleinus et al. 2017; Jamal 2018).

As we have seen, in the context of the globalised new knowledge economy, innovation and entrepreneurial activity are increasingly considered sources of economic advantage and feature as objectives of economic strategies. Collaboration amongst diverse actors, in conjunction with shared learning and creative activity, have been theorised to contribute towards innovation (Nooteboom 1999; 2000a; Nooteboom et al. 2007; Lundvall 2010). In fact 'innovation through collaboration' is a common theme in the Coworking industry and often promoted as the goal of many Coworking spaces. Urban policy analysts should regard this proposition with critical interest and question whether Coworking spaces and practices actually contribute towards entrepreneurial learning, creativity and innovation. Furthermore, even if correlation can be established at the macro level, research should help distinguish what kind of *practices* lead to positive entrepreneurial, employment and innovation outcomes.

Quantitative job creation alone is not the only metric of concern in the development of urban economic and social policy. As we have seen, just as critical is that work is meaningful, secure and fairly compensated, that the available jobs are 'good jobs' (Cappelli and Keller 2013b). A further important factor is whether these opportunities are available to the population at large, that is that they are socially inclusive and will ultimately promote greater equality of income and life-chances for marginalised urban residents (Bauder 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Pratt 2009; Anyon 2013). So

the innovation producing potential of Coworking spaces represent only one, albeit important, facet of their social utility. For example, policy makers must consider whether the rise of Coworking spaces and practices represents a socially inclusive urban project, as a network of platforms that enable social mobility through the co-mingling of difference? Places where newcomers can access the material and social support required to further their work ambitions? Or do they represent a reification of urban privilege, a trendy veneer on the older form of the elite membership club? A further expression of the widening gap in the incomes and life opportunities that characterise contemporary global cities? Understanding the nature of access to emerging socio-spatial structures of privilege and prosperity should be a concern for urban policy makers seeking to promote more equal opportunities for economic mobility and life-chances. In the Coworking context, this not only includes the literal physical access to the spaces, but understanding complex cultural practices that enable participation, in sociological terms, the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1980; 2005; Holt 2008) that foster the cultural and cognitive proximity required to engage in this small world of the new knowledge economy. These concerns fall within an established theme in urban theory, the democratic foundation in access to the urban socio-spatial landscape championed by Lefebvre's (1968) 'rights to the city'.

This discussion highlights three fundamental questions that the rise of Coworking spaces pose for urban policy makers. First, to what extent do Coworking spaces foster innovative entrepreneurial activity that generates high quality jobs? Second, if they are found to promote innovation and entrepreneurship, to what extent do Coworking spaces promote urban social inclusion? Third, if they are found to promote innovation, entrepreneurship and social inclusion, what policy approaches might support the development of accessible, high quality Coworking spaces and practices appropriately distributed across the urban environment?

Coworking space entrepreneurs

Finally, Coworking space operators should ask which social practices and collaborative activities are of particular value to Coworkers, and how the formal organising platforms of Coworking spaces may best support (or hinder) these practices. Coworking space founders and entrepreneurs constantly face decisions on where to invest time, energy and resources. As a relatively young industry, stories of success are shared anecdotally, and some ‘folk theories’ (Keesing 1987) have developed. But as some industry actors have noted (Hillman 2014), stories of failure, and subsequent analyses of where Coworking doesn’t work for participants are seldom shared, at least outside of the more recent critical academic literature (see Gregg and Lodato 2017 for a compelling negative account). More recent literature has suggested that there can be significant discrepancies in what Coworking providers and Coworking users perceive as valuable (Seo et al. 2017).

Finally, many details of Coworking practices remain tacit and implicit, being created, evolving and falling away in the midst of the everyday work lives of Coworkers. Sometimes these practices are initiated or adopted by the staff of Coworking enterprises. At other times they take place outside the purview of the formal organisation, the result of creative improvisations from Coworkers themselves. Accordingly, better understanding the nature of interactions and practices that generate value in the perception of Coworkers, and the contexts in which these take place, are useful lines of inquiry for founding entrepreneurs of Coworking spaces. Given the choice of many Coworkers to forgo formal organisational employment, understanding how Coworking spaces organise to support (and perhaps hinder) these practices should be of particular interest.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Conceptualising 'Coworking communities'

This thesis conceptualises the network of social relations organised around the pioneering Coworking spaces in Melbourne as an *entrepreneurial community*. While, the preceding literature review observed some critiques regarding the application of the concept of community towards Coworking (e.g. Gandini 2015; Spinuzzi et al 2018; Arcidiacono et al 2018), this section responds to these claims by offering a more comprehensive theoretical treatment of the notion of community itself. This thesis proposes that the concept of 'community' should remain a meaningful theoretical and empirical unit of analysis that builds on its long, if contested, history in sociology. Etymologically the English word has roots in the Latin *communis* or 'things held in common' (OED 2015)³³. The word is commonly employed popularly in this sense, used in a variety of ways to mark a conceptual boundary, from referring to groups that objectively share a physical location (e.g. 'the Richmond community') to groups that subjectively share an identity (e.g. 'the academic community'). Sociologically, debates over the shifting character of social relations between the tightly knit, small scale, face-to-face, local interactions of small rural 'communities' and the diffuse, impersonal, mediated and rationally calculating interactions of larger urban 'societies' can be traced back to Tonnies' conceptualisation of the former as *Gemeinschaft* and the latter as *Gesellschaft* (Tonnies 1887).

The continuing onset of modernity, in particular the encroaching intersection of urbanisation, industrialisation and bureaucratisation further energised subsequent scholarly debates over the effects of these factors on the character of social life. A collection of theorists extended Tonnies' early analysis by examining how the growth of urban social life had been accompanied by a loss of the strong, personal ties of

³³ The significance of 'resources held in common' and a fuller discussion of the relationship between communities and the evolving 'theories of commons' is offered in [Chapter 8.3](#).

reciprocity connected to local geographically and historically situated identities and communal norms (Woodsworth 1911; Park 1925; Wirth 1938; Nisbet 1953; Stein 1965; Castells 1975). However other research pointed out that despite the remarkable structural changes of urban life, older forms of community relations persisted as local actors reconstructed collective identities within the boundaries of neighbourhoods (Keller 1968; Suttles 1972), in the actions of immigrants whom recreate the social character of rural life in 'urban villages' (Gans 1962), even how compacted diversity itself can lead to a social vitality within 'the life of great cities' (Jacobs 1961).

From the 1970s onwards, some scholars began to argue that the empirical research on urban 'communities' tended to include problematic assumptions that conceived a geographical boundary around social interactions. As accessible transportation and communications technologies like the telephone expanded the geographical range in which social relations could be maintained, this conception was seen to mischaracterise the wider realm of social interactions. Scholars argued that social networks themselves should form the unit of analysis rather than geographical places, as this better reflects the conditions in which individuals exercise social relations (Granovetter 1973; 1983; 1985; Wellman 1979; 1988; 1996; Fischer 1978; 1982). The work of Granovetter (2005) particularly challenged the negative connotations of diffuse social networks, arguing that a broad range of 'weak ties' can enhance social mobility and furnish economic advantage. If technologies such as print media, postal services and the telephone complicated the conception of communities as geographically bounded, the widespread adoption of the internet and digital social network sites have only further compounded the problem (Wellman et al. 2001). In the 1990s, for example, the term 'virtual community' was introduced into the sociological lexicon (Rheingold 1993; 2000) to conceptualise social relations online, accompanied by much debate over the utility of its application (Stoll 1995; Slouka 1996; Lockard 1997; Kerckhove 1997; Levy 1997; Parks 2011).

Social network analyses can reveal much about the character of social relations, but they do not in themselves explain the *processes* by which individuals subjectively

identify with an abstracted collective entity beyond the network of personal ties. Neither do they reveal the *practices*, rhetorical resources or strategies employed to build 'a sense of community'. This is the social process by which a community becomes more than the aggregation of personal ties, but a 'generalized other' which enables perspective taking on the self (Mead 1934) and forms a crucial container for identity construction, forming influential frames for action beyond the mere relational dyads of interpersonal networks, but through the frame of 'imagined' (Anderson 1983) or 'abstract' communities (James 2006). The transnational cultural web of 'disjuncture and difference' (Appadurai 1990) that individuals must now navigate has led some to claim that belonging to a 'community' has lost much of its former meaning, and the vestiges of its use now resemble the choices consumers make when selecting products (Bauman 2000; 2013). Despite these charges, the importance of local place, and social relations grounded in regular, embodied practices and interactions persist in analyses of social life in the most late-modern of contexts (Storper and Venables 2004; Atkinson 2008; Mckeever et al. 2015; Kleinhans et al. 2017).

Reflecting on these debates, I would note that the complex terrain of international community development, forced to contend with the contradictory conceptions of tribal, national and global communal identities, offers constructive reflections on the interests that can lie behind the different applications of the 'community concept', whether framed as a geographic unit of shared spatial relations, as an economic unit of shared commercial relations, or as a cultural unit of shared practices and identity relations (Kepe 1999). Accordingly, James et al. (2012) provide a broad definition of community of enduring relevance to the interests of this thesis, informed by the objective network and subjective identity nuances captured in the various debates introduced above:

'[W]e define community very broadly as a group or network of persons who are connected (objectively) to each other by relatively durable social relations that extend beyond immediate genealogical

ties and who mutually define that relationship (subjectively) as important to their social identity and social practice'

(James et al. 2012:14)

This overview of the theoretical understanding of the term 'community' reveals applications to shared spatial locations, shared economic relations, collective practices and shared activities, shared webs of kinship, social and cultural relations and abstract collectives that endure beyond the participation of specific individuals. Despite briefly falling out of favour during the popularity of social network analyses, a reinvigoration of the sociological concepts underpinning community, including recasting Tonnies' original distinctions, has been evident in recent years (Adler and Heckscher 2006; Spinuzzi et al. 2018; Arvidsson 2018). A more precise question to ask here however is what *kind* of community affords the most revealing analysis of Coworking.

Coworking as community of practice

The theory of 'communities of practice' organises the various features of Coworking within a logically coherent framework, offering a parsimonious means of integrating analysis of these features including the key aspects of Coworking described in the existing literature (e.g. community, sociality, relations, place, practice). Communities of practice theory emerged from earlier work in situated and social learning theory. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger developed the framework from a series of ethnographic works on apprenticeships, especially in non-canonical learning contexts outside the rubric of formal education institutions. They originally used the term *legitimate peripheral participation* to 'characterise the process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice' (Wenger 1998: 100). The term community of practice was later adopted to better account for the theory of 'knowing', doing and learning' advanced from their observations.

Through the lens of social learning and practice, Lave and Wenger observed that the development of skill is less about internalising a stable, canonical curriculum than socially participating within a community of skilled practitioners in increasingly active ways. Moreover this process of participation itself is said to affect the identity and social relationships of the learner in at least four fundamental ways:

“Meaning: a way of talking about our (changing) ability - individually and collectively - to experience’ our life and the world as meaningful.

Practice: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.

Community: a way of talking about the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence.

Identity: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.”

(Wenger, 1998:4)

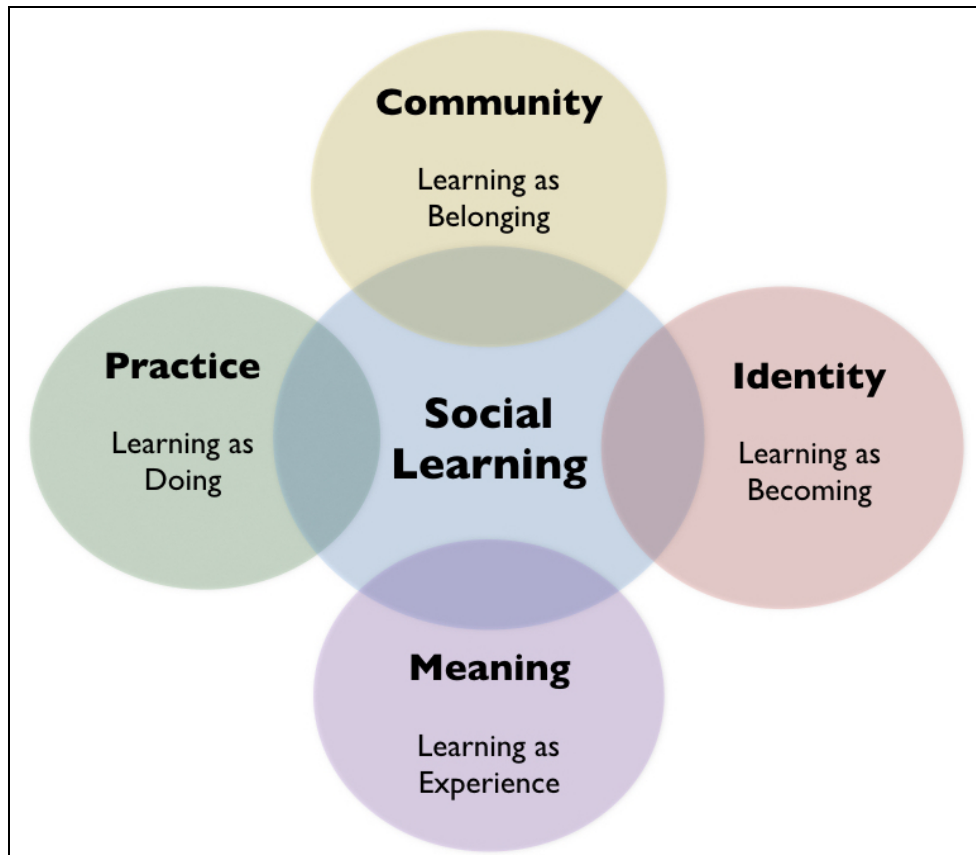


Figure 7: Theoretical components of social learning

A community of practice requires three fundamental elements, a *community*, a *domain*, and *practice*. Communities refer to a set of actors that need to interact regularly, although their interaction can be ‘virtual’ and they do not necessarily need to share close physical proximity (Wenger et al. 2009; Sadler 2014). A domain refers to the area of interest or skill around which the group coheres. Practice gives a direction to kinds of activities and interactions that are performed within a group. They are not merely ‘social’ but must involve the pursuit of knowledge or skill in a particular domain.

Wenger proposes that for ‘communities of practice’ to meaningfully cohere, they need three further elements, mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Mutual engagement represents the shared norms and expectations that make up the distinct identity of the community. Joint enterprise refers to the key practice domain of the group, which remain open to being reviewed and moulded by the group in order to maintain community vitality. Shared repertoire involves the

resources, tools, techniques and standards of the domain (Wenger 1998; Sadler 2014).

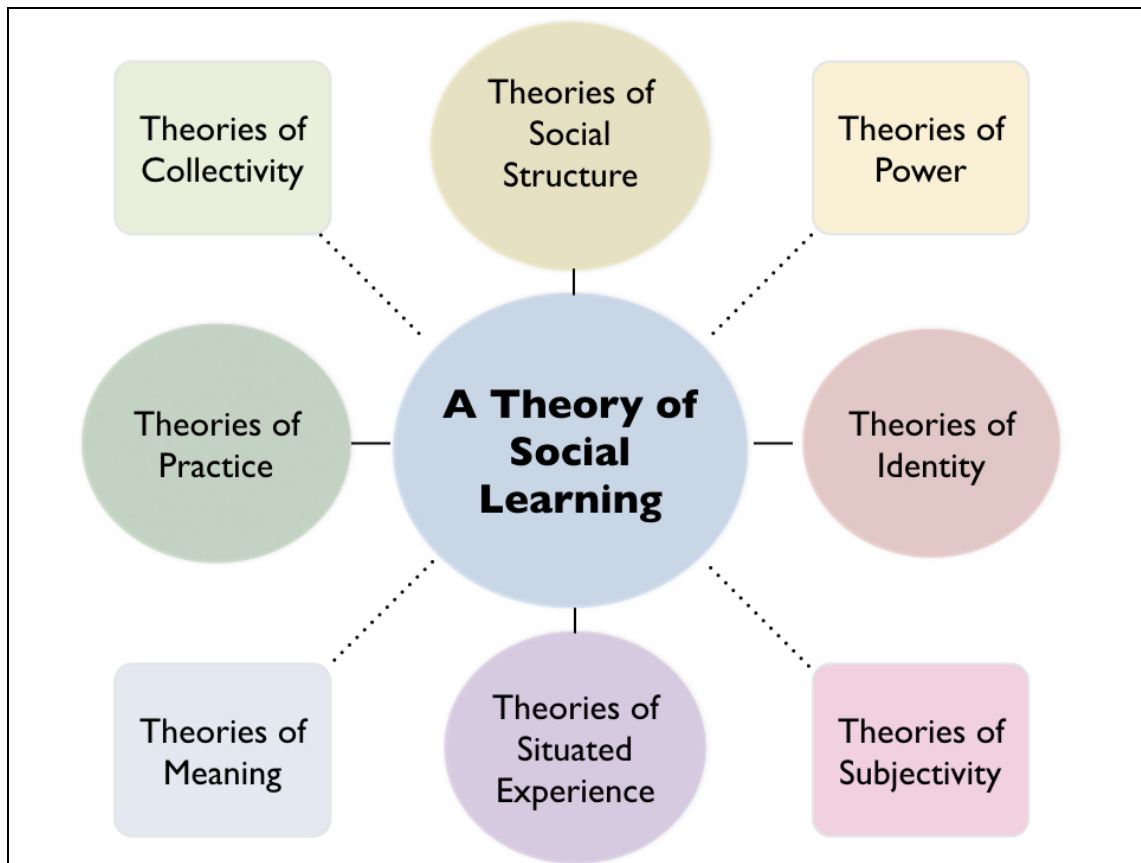


Figure 8: Intersection of intellectual traditions

Learning does not principally take place through didactic instruction in teacher-student relationships, but through increasing levels of community participation, moving from the periphery to more central roles over time as skills develop. In this sense, triadic relationships rather than dyadic role sets of teacher-students, predominate. These are conceived of as ‘apprentices or newcomers’, ‘young masters or journeymen’ and ‘masters or old timers’.

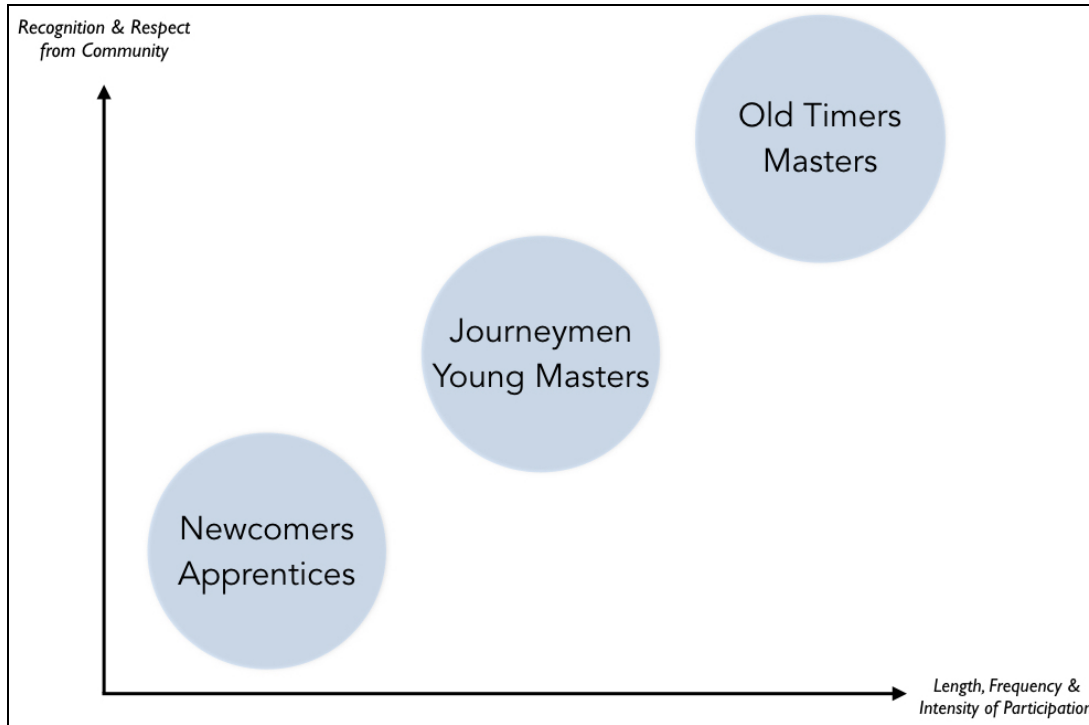


Figure 9: Practitioner journeys

Community of Practice (CoP) theory offers a ‘meso’ unit of analysis that rests between the macro influence of formal institutions and the micro domain of isolated individuals. In keeping with the long conceptual development of CoP theory, I have concluded that such a theory offers an appropriate means of conceptualising the relationship between the requirement for social learning amongst the self-employed and the emphasis on identity construction, social belonging and the co-generation of meaning that so characterise Coworking as a set of distinctive cultural practices³⁴.

³⁴ A fuller account of the relationship between ‘communities of practice theory and the wider arena of practice theory, including a response to some common critiques from organisational scholars, is offered at the beginning of Chapter 6 On practice theory.



Figure 10: Unit of analysis in communities of practice theory

2.5 The purpose of this thesis

Informed by a careful reading of diverse literatures relevant to the study of Coworking, as reviewed earlier in the chapter, and a theoretical orientation derived from Community of Practice theory, the purpose of this thesis is to undertake a theoretically articulate, empirical investigation of Coworking understood as emerging entrepreneurial communities of practice. To this end, the thesis advances a rigorous ethnographic analysis of the *social practices* of a pioneering Coworking community. The ethnography is guided by three fundamental questions, *why* people Cowork, the focus of [Chapter 5](#), *how* they Cowork, the focus of [Chapter 6](#) and how their *experiences change over time*, empirically addressed in [Chapter 7](#) and theoretically unpacked in [Chapter 8](#).

These three guiding questions warrant some further explanation. First, this thesis proposes *social learning*, configured through communities of practice theory, as a theoretical lens that can explain Coworking as a social activity, and whilst the extant literature includes some evidence to support this proposition, empirical research should continue to test the assumption by examining the motivations for Coworking,

comparing different experiences and noting outlier cases. In other words scholars should continue to examine ‘*why*’ people Cowork.

Second, as a relatively novel social phenomenon, Coworking practices themselves will likely feature considerable diversity. Some forms of practice may prove ‘successful’ in realising their intentions, others may be deemed ineffectual. Some may endure, others exist only fleetingly. Accordingly, research should elucidate ‘*how*’ people Cowork, including documenting experiments that are not deemed successful, or do not endure.

Thirdly, communities of practice theory posits a journey as ‘*newcomer*’ participants move from peripheral to central social participation as ‘*old-timers*’. Social recognition and respect for skill within a domain are theorised to correlate to length and frequency of engagement within the community of practitioners during which identity and social relations noticeably change. Researchers should thus inquire *how Coworking experiences and practices change over time*.

This last question has been one of the most neglected in the available literature on Coworking to date. It was this question that became the launching point for the discussion and theoretical development advanced in Chapter 8. This thesis proposes that the resources co-constituted by the Coworkers themselves, conceptualised here as an *immaterial commons*, forms the missing piece essential to comprehending the puzzle of *entrepreneurial communities* that remains much discussed in the literature (for example by Garrett et al. 2017; de Peuter et al. 2017; Gregg and Lodato 2017; Jakonen et al. 2017; Butcher 2018; Arcidiacono et al 2018; Arvidsson 2018; Spinuzzi et al. 2018)

The purpose of this thesis is thus to investigate the relationship between Coworking and emerging entrepreneurial communities through a grounded theory ethnography that explores the motivations, social practices and changing experiences of a pioneering Coworking community in Melbourne, from 2013 to 2016.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Grounded theory ethnography

Chapter 2 established that the purpose of this thesis and how a rigorous empirical investigation of the social practices of Coworking can advance our understanding of the relationship between Coworking and entrepreneurial communities. This chapter will explain the methodological choice of a grounded theory ethnography as the most appropriate research strategy to realise this aim.

Ethnography

The focus on social practices, interactions and the 'culture' of Coworking first positioned ethnography as a fitting methodological choice for the research. The broad 'aim of ethnography is the analytic description of a culture' (Van Maanen 1979:1). However the term 'ethnography' can be used in a variety of different ways in research literature (Ybema et al. 2009). Some treat the word merely as a substitute for research methods, principally participant-observation, but occasionally any kind of naturalistic inquiry or field research. Others insist the word ethnography should be reserved for the final written account, the monograph or narrative produced after field research and analysis are completed. A few even invoke the word as an ontological position towards research practice, a 'method of being at risk in the face of the practices and discourses in which one inquires' (Haraway 1997:190).

In this thesis, I employed ethnography as a research *methodology*. In other words, the ethnographic approach, with its orientation towards understanding the shared culture of a group, functioned as a guiding logic across a suite of research methods. Ethnography is an omnivorous discipline concerning both social theory and methods, and the four years of field research spanned participation in Coworking practices, observations of other Coworkers, informal conversations and formal (recorded and

transcribed) interviews, analysis of images, videos and documents, auto-ethnographic reflections and participation in social media communications.

Grounded Theory

The Grounded Theory Method (GTM) is one of the most widely recognised methodological approaches in qualitative research, and was designed specifically for theory construction (Bryant and Charmaz 2014). The first generation of GTM was birthed through a blend of 'Columbia University positivism' with 'Chicago school pragmatism and field research' (Charmaz 2014:9). Although the 'constructivist turn' was only explicated in the 1990s, much of its theoretical stance can be traced back to the pioneers of American Pragmatist Philosophy, such as Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey, with their emphasis on iterative knowledge construction through practical problem solving; and through the Chicago School of Sociology, through noted scholars such as George Mead and Herbert Blumer, especially the school's emphasis on combining extensive field observations and in depth interviews characteristic of ethnographic work with the purposeful development of new sociological theory (Charmaz 2014). These distinct combinations of ontological and epistemological assumptions about the social world held by Mead and Blumer later came to be expressed more formally in the precepts of *symbolic interactionism* (Blumer 1969).

'Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories' (Charmaz 2014:1). GTM was first developed by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser in their seminal work '*Awareness of Dying*' (1966) which focused on research into an area of human experience they argued had been neglected by existing scientific studies and social theory. In the subsequent '*Discovery of Grounded Theory*' (1967) the authors codified the procedures and articulated the rationale for their approach. Although Glaser, Strauss and a number of methodological scholars such as Juliet Corbin, Kathy Charmaz, Antony Bryant, Barry Gibson and Jan Hartman, have all evolved

GTM in different directions since its inception, these variations all share a small number of core features that distinguish it from other approaches to social inquiry.

These defining components of GTM consist of:

- Simultaneously conducting data collection and analysis in an iterative process
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, rather than from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses, and focussing on actions and processes rather than themes and structure
- Using 'comparative methods' which involve comparisons at each stage of the analysis
- Drawing on field data (whether interview transcripts or descriptions of incidences) to develop new conceptual categories
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps.
- Sampling aimed toward theory construction (theoretical sampling), not for population representation
- Emphasise theory construction rather than description or testing current theories

(adapted from Charmaz 2014:15)

At heart, grounded theory is an inductive and *abductive* approach to social inquiry that guides the collection and analysis of research data, aiming to construct plausible theories 'grounded' in extensive empirical material. GTM involves iterations between phases of data gathering and analysis, as researchers work their way towards '*theoretical saturation*' and the construction of substantive, middle-range (and sometimes formal) theory. The initial exposition of GTM in the 1960s did much to renew the legitimacy of qualitative research and offered a powerful counterweight to concerns at some of the constraining assumptions dominating quantitative sociology at that time. But by the 1990s some of the assumptions adhered to by Glaser and Strauss (and Corbin) came to be viewed by some as unhelpfully procedural and restrictive.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

In response to these concerns Kathy Charmaz (2000; 2014) has become the leading proponent of a more recent turn towards 'Constructivist Grounded Theory' Methods (CGTM). The fundamental differences between this recent turn and the earlier presentations of grounded theory ultimately lie in ontological and epistemological assumptions about the social world. The constructivists stance emphasises the active 'co-creation of meaning' by social actors, including the researcher herself, in place of the objective 'discovery' of a pre-existing social world 'out there' (Guba and Lincoln 2013). The constructivist assumptions consequently focus attention on 'processes and practices' that actively construct the social, rather than search for 'obdurate structures' that determine the responses of social actors (Charmaz 2000). Whilst the core analytical methods are generally shared between the various schools of GTM, these constructivists assumptions emphasise some important differences in both data analysis and the presentation of written accounts.

- CGTM places greater weight on the role of the researcher as an active participant in the co-construction of meaning when gathering data and in interpreting findings. Researchers are not viewed as neutral observers or objective interviewers, but actors that bring their own influence to the field, consequently their identity, status and worldview shape what is 'discovered' through research processes.
- CGTM thus explicitly encourages a more reflexive stance, greater attention placed on the background, worldview, status and even 'voice' of the researcher in the written account compared to the 'distant expert' tone of traditional GTM reports.
- CGTM places less emphasis in systematically following the elaborate coding procedures recommended for example by Glaser (1978) or Strauss and Corbin (1990)³⁵, and instead encourages researchers to use the coding and

³⁵ Glaser for example presents 18 different forms of coding in 'theoretical sensitivity' (1978).

memoing techniques as 'flexible, heuristic devices', or conceptual scaffolding to elicit intuitive connections and assist in imaginative theoretical constructions.

- CGTM does however encourage coding *active processes* (or practices) operationalised by assigning present 'gerunds' (or active 'doing' words) rather than structural themes. This is recommended to help focus attention on the continuous, open ended 'construction' of the social world through practices.
- CGTM also places greater emphasis on including the voices of key research participants and rich descriptions of incidences in the written research accounts. Where appropriate researchers are encouraged to present raw interview excerpts, and thick descriptions of situations in addition to the researchers interpretation or more abstracted analysis. Doing this helps render the author's interpretation transparent and allows the reader to plausibly interpret the meaning of empirical material differently.
- CGTM places less emphasis on delaying literature reviews of extant theory until after data collection begins. Glaser for example initially advocated engaging with extant literature only towards the end of data analysis to maximise potential originality of interpretation. CGTM assumes researchers already interpret data through existing conceptual frameworks grounded in familiar theories.
- Finally, given the points above, CGTM places greater emphasis on literary-like accounts more common within the ethnographic tradition than the neutral and objectivist tone of positivist social science reports.

The 'happy marriage' of grounded theory ethnographies

The early years of grounded theory saw a close affinity with ethnographic practices, but the two approaches have taken somewhat diverging paths over the past forty years. On the one hand, ethnographers are often more concerned with 'thick' (Geertz 1973), or 'luminous' (Katz 2001) descriptions of local practices and their meaning for a group, usually presented through literary-style accounts intended to illuminate the

hidden significance of a shared culture. Some ethnographers have indicated suspicion towards the overly procedural approaches to analysis³⁶, the drawing of generalisations from particular incidents, and the presentation of theoretical insights in propositional forms that can be associated with grounded theory³⁷. On the other hand, some grounded theory research is presented in a highly abstract and decontextualised form, chiefly concerned with ‘the discovery’ of a core sociological category that will be applicable across multiple sites, rather than attempting to draw the reader into a social world through vivid representation of the actors and context of a particular drama³⁸. This tension has led to grounded theory methods being criticised for appearing too scientific from the interpretive end of qualitative social inquiry (for example by Thomas and James 2006) and too interpretative from the objectivist and quantitative end of social research (Toomela 2011; Bendassolli 2013).

These debates notwithstanding, many scholars argue that there is ample scope to carve a path between these two poles, drawing inspiration from both ethnographic and grounded theory traditions to find a ‘happy marriage’ (Pettigrew 2000; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). Both approaches are particularly well suited to the study of interactions in context, a central feature of interest of the social world studied here. Grounded theory ethnographies do, however, tend to be more ‘analytical than descriptive’, and often aspire ‘to invoke the lifeworld of others while also achieving a level of conceptual abstraction that provides sociological significance beyond the substantive area of study’ (Timmermans and Tavory 2014: 505).

³⁶ For example, despite being called a ‘master ethnographer’, Erving Goffman famously refused to explicate his methods, believing encouraging novice researchers to follow methodological recipes would not lead to insightful qualitative analysis (Charmaz 2014).

³⁷ *Working Knowledge* (Harper 1987) is one example here of ethnographic work that is circumspect in its theoretical analysis and propositions, communicating insight into the working practices of its single subject through photographs, elicited responses, and short anecdotes of interactions by the author.

³⁸ Barney Glaser continues to advocate this approach, eschewing vivid qualitative description and emphasising the identification of transferable core categories. Classic examples of core categories ‘discovered’ through grounded theory he cites include ‘*supernormalizing, credentializing, cultivating, pluralistic dialoguing, atmospherizing, toning, abusing*’ (Glaser 2002).

The methodological choice of a constructivist grounded theory ethnography has been selected in this thesis for three primary reasons, my own ontological assumptions about the social world, my own position in relation to the phenomenon of Coworking in Melbourne and its complementarity with ethnography.

First, although I do not believe the natural world is 'socially constructed', and that many 'positivists assumptions' are appropriate for inquiry within the natural sciences, I do consider the domain of culture to be distinct. I assume the ontology of culture as fundamentally *processual*, not exerting influence on behaviour by way of underlying structural laws, but routinely recreated through social practices and thus constantly in some flux. From this perspective even the most seemingly obdurate social institutions only persist through 'constellations of teleoaffective practices' (Schatzki 2001).

Second, although the constructivist stance rejects the absolute 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' researchers in principle, as the following section on backgrounds and motivations for this research will highlight, I myself was an active protagonist within the pioneering Melbourne Coworking community. Accordingly I include my own experiences amongst the set of recurring interviews.

Finally, the constructivist emphasis on a more reflexive position of the researcher, the inclusion of richly descriptive accounts and extended dialogue from interviews accords with the literary-like motifs of ethnographic monographs. The constructivist position thus finds a 'happier marriage' with ethnography than some other schools of GTM.

Research design

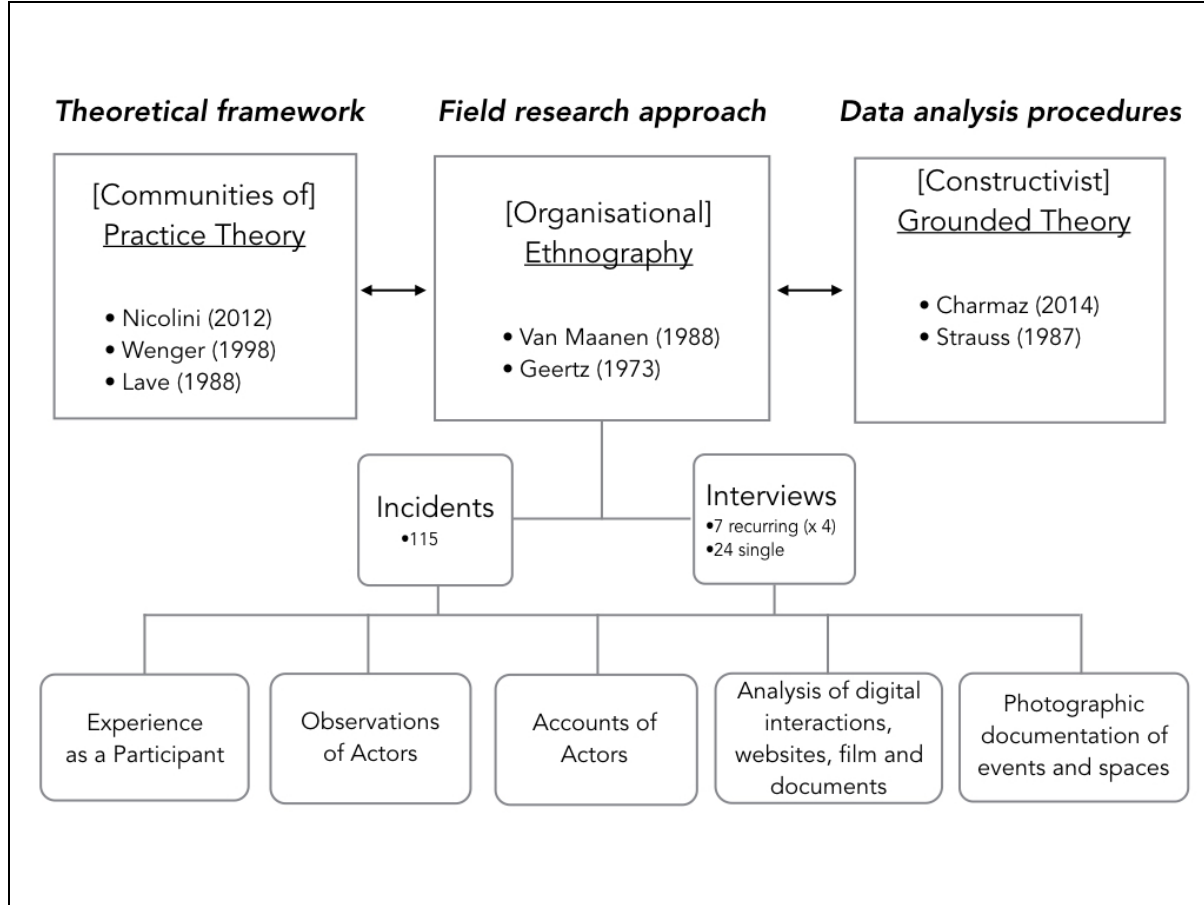


Figure 11: Research design

The aspiration of this research project was to both illuminate the social world of this particular Coworking community and provide a substantive theoretical analysis expressed in a format that lends itself to ‘transferability’. The intent of the former was to draw the reader into the lives and experiences of this particular group of Coworkers, to render their social arena legible. The goal of the latter was to make it easy for others, including those from different research traditions, to engage with the theory and test the propositions in other contexts. If this endeavour is successful, in concert with other research, we should understand something more about the nature of common experience for late-modern non-standard creative knowledge workers and the attraction Coworking holds, but also what was distinct about this time and place in Melbourne. The following section will briefly introduce my own background motivations for undertaking this study before moving to discuss the process of field research and the application CGTM of analysis in more detail.

3.2 Background and motivation for this study

As we have seen, the constructivist stance assumes that researchers do not innocently reveal the social world through the inquiry process but actively interpret it through the distinct lenses crafted from personal histories and theoretical knowledge (Strauss 1987; Gallagher 2008; Charmaz 2014). Consequently, methodological scholars suggest rendering the research context and personal perspectives of researchers as transparent as possible, so that they too can become an object of investigation and scrutiny for readers (Bogdan and Taylor 1990). Within the field of ethnography the question of ‘reflexivity’, or the explicit interrogation of a researcher’s position in relationship to the researchers, has been the subject of much debate since the ‘reflexive turn’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Accordingly, here I will offer a brief account of my background leading up to the formal commencement of the PhD. I do this for two reasons. First, because there are some details from my past that may offer insight into my motivations to pursue this study and that have potentially influenced my analysis of Coworking practices. Second, because my engagement with the phenomenon preceded the formal commencement of the PhD. Simply beginning the story in 2013 would omit some important details around access to the field and engagement with Coworking actors that shaped the ethnographic research in important ways.

Music, globalisation and social entrepreneurship

There are three components of my past that I consider relevant to share when reflecting on why Coworking captured my interests as a phenomenon. These are the experience of precarious creative labour through my work as a musician; the introduction to the social theory of globalisation in my undergraduate studies; and my professional work in the field of youth focussed social entrepreneurship. I will introduce each of these and then explain how they converged into an interest in Coworking.

Throughout my twenties I earned money by playing piano, supplemented by some hospitality work in cafes. Although at the time I thought of myself simply as a jazz musician, not a freelancer and certainly not an entrepreneur, many of my memories of this time reflect the ambivalence often noted by scholars who have analysed common experiences faced by other workers in creative industries (for example by Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). It was characterised by the odd combination of intrinsically satisfying work (after all musicians ‘play’ for a living), a high degree of autonomy, often verging on social isolation and loneliness (there is much talk in the elite music world of ‘eight hours a day’ solo practice), but also precarious contracts (gigs can be cancelled anytime), highly informal work selection processes (getting paid work happened largely through social networks) all transpiring within an informal economy of ‘relational contracts’ (back then being paid cash in hand was common, and I subsisted largely off bundles of cash hidden in my bedroom cupboard). Looking back on that world from my current vantage point, I still see an intriguing mix of cultivated elitism and structural marginalisation. It did however provide an early introduction into the complex subjectivities and paradoxical relationships between immaterial labour, cultural work and structural precariousness within contemporary configurations of cognitive-cultural capitalism (Gill and Pratt 2008; Scott 2014). At the time the experience proffered few clear organising constructs for social solidarity.

It was partly this social and economic marginalisation and partly the enduring fascination with big ideas, that led me back to tertiary education. I enrolled in an undergraduate degree in ‘international studies’. This was a young course with an interdisciplinary orientation, attempting to weave together scholarship from economics, history, international relations, media and technology studies in order to study the emerging phenomenon of globalisation³⁹. I was introduced to the thinking

³⁹ I completed this course between 2004-2006 during which the design was loosely modelled on the five ‘scapes’ constructed by Appadurai (1996):

- 1) Ethnoscapes
- 2) Mediascapes
- 3) Technoscapes
- 4) Financescapes
- 5) Ideoscapes

of a range of social theorists of late-modernity, nationalism and globalisation⁴⁰. These ideas enabled me to coordinate some of my previous interests, both formal studies and intuitive hunches, within a clearer narrative framework - that our current 'globalising' period signifies a transformative shift in social relations akin to the transition from agrarian to industrial societies; that consequently the way people work, live and play will change and new social institutions will emerge to support and stabilise these changes⁴¹.

During the undergraduate course I had become interested in the relationship between curriculum and social practices in schools and the formation of broader 'post-national' frames of social identity. I consequently found work with a non-profit organisation coordinating a school-based program called *ruMAD* (an acronym for Are You Making A Difference?). The job involved working with young people to identify problem or opportunity spaces in their local communities and then develop projects to have an impact on these areas, with the aim of fostering self-efficacious and enterprising skills beyond the conventional learning standards. This work led to broader engagement in the field of youth focussed social entrepreneurship, where I worked with a foundation that funded social enterprise projects developed by young people. This began my engagement with questions of enterprise development and forced me to reflect on the nebulous range of skills that make up entrepreneurship.

Through this process the word 'entrepreneur' itself undertook a reformation of sorts in my understanding. Growing up in the 1980s in Australia, I had implicitly inherited some negative associations with entrepreneurs, largely as scandal-ridden shady

⁴⁰ The key names that have stayed with me, many of which are cited in this thesis, include: Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Jurgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Immanuel Wallerstein, Arjun Appadurai, David Held, Benedict Anderson, Paul James, Manfred Steger, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm.

⁴¹ Although I didn't use this language at the time, in a sense the course promoted a similar perspective to David Christian's 'Big History' approach, in critically examining the evolutionary trajectories of technology, migration patterns, ethno-linguistic groups, the formation of nation-states and construction of national identity, and the supranational architecture post Breton-Woods; it seemed only natural to ask the question - so what's next?

businessmen⁴². But during this time 'being entrepreneurial' began to signify something different - prospective thinking, the ability to imagine alternative possibilities, not merely passively receiving current social practices or institutional arrangements but actively attempting to transform them. Perhaps ironically, it was my work in supporting young people to reimagine social arrangements and the inquiry into what enables some individuals to enact this in practice (entrepreneurship), that led to a more sustained critique of the organisations in which I was employed. I began to attribute proximate organisational problems as rooted in the legacy of past institutional arrangements, such as distant governance by volunteer boards, fixed salaries and job descriptions, the dependency of the third sector on centralised funding sources or reputation. I began to believe that organisations attempting to shape alternative futures were hindered by design constraints rooted in obsolete assumptions. I was also uncomfortable with the notion of 'picking winners' to fund, and was more interested in 'ecosystemic' solutions that would support the development of a more creative and responsible society.

Encountering Coworking

I had my first 'Coworking experience' in 2011 when I walked up the three flights of stairs of Donkey Wheel House and into an embryonic Hub Melbourne. I was halfway through a three year period of living in Argentina, but had returned to Melbourne for a brief visit. I was immediately struck by the bespoke, makeshift aesthetic, communal tables, abundant plant life, distinctive book collection, but most of all the unusual welcome from the host. The combination evoked a curious sense of being both at home and in an exotic environment. I looked at the founding member photo board on the wall, and recognised many friends and faces from my time spent working in the youth and social innovation sector. Their presence alongside other - then unfamiliar - faces inspired a strange sense of anticipation. As it happened I came to know many of those faces through the course of this research. The emotions were paradoxical - a nostalgia for images of a more village-like past and a peephole into an alternative

⁴² I am thinking here of figures such as [Alan Bond](#) and [Christopher Skase](#).

future of urban work and social life. It was a strikingly effective orchestration of affective experience (Massumi 2014). Upon discovering that this individual Hub was part of a growing global network of connected spaces and communities, my interest only deepened. My final year undergraduate thesis had explored various forms of global citizenship and identity and their implications for (national) education systems, but I had never found a pathway to pursue this interest in the work I was engaged with in Australia.

These three components of my past found something of a convergence in my interest in the then nascent project of Coworking. The experience with isolated and precarious creative work had left me wondering how ongoing forms of social cooperation between independent workers could mediate some of the challenges of solo self-employment. The study of globalisation and introduction to late-modern social theory had left a sensitivity towards emerging ‘trans-local’ institutions and curiosity around post-national frames of solidarity. The experience with youth and social entrepreneurship had afforded an interest in the pursuit of less environmentally and socially corrosive forms of enterprise accompanied by a wariness of bureaucratic organisational structures and governance.

The introduction to Coworking and the Hub network so impressed me that I spent the best part of the next year attempting to foster a Coworking community and open a Hub in Buenos Aires. But building a viable business around such an endeavour proved to be no easy task, not least in the notoriously unstable economic environment of Argentina. It was an early insight into the challenges of organising within the rhetoric of ‘building a better world’ through social innovation. Underneath the novel and exciting discourse of social innovation I often encountered older and more familiar games of individual ambition, calculated investment, and subtle power relations, which were often difficult to reconcile.

In 2012 I returned to live in Melbourne and became an active member of the pioneering Melbourne Coworking community. The Hub became a powerful vehicle to meet like-minded people and rapidly (re)build a sense of community that I believed

shared similar values. It became a speedy portal to new social connections. It also became a site (what I later coded as 'platforming' and 'sandboxing') where one could demonstrate skill in some domains, and my 'volunteered labour' in group process facilitation began to result in paid 'gigs'. Although my formal membership was only through a single Coworking space there was an interconnected 'Coworking community' that spread across four of the early Coworking spaces. During this time my economic life was still precarious, but my social life was rich and I was making sense of the varied experiences as preparation for the formal inquiry into the culture and institutional form of Coworking through this doctoral thesis. As part of this preparation I completed a series of recorded interviews with individuals I identified as influential nodes within the social network, many of whom 'spanned' several Coworking sites in their reach. These interviews led to invitations to begin hosting public 'panel discussions', one called '*Inside the mind of the entrepreneurs*' and another as part of a meetup called '*Collaboratory Melbourne*'. Topics ranged from 'navigating the transition to freelance work', the 'trials of being an intrapreneur in large organisations', how to 'tackle wicked problems and complex systems', and 'emerging forms of civic action and urban renewal'. During this time I regularly visited other Coworking spaces the city, although I never quite became a 'regular' in the same way I was at Hub Melbourne.

Foreshadowed problems

It was from this work-life-matrix that the research questions pursued in this inquiry first emerged. Most notably in the movement from Coworking spaces as the primary object of exploration to the network of relations that made up the pioneering Coworking community and the social practices they shared. I became fascinated with how these actors used these places, and the surrounding reasons for such importance in their lives. One of the first observations that intrigued me, and the starting point for the research questions outlined, was why it was that some people joined and quickly appeared to derive much value from their interactions, whereas others didn't - and sometimes left bewildered or frustrated. I began to speculate about the underlying reasons for these observations. Some kind of tacit social

network and digital literacy? Was it the nature of their particular work? Was it that some people understood the (often unstated) reciprocity of these community interactions and others didn't? Was it related to their age or other less visible variables within their experience? Or was it that those that left actually saw something that I didn't, a charade or subtle form of exploitation taking place that I was overlooking?

These observations eventually became organised within the conceptual framework that regarded Coworking as a community of practice, and contributed to the development of the guiding research questions, why they Cowork, how they Cowork, and especially how the Coworking experience changes over time.

In the early days of my engagement, I saw Coworking spaces as an exciting representation of structural changes in social production and the culture of work, but I had rarely felt at ease within conventional organisations, and this no doubt shaped my eager projections. What did others see, and how did their own backgrounds shape what sense they made from Coworking? As my curiosity deepened the object of inquiry moved from the spaces and enterprises themselves to the culture of particular Coworking 'adepts'. Seeming savants of the network society, often (but not always) millennials, some of whom stretch their working and social lives across several of these spaces and the cafes and bars inevitably clustered around them in urban symbiosis. What invisible skills were they practicing? How were they shaping conversations and cultivating relationships to suit their ends? What did the world, and in particular the future look like from their perspective? How did they find security amid the (apparent) precariousness of their circumstances? How might their actions and worldviews represent broader changes to social expectations shaping work?

For the Coworking community I came to know, entrepreneurial action tends to be privileged above critical and reflexive inquiry, and these questions often came across as odd, neither their exchange or use value was immediately clear, and they were often dismissed as 'philosophical', a word that is seldom complementary in these circles. Naturally, they probably cannot be answered definitively and certainly not in a

single doctoral thesis. Nevertheless I believed they formed important guides for an inquiry into the texture of the lifeworlds of these late-modern Coworkers. They were questions clearly rooted in the prior life experiences I have shared here, and they continue to fascinate me years later. They formed the foreshadowed problems that, in conjunction with my reading of the literature, shaped the ultimate research questions that guide this thesis.

3.3 Fieldwork and analysis

Entering the field

Grounded theorists are encouraged to ‘start with data’ (Charmaz 2014: 3). Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original insistence that reviews of extant literature should come after the analysis of data is near complete in order not be swayed by ‘received theory’ and to maximise originality of interpretation, has generated some controversy over the years. Whilst Glaser still maintains that GTM best integrates with existing literature *after* data analysis and theoretical development, Charmaz (2014) and many others (such as Bulmer 1979; Layder 1998; Day 1999) argue the benefit of clarifying and explicating theoretical orientations early on, and that prior literature reviews can serve this end. Moreover, more pragmatically, formal literature reviews are usually mandated steps in doctoral programs and research grants prior to receiving ethics approvals for field research. Although some may question the degree to which practitioners can *actually* enter the field with ‘an open mind but not an empty head’ (Giles et al 2013), others encourage the researcher to adopt a position of ‘theoretical agnosticism’ (Henwood and Pidgeon 2003) as to what is happening, maintaining a critical and comparative stance towards extant theory in place of a *a priori* acceptance of theoretical enclosure of the the phenomenon.

As previously outlined, I first engaged in the then niche world of Coworking in 2011 in Argentina and 2012 in Melbourne. Throughout this time, I kept journals of my

experience, engaging in frequent discussion about the purpose of the early Hub project and listening to members' experiences of arriving, maintaining their Coworking membership or leaving. During this phase, many of the more vocal Coworking members freely volunteered theoretical frames that gave meaning to their work. I would document and read many of the sources these Coworkers claimed exerted influence on their thinking and actions. I did this to deepen my understanding of their worldview, but also because I found many of the sources intrinsically interesting. These were usually popular expressions of theory, rather than scholarly literature, nevertheless the fact that many Coworkers would enthusiastically reference varieties of psychological, social and systems theories within the story of how their actions and enterprises were 'disrupting' the status quo was a striking feature of the early culture.

The sources cited by Coworkers I encountered during this time ranged from theories of self-directed work practices such as 'getting things done' (Allen 2002) or the psychology of 'flow states' (Csikszentmihalyi 1996); developmental models from adult psychology such as Spiral Dynamics (Beck and Cohen 2014) and post-formal ego development (Cook-Greuter 2000); methodological approaches to design, innovation and entrepreneurship, such as 'design thinking' (Brown 2009) and 'the lean startup' (Ries 2011), theories of group learning and emergence such as 'theory U' (Scharmer 2009), 'scenius' (a concept advanced by Brian Eno to signify collective genius), the 'art of hosting', 'appreciative inquiry' (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005); to broader theories of social systems, such as 'integral theory' (Wilber 2000); 'futures methods' (Inayatullah 1998); 'peer to peer theory' (Bauwens 2006), 'the third industrial revolution' (Rifkin 2011), 'the power of pull' (Hagel et al 2012), and the 'evolutionary technological' work of Kevin Kelly (2010). Some participants had even developed their own systems oriented frameworks⁴³.

⁴³ Some of these included for example:
'apithology' (www.apithology.com);
'pattern dynamics' (www.patterndynamics.net);
'stigmergic collaboration'
(www.collabforge.com/stigmergic-collaboration-theoretical-framework-mass-collaboration);
'bubbleosophy' (www.frothy.capital).

During the early phase of my participation I engaged with these ideas on their merits, read much of the work cited above and sincerely considered them as explanatory frames for what I was observing in Coworking. Later in my research I interpreted acts of displaying familiarity with some of these concepts as a kind of *emic* language of Coworking, and incorporated their discussion when exploring Coworking social practices such as 'fostering shared heuristics' (see [Chapter 6.2](#)) and 'declaring purpose over profit' (see [Chapter 6.3](#)). Displaying familiarity with many of these concepts in these texts, not simply referencing the ideas but physically drawing the frameworks on whiteboards in the space and using them to interpret events, was one of the practices that distinguished 'outsiders' or 'newcomers' from 'oldtimers' in the Coworking world.

Gathering data

Second, grounded theorists gather extensive data, usually (but not exclusively) qualitative in nature through observations and interviews. CGTM itself imposes few strictures on the nature of methods, phenomenological reflective writing, ethnographic participation and structured interviews are all considered sources of data commensurate with grounded theory. Naturally, the empirical data gathered is filtered through the interpretive choices of field researchers, what is noted and overlooked in field observations, interviewees respond to both the explicit questions and implicit skill of the interviewer, the subtle rapport established through the myriad of micro-actions that foster (or corrode) trust.

Between 2012 to 2014 I spent a number of days each week working from Hub Melbourne and frequently visited other pioneering Melbourne Coworking spaces, principally Inspire 9 and Electron Workshop. These years included many hours of unstructured social participation in the Coworking social world - innumerable 'coffee catch ups', 'walk and talks' and various spontaneous encounters with other Coworkers. This time also included more formal participant-observation where I took detailed notes on social practices visible in the field. A core component of Coworking

culture involved attending social events in the form of short talks, panel discussions and participatory events like ‘unconferences’⁴⁴. I estimate that I attended about one per fortnight over this two year period, these included many events which I facilitated or presented on. A critical component of the Coworking world involved internet-mediated communication, principally through the shared digital social network platform established by Hub Melbourne. Public facing social network sites, such as *twitter*, *facebook* and to a lesser degree Coworkers’ individual blog sites were also key sites in which I observed and participated in public discussions. Coworkers often shared photos and videos on these sites alongside the commentary, some of which I captured through screenshots and filed alongside my field notes. I also personally photographed some social occasions (when appropriate) and artefacts of interest in the physical space, especially communications left for other Coworkers on whiteboards, tables and through posters on the walls. I kept a reflective journal throughout this time documenting interesting interactions across the social field.

Sources of data	Time period of collection	Categorisation for analysis
Regularly Coworking, participating in and observing the community	2012-2014 ⁴⁵	115 descriptive incidences
Episodic but not weekly Coworking, more observation than participation	2014-2016	
Observation, participation and analysis of digital media interactions	2012-2017	
Photographic documentation of events and spaces	2013-2015	
24 single formally recorded interviews with Coworkers	2013-2016	

⁴⁴ Unconferences are occasions where the attendees are invited to propose presentations at the beginning of the proceedings. A good overview is provided here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference>

⁴⁵ Although the period of my formal PhD began in 2013 I have included 2012 as the start date for the participation and observation of community because many rich experiences and insights are from this period

24 recurring interviews with the same Coworkers	2013-2016	48 interview transcripts
Autoethnographic reflections through journals and memo writing	2012-2017	

Table 1: Sources of data

Prolonged periods of field research can generate an enormous and unwieldy amount of ‘raw data’. Over the years I organised these observations, photographs, video and screenshots into one hundred and fifteen ‘incidents’, or anecdotes that illustrate particular features of the Coworking world. I conducted forty-eight formal, that is to say recorded, interviews between 2013 and 2016. I began most of the formal interviews after almost two years of field observations and engagement. This was principally to spend time identifying a mix of appropriate research participants but also required by the protocols of the doctoral program, including obtaining clearance from the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Despite this prolonged time identifying and building rapport with research informants, the final research interview cohort differed from the initial selection. Some, despite initial receptiveness, later had limited availability or relocated from Melbourne. Others whom I hadn’t originally considered, became more interesting overtime. I began with some attention to nominal diversity of variables relating to gender, sexual orientation, ethnolinguistic and employment status. The research cohort contained solo-self employed business owners engaged in professional service work, part-time employees, founders of a non-profit organisations, ‘corporate refugees’ venturing into self-employment, full-time but ‘location independent’ employees of San Francisco based startups, and a former employee of a professional services firm who was ‘underemployed’ for much the research period. I included my own ‘autoethnographic reflections’ within the recurring research cohort.

I continued to follow up on the experiences of some Coworkers through interviews after I had finished participant-observation phases in Coworking sites. Many of these final interviews were conducted with participants who had renounced their formal

Coworking memberships, and these cases were particularly instructive towards understanding *how Coworking experiences change over time*. The interviews initially took a semistructured form with questions framed around a number of themes such as motivation, collaboration, sharing and influence. I found almost immediately however that allowing participants to simply talk about themselves, their interests and how their Coworking experiences evolved over time provided richer, less contrived material. Consequently most subsequent interviews followed an unstructured, ethnographic form where I asked 'descriptive questions' (Spradley 1979).

Coding data

This raw data was then 'coded' or fragmented into small analytical units. In the initial phase of interpretation, grounded theorists recommend coding interviews and field notes 'line by line' (Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2014). This careful scrutiny of data aims to establish a sensitivity towards discovering important details that may be overlooked in more casual appraisals. A distinct feature of CGTM coding is the focus on *social processes* and *interactions* rather than *thematic categories*. This is enacted through coding data with *gerunds*, or the present participle of verbs rather than static *nouns*. Thus interview lines are coded as '*avoiding disclosure*' or '*predicting rejection*' (Charmaz 2014:52). Coding changes as the inquiry progresses, from '*initial*' or '*open*' coding, and '*in vivo*' coding that directly captures the 'emic' language of participants, to more '*focused*' sociological coding in the later stages of a study⁴⁶. Fragmenting and sorting the data in this way enables a number of analytical processes, including comparison between other cases, identifying logical gaps, teasing out tacit

⁴⁶ The major GTM theorists have proposed different procedures for coding data. Glaser (1978) introduced a final stage of 'theoretical' coding in which focused codes themselves are relationally coded. Strauss (1987) suggested three stages, 'open, axial and focused'. I generally followed Charmaz's advice that 'initial' and 'focussed' are often sufficient to construct theory, although I did find applying Strauss' 'coding paradigm' that recommends considering 'conditions, interactions, strategies and tactics and consequences' helpful.

assumptions and synthesising collections of narrow codes into broader underlying categories.

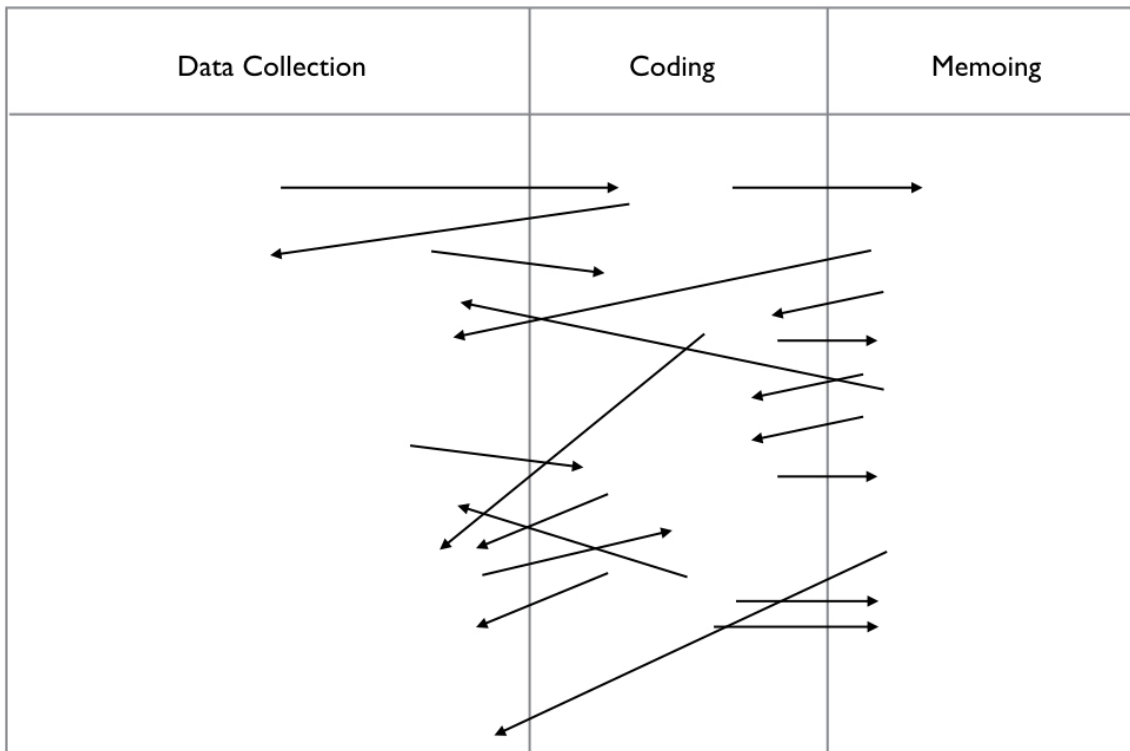


Figure 12: Grounded theory iterations of data collection and analysis⁴⁷

I began coding right after the first formal interviews in 2014, I did this manually with highlighter pens and physically marked up the printed transcripts. After several iterations in order to familiarise myself with the techniques, I then loaded interview transcripts, alongside many of the ‘incidents’ into NVIVO, a popular qualitative data analysis software program. NVIVO facilitates the coding of large amounts of qualitative data and the ability to link codes to written memos. I have listed the first hundred ‘initial’ codes in the table below. I have also included some of the ‘in vivo’ codes, in the (emic) language of Coworkers. ‘In vivo’ codes can help illustrate distinct features of group communication that establish insider and outsider boundaries. Sometimes the particular terms reflect innovative language constructions of a group that signal useful information about their shared perspectives (Strauss 1987; Charmaz 2014).

⁴⁷ This diagram is reproduced from Strauss (1987:19).

Open Codes				In Vivo Codes
Advising from the edge	Diversity and Cohesion	Meaningless work	Fresh eyes	<i>Ambiently Knowing</i>
Appreciating the aesthetics and material	Embracing hybridity and ambiguity	Metaphoring	Reputationing	<i>An enlightenment space...like the next version of the (european) enlightenment.</i>
Expressing agency	Entrepreneuring	Modelling	Promoting	<i>Better world, making change, doing it outside the box, going it alone outside organisations.</i>
Answering (Coworking as an answer to a problem)	Escaping	More than money and markets	Returning	<i>"Coworking spaces are the physical embodiment of the principles of social network technology."</i>
Anticipating	Exploring and adventuring	Multi-project persona	Sandboxing	<i>Draw a line in the giving.</i>
Archotyping	Forecasting	Multicultural	Schelling point	<i>Ecosystem Weaver</i>
Asking the network	Freedom and Security	Nerding	Self-Organising	<i>Failing...because</i>
Attracted to the novel	Generativity (or lack of)	Network Saturation	Self-preferencing	<i>finally living an archetype that I had craved for a long</i>
Autodidacting	Globalising	Networking (literacy)	Serendipity and Synchronicity	<i>For free or for a fee</i>
Awareness of narrative	Growing	Nomading	Shaping [the institution]	<i>I'm glad to be part of the experiment, knowing it will change over the years</i>
Beginning	Heroes	Nurturing ecosystems	Shared edge networks	<i>It feels like there's opportunity to collaborate here</i>
Being accountable	Hub as a consultancy to the wider world	Observing	Sharing	<i>It takes a long time to build trust and understanding with people</i>
Blending the personal and professional	Hub as a talent pool	Offering	Shared ownership	<i>it was a peak experience in that...um...I don't know I was just on my own just really on my own</i>
Boundary constructing	Identifying	Organising platforms	Spanning boundaries	<i>It's great to be a cloud kitten but you've got to have your feet on the ground. This place keeps my feet on the ground and keeps me inspired</i>
Building trust	Imagining	P2P relating	Spiritual experiences	<i>It's where you foster things rather than complete</i>
Bundling and Unbundling	Impacting	Peak experiencing	Starting up	<i>sustainable...might be wishful thinking</i>
Capturing	Incubating	Perceiving a gap between membership and management	Supernode	<i>The little operators are more effective at sourcing the needs of the consulting world. It goes along with crowdsourcing, and online campaigning (pozible, oursay etc).</i>
Celebrating	Inner work	Philosophising	System contexts	<i>The names on tables annoy me when there's no one there.</i>
Changing (opinions)	Inspiring	Platforming	Tacit knowledge	<i>The vibe</i>
Childhood role	Intergenerationing	Politicking	Territorialising	<i>The water cooler conversations are better than I could have anticipated...I'm meeting people that are working in fields that I wouldn't otherwise encounter</i>
Collaborating and Cocreating	Intimacy and Meaning	Positional ambiguity (as strength)	Tracking	<i>There's a buzz here</i>
Collective spaces	Introduction to Coworking	Practising	Unclear [about strategy]	<i>unspoken vision and values for Hub</i>
Conflicting	Keeping me grounded	Problematizing (the current paradigm)	Web 2.0 and Social Media	<i>Catalysing Awesome</i>
Connecting [Weak Ties]	Large organisations and resources	Progressive heuristics	Welcoming	
Coolification	Leading	Purposing [declaring]	Working in not from an organisation	
Coworking as a portal to a new world	Learning	Reading [the internet]	Worrying	
Coworking location and facilities	Feedback	Receiving [from the network]		
Creativity and Innovation	Scaffolding	Recently arriving		
Discovering	Leaving	Renewing		

Table 2: Examples of initial codes

Writing memos

These codes constitute the building blocks from which an emerging theory can be assembled and shaped. Analysis involves comparing cases, constructing relationships between codes and identifying the properties and conditions of later codes and categories. This marks a transition in analytical orientation from inductive to abductive inquiry, from organising and making sense of observations toward postulating explanations. The research ‘mindset’ recommended by constructivist grounded theorists during the early data gathering phase is to suspend leaping to immediate conclusions, and pursue data collection with a spirit of ‘open curiosity’. This early phase of constructing theory is about deliberately exploring ‘hunches’ or ‘intuitions’ about the relationships between codes through written ‘memos’, or reflective journal entries that elaborate these insights. Memos can fulfil two purposes, they explore deeper possible relationships affecting the phenomena than is present on the surface of the empirical material, and they help make the emerging interpretive assumptions of the researcher explicit⁴⁸. Memos outline emerging theorising from the data, ‘micro-hypotheses’ that can inform the next iteration of field research.

I frequently wrote memos from late 2013 to early 2016. These often took the form of a dialogue between observed incidents or informal conversations with Coworkers and the emerging codes and theoretical categories of the CGTM analysis. Charmaz suggests the tone of written memos should be ‘spontaneous, not mechanical...free and flowing, they may be short and stilted’ (2014:80). Memo writing is intended as an exploratory form in the ‘natural voice’ of the author, ideally liberated from the constraints of academic writing. The purpose is to help tease out conjectures and distinguish them from more ‘grounded’ claims. This practice can serve to direct

⁴⁸ More objectivist orientations might call this process searching for and bracketing researcher ‘bias’.

further field research, aiming to check emergent ideas for more support. As such memos can take on an intimate and private tone akin to a research diary, and as such are best kept unpublished. Others can make up early ideas for journal papers, or reflections on incidents that may constitute evidence for a category.

Here are three examples of short memos from 2015 as I was grappling with puzzles from the field notes and the emerging components of a Coworking theory:

<p>On forecasting the future...</p>	<p>On conflict in Coworking spaces...</p>	<p>On trying to hold the edge...</p>
<p><i>“But I genuinely think that with the technology that we’ve now got available, there’s the possibility of the Hub becoming what is a normal organisational structure in the future”</i></p> <p>In the early days of Hub and Coworking there was a class of engagement that was orientated around exploring the novel, getting out in front to learn something about it in order to position oneself to better meet the future.</p> <p>These actions rested on an acceptance of Roger’s innovation diffusion curve.</p> <p>I was heavily influenced by this narrative. Logically however its effect should fade with time, as the novelty wears off and people either find the services conducive to their lifestyle or not.</p>	<p>Ok so this is as close to the central argument of my thesis as any yet. It is the curious paradox at the heart of coworking culture:</p> <p>Coworking only ‘works’ if people ‘share’ into the ‘commons’. In other words, if we distinguish Coworking from serviced offices (of which the value proposition is access to strategic location and facilities), the value of Coworking is in the social interactions, network access and social learning.</p> <p>But in the entrepreneurial world(view) people ‘win’ by exploring scarcities rather than contributing to common abundance - time is scarce, so instead of researching/teaching myself how to do innovation, I’ll hire these consultants to help us or do it for us. At times Coworking actors may be competing for the same resources in the form of funding (for product development) or contracts (for professional services)</p> <p>So the narrative (discursive practices) need to resolve this dilemma, integrate these antinomies.</p> <p>This is a large part of the function of the Coworking enterprise strategy - crafting messages and social processes that resolve this dilemma.</p> <p>Some practices do this too - I win by ‘sharing’ information that fosters my reputation, or platform positions (‘I’ll host this conversation’). This builds cultural and social capital that can later be exchanged for financial capital.</p> <p>There is nothing inherently wrong with this if the actors are aware of what is happening and there is a virtuous cycle to the process. The problem is, at times it breaks down.</p>	<p>Is it possible to hold on to ‘the edge’? Or can you only ride it?</p> <p>The winds of novelty that one can fly a kite in, but not capture.</p> <p>R & E seem to ride the edge?</p> <p>Part of it seems to require an (unbearable?) lightness, a minimalism, a nomadism. A preparedness to pack up the (laptop) and leave for where the next opportunity is (and unpack from the cloud). Find the best coffee from twitter. Make new ‘friends’ on the spot.</p> <p>All that is solid melts into air...</p>

	Consider meeting A- at the kettle - it was the progressive heuristic (integral theory) that established mutual interest and enabled trust to form.	
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Table 3: Examples of memos

Theoretical sampling

Early rounds of interpretation help direct ‘theoretical sampling’. Constructivist grounded theory does not rely on random or representational sampling techniques but selects individuals or categories of inquiry based on their perceived relationship to the emerging theory. These may be outlier cases that represent identified ‘gaps’ in the data, or samples may be confirmatory cases used to check, fill out, or refine existing categories. In essence, ‘theoretical sampling involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry’ (Charmaz 2014:103).

During the early phase of this research I constructed a visual social network map of the pioneering Coworkers, and continued to use this as a guiding heuristic device, adjusting the nodes into different theoretical categories as they emerged from the ongoing analysis. These categories began as crude dichotomies, divided into my perception of ‘successful’ Coworkers, or those that appeared able to translate their Coworking participation into visible benefits and ‘unsuccessful’ Coworkers, or those that encountered difficulty, complained and often discontinued their membership. I evolved these maps in concert with the relevant concepts from the literature, such as the triadic relations of newcomers, journeymen and old timers from communities of practice theory (Wenger 1998); the distinctions between different subsets of non-standard workers along an ‘entrepreneurship spectrum’ (Wennekers et al 2010); and Strauss’ (1987) suggested coding paradigm distinguishing between ‘conditions’, ‘interactions’, ‘strategies and tactics’ and ‘consequences’. These early distinctions helped inform subsequent interviews and social occasions to pursue, document and incorporate into the analysis.

Refining categories

In CGTM these rounds of iteration between initial codes from the data, speculative propositions in the memos, and returning to the field to collect more data to refine (and sometimes challenge) the nascent theory, continue until the researcher reaches ‘theoretical saturation’, or the point when the properties of theoretical categories are appropriately filled. Saturation is the point in which gathering more empirical material no longer yields fresh theoretical insights, or reveals additional properties of the core categories (Charmaz 2014). By early 2016 I had integrated (or discarded) the initial codes into a set of ‘focussed codes’ that were mapped to Strauss’ suggested coding paradigm. The final rounds of interviews and observations largely confirmed the existing categories.

Conditions	Interactions	Strategies and Tactics	Consequences
Perception of discretionary time	Welcoming	Platforming	Finding meaningful personal relationships
Network saturation	Connecting	Forecasting and Positioning	Fostering reputational and symbolic capital
A Schelling point	Sharing	Globalising	Finding better work
Utility of a Sandbox	Offering (gifting)	Hacking the Hierarchy	
Social-Digital Literacy	Asking		
	Receiving		
	Declaring purpose over profit		
	Blending the personal and professional		
	Working out loud		
	Committed public optimism		
	Spanning boundaries		
	Constructing boundaries		

Table 4: Strauss' coding paradigm

Mapping analysis to research questions

Finally, between late 2015 and early 2016 I remapped these categories back to the three guiding research questions: why they Cowork, how they Cowork and how their experience change over time. This process helped establish *social learning* as a meta-category, a coordinating principle that was superordinate to the other questions. It was only at this relatively late stage that I deepened the reading of communities of practice theory and found it the most parsimonious and robust theoretical framework in which to situate the thesis. This process also helped clarify and simplify the argument of the thesis, that Coworking practices enable social learning for entrepreneurial communities through creating an immaterial commons that requires community oriented governance to endure.

Core Themes	Research Questions	Coordinating Principle	Argument
Problematising the current paradigm	Why	Social Learning	Coworking practices enable social learning for entrepreneurial communities through creating an immaterial commons that requires community orientated governance to endure.
Leaving standard employment			
Wanting more meaning than mere money and markets			
Coworking becomes a portal to a new world			
Welcoming	How		
Connecting			
Declaring purpose over profit			
Blending the personal and professional			
Sharing			
Offering (gifting)			
Asking			
Receiving			

Working out loud			
Shaping the institutional logic			
Getting a job	Changes over time		
Moving space			
100% virtual			
'It stopped making sense'			
Starting my own...community			
It works as a serviced office			
It works for me as a weekly club			

Table 5: Mapping core categories to research questions

Constructing a theory

The purpose of these various analytical methods is ultimately to provide scaffolding to aid in the construction of plausible theory that offers a ‘good fit’ for the data gathered in the study. In CGTM the processes of coding, memoing and constructing conceptual links through techniques such as ‘integrative diagramming’ continue until categories become ‘saturated’. This point of saturation occurs when ‘fresh data no longer spark new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories’ (Charmaz 2014:213).

Some grounded theorists such as Strauss (1987) and Clarke (2003) encourage the use of ‘integrative diagrams’ or ‘situational maps’⁴⁹ to represent proposed relationships between the concepts that can assist in the development and presentation of theoretical propositions. Diagrammatic propositions can render theory

⁴⁹ Clarke (2003) actually introduces three kinds of diagrammatic maps:

- situational maps
- social worlds/arenas maps
- positional maps

more amenable to verification and modification through subsequent tests in different contexts, including the use of quantitative methods.

After mapping the core conceptual categories to the research questions, I followed this advice and constructed an elaborate diagram that exhaustively mapped various links between the research questions, extant theory, Coworking practices and their possible relationships with the 'conditions, interactions strategies and tactics and consequences' advanced by Strauss (1987). This process helped direct my attention beyond 'social learning' and the features of community of practice theory as the core categories of interest and towards the 'common resources' that appeared to be generated through and around Coworking as a 'spillover effect' of the distinct social practices. This process also inspired deeper reading of how communities might collectively produce resources, and this inquiry ultimately directed my attention towards the theories of 'immaterial labour' and 'commons-based governance' that constitute the *'immaterial commons'* theory at the heart of this thesis. The substance of this theoretical progression is presented in Chapter 8.

The integrative diagram itself ended up being so large and complicated that I have elected not to reproduce it here, considering it would add little to the reader's experience. Moreover, Charmaz (2014) cautions against the use of diagrammatic simplification, arguing that 'imitating the appearance of positivist theory' does not necessarily improve the quality of the research, and in some cases can obfuscate the complexity, diversity and indeterminacy of the issues being presented. It is in this spirit that I have chosen to communicate the substance of the theory of Coworking through the ethnographic narrative that follows.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that ethnography and grounded theory are appropriate methodological choices for the purpose of this research and provide a good fit to gather appropriate data in service of answering the three guiding research questions.

I have recounted the steps I followed over the years of field research that are consistent with the tenets of constructivist grounded theory presented by Charmaz. More pointedly, this chapter has shown how the the empirical material was organised through the codes, memos and categories in response to the research questions and how these informed the logic of the central argument of this thesis. The following four chapters will present the evidence in support of this claim, before returning to the significance and implication of this argument for a theory of Coworking in the final chapter.

Chapter 4: Context

Where and who Coworks

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the context in which the empirical material that follows is examined in more detail. It aims to ‘set the scene’ within which the ethnographic drama unfolds. The first section discusses the general patterns of spatial distribution of Coworking spaces within cities and briefly reflects on the significance of the inner urban locations in which creative knowledge work is frequently concentrated. It then provides an account of the evolving location of Coworking spaces in Melbourne over the course of the PhD thesis. The second section presents brief profiles of the twelve Coworkers most frequently featured in the ethnography⁵⁰. These profiles include the approximate ages, education backgrounds, past and current forms of work and how they encountered Coworking. On the whole this chapter presents ‘where’ and ‘who’ Coworks to the set the scene before zooming into the more detailed, micro-level analyses that follow in the empirical chapters.

4.1 The spatial distribution of Coworking within cities

At first glance, the spatial location of contemporary knowledge work in general, and Coworking spaces in particular, present something of a paradox. Whilst most Coworkers could technically perform much of their work from anywhere, in practice Coworking spaces appear remarkably spatially concentrated within the inner precincts of urban environments.

The observation that particular species of economic activity are not evenly geographically distributed is not new, and economic geographers have long theorised the sources of unevenness in activity and prosperity across regions and

⁵⁰ All the names of these Coworkers have been altered.

within cities. Classic postulated causes have included the proximity to advantageous natural resources (North 1955); the accumulation of physical capital (Solow 1956); and the local accretion of knowledge and experience over time (Arrow 1962). All of these factors formed arguments for the reproduction of particular economic activity in bounded locations. This idea has found one of its most prominent and recent expressions in 'cluster theory' (Porter 1990), or the notion that similar industries 'cluster' together due to the competitive advantage conferred by tightly bound 'knowledge, relationships and motivation' (Porter 1998:2). Participation in clusters is claimed to proffer advantages in access to new and specialised information; access to employees and suppliers; complementarities of services for buyers, marketers and producers; access to institutions and public (or quasi public) goods; incentives and performance measurements, including the 'positive spillover' effects of competitive peer pressure (Porter 1998). Capdevila (2014a) draws upon this theory in his analysis of Coworking spaces in Barcelona, arguing they can be conceptualised as 'micro-clusters'.

The advent of the internet was initially portended by some to signal the 'death of distance' (Cairncross 1997), a 'flattening' of the spatial asymmetries of production (Friedman 2006), and the widespread adoption of 'telecommuting' that would usher in an age of geographically decentralised knowledge work (Wellman et al. 1996). The result however, has generally seen a paradoxical spatial concentration of digital knowledge work within particular locales, frequently inner city, 'bohemian-like', 'creative suburbs'.

Geographically, it appears Coworking spaces do cluster together, but the underlying causes warrant some investigation. Sociological research suggests that participation in *symbolic space*, socially produced, can be as important for individuals as any access to economic relations and hard infrastructure (Bourdieu 1985). Social milieus within the city are organised as much around *lifestyles*, sites to express symbolic capital and pattern social distinctions, as they are structured in relation to economic activity. As the following chapters will demonstrate, Coworking practices provide a curious fusion of social and economic relations in ways that can be difficult to

analytically distinguish, even to Coworkers themselves. The bundling together of the ‘personal and professional’ is a source of both promise and problems encountered by Coworkers⁵¹. These tensions played out in a context of profound social and economic transformation across Melbourne, particularly within the inner city, which has experienced significant gentrification in the last twenty years.

Since the 1970s there have been sustained discussions on the patterns and problems associated with ‘gentrification’ of formerly working class suburbs. Gentrification is said to result from the process of renovation in housing stock as middle-class actors move into working-class suburbs, often spurred by repurposing or rezoning properties as these localities ‘deindustrialise’ (Smith 1979). Proximity to the inner urban locales is driven by cultural consumption as ‘young professionals’ seek to live closer to centres of leisure and entertainment; and seek out environments more conducive to individual self-expression (Castells 1983). But this process itself is often fraught, and can result in a problematic cycle. The creative vibrancy that is the source of attraction for professional classes is partly sustained by the presence of cheaper residential and commercial rents that enable artists, migrants, students and other ‘counter-cultural’ or ‘bohemian’ actors to live and work there. Middle class migration to these areas and the rehabilitation of real estate usually cause rents to rise, which often provokes resentment from the displaced populations, especially those that feel responsible for creating the local allure. In San Francisco, perhaps the most emblematic site of both gentrification and the new economy, a complex mix of technology and venture capital is argued to be affecting ‘the political economy of urban development’ itself (McNeill 2016:1). This pattern can lead to explosive sites of resistance where locals metaphorically (and in San Francisco’s case literally) begin ‘*throwing rocks at the Google bus*’ (Rushkoff 2016), or aggressively resisting the perceived encroaching gentrification.

Early Coworking spaces were often located within this broader cultural atmosphere of ‘neo-bohemianism’ (Lloyd 2010). In Melbourne, as in many cities, public

⁵¹ This practice of blending the personal and professional will be elaborated in [Chapter 6.4: blending the personal and professional](#).

consumption of coffee in boutique cafes is one of the most habitual and conspicuous practices of this class of creative knowledge workers. Accordingly, the density of cafes and espresso consumption can be reasonably mapped to this species of work, an observation that has been encapsulated as the 'flat white economy' (McWilliams 2015). Usually Coworking spaces operate within a dense network of public or privileged sites including cafes, clubs and bars, which Coworkers use for both solo work and social interactions. Indeed, some Coworkers referred to this network of places as an 'ecosystem', evoking the explicit conception of the symbiosis of these spatial and service relationships. When it came to researching the social field of Coworkers, this point was methodologically significant, because if an ethnographer only considered social interactions within the boundaries of Coworking spaces themselves, s/he would miss much of the context in which important Coworking interactions transpire.

4.2 The growth of Coworking spaces in Melbourne

When I began engaging with the Coworking social world in 2012⁵² there were six enterprises in Melbourne that called themselves 'Coworking spaces' and were open to the general public. These were Hub Melbourne⁵³, Inspire9⁵⁴, Electron Workshop⁵⁵ and York Butter Factory⁵⁶, The Cluster⁵⁷ and the Hive Studios⁵⁸. They were all located either in the central business district or one of the adjacent, 'creative

⁵² As noted in the methodology chapter, my engagement with the social world of Coworking predated the formal period of the doctoral research.

⁵³ Now changed locations and called Hub Australia, www.hubaustralia.com

⁵⁴ www.inspire9.com

⁵⁵ www.electronworkshop.com.au

⁵⁶ Now called YBF Ventures, www.ybfventures.com

⁵⁷ www.thecluster.com.au

⁵⁸ Now changed locations, www.hivestudio.com.au

suburbs'. At last count in 2018 there are approximately 150 such spaces in Melbourne, with more appearing to open (and some close) every few weeks.

The following maps indicate the growth and location of Coworking spaces over the period of research for this thesis.

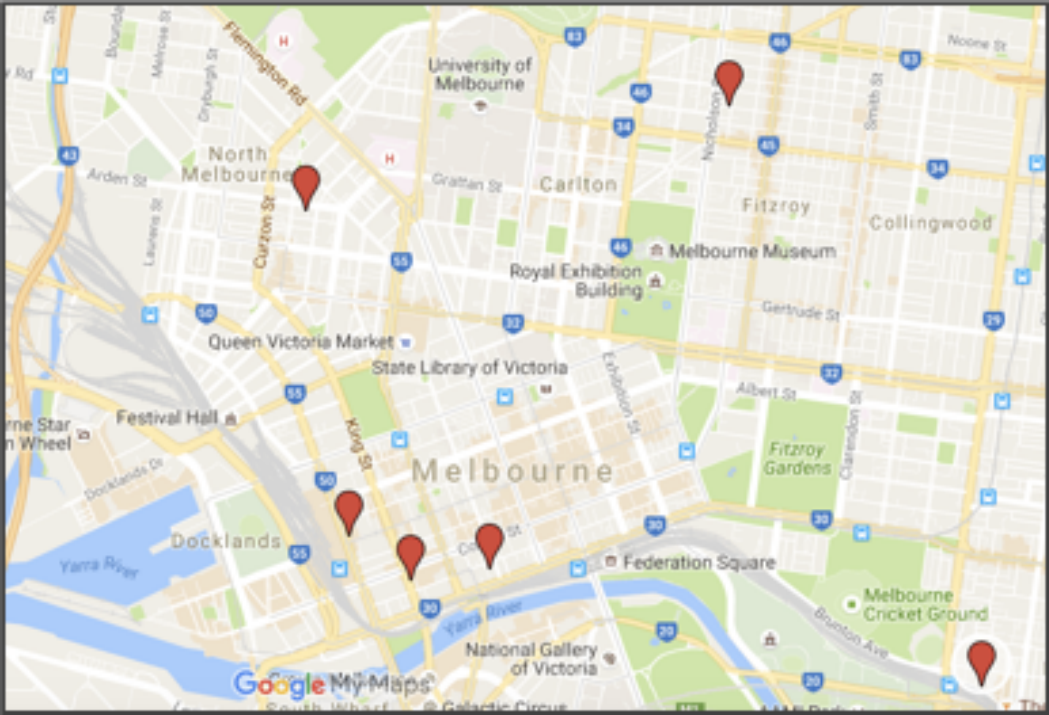


Figure 13: The 6 Melbourne Coworking spaces in 2012

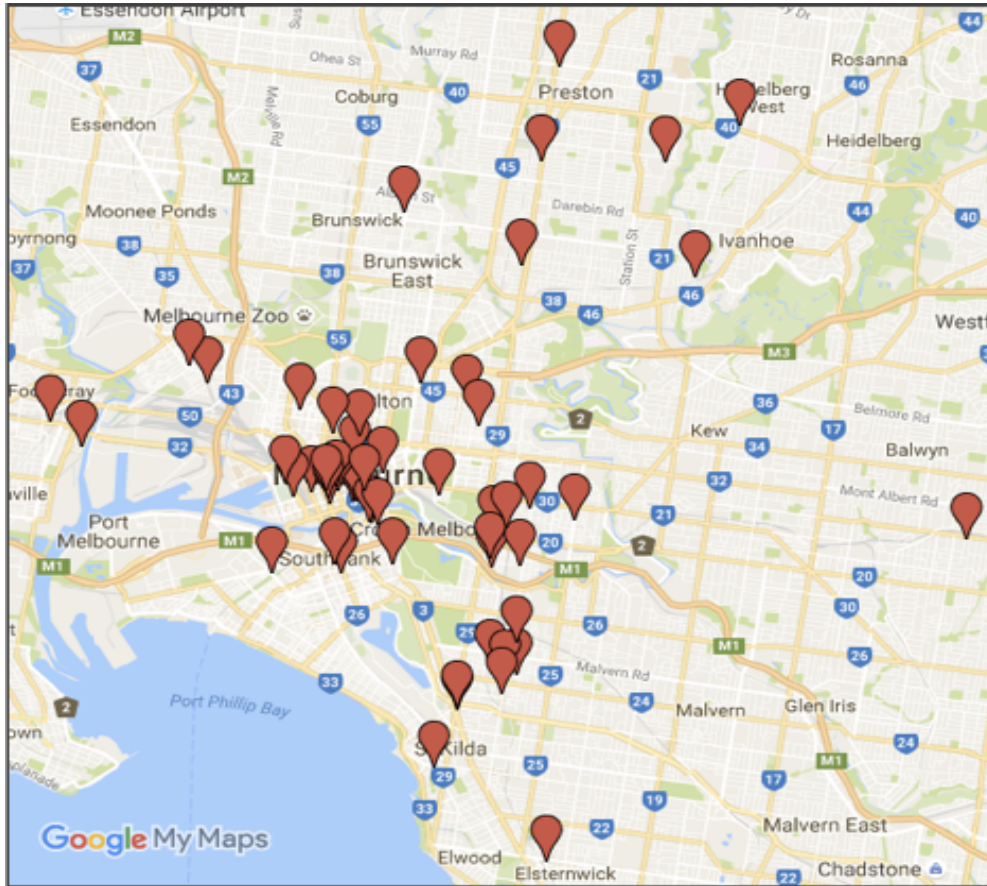


Figure 14: The 120 Melbourne Coworking Spaces in 2017

4.3 Coworking profiles

This section will offer brief introductions to a selection of the Coworkers that appear most frequently in the thesis. There are thirteen Coworkers profiled below, the six of them recurrent interview participants and six Coworkers in which single formal interviews were conducted⁵⁹. The intent of this section is to introduce ‘who Coworks’

⁵⁹ The six recurrent interview participants include: Ralph, Asha, Janelle, Robert, Zahra, Harry. The six single formal interview participants include: Wendy, Sarawut, Charis, Daniela, Greta, Warrick. Despite only conducting a single formally recorded interview with the second cohort, I ended up spending more informal time with some of them (for example Sarawut and Warrick) than some of the recurring interview participants (for example Zahra).

by describing the backgrounds, education, and work of key participants and where Coworking fits into their lives.

Ralph

Ralph is in his late twenties and a 'well known' figure in the Melbourne Coworking, technology and startup scene. He studied entrepreneurship at University and briefly worked for the digital division of a large professional services firm before becoming one of the first Australian employees of a San Francisco based 'enterprise social platform', modelled loosely on Facebook and designed for open communication between employees within a firm. Ralph was an early organiser of Melbourne Jellies, informal Coworking events arranged through Meetup.com⁶⁰ and held in cafes. These social networks intersected with the early participants of Coworking spaces in Melbourne, and Ralph was a regular visitor to several of the pioneering spaces. Ralph is both an early adopter and enthusiastic advocate of digital technology, from the internet and Web itself, to learning to build websites, blogging practices, Twitter, Airbnb, Uber, Bitcoin and the Apple smart watch. He frequently positioned himself as both an explorer of, and advocate for, these technologies. New technology and startups would be the most common themes of conversation in our interactions and he would often write about his experiences with them on his blog.

Ralph became a formal member of a Coworking space when the startup company that employed him required an office address for its Australian employees. Two years later the startup was acquired by a large and established technology firm after which Ralph left the company. He stayed a member for some time, but moved away from Coworking as the community expanded and some of his closer contacts moved on. He eventually left Melbourne to travel in Asia with his partner and work remotely as a digital nomad, although this work has mostly appeared to involve investment in blockchain based 'altcoins'.

⁶⁰ The company Meetup.com was acquired by WeWork the largest Coworking company in 2017.

Asha

Asha is in her early thirties and is originally from Brazil. She studied industrial design and came to Australia when her husband was offered a job in Melbourne. She worked for a number of years for two large corporate retail enterprises, during which she became fascinated with 'design thinking' and collective innovation processes to tackle internal problems within the business, and began hosting 'design jams' internally within her workplace and externally within the early Coworking spaces. These experiences inspired her to resign from her role and create an enterprise focussed on offering services that teach design processes and help incubate new ideas. She frequented several of the early Coworking spaces during this period as both a location to Cowork from and to a customer of their facilities as sites for her public events. She began to focus increasingly on the inclusion of more women in the local startup scene, and the attention she attracted through these activities led her to be offered an innovation role in a major professional services consulting firm. Although she initially found the idea of returning to organisational employment within a large firm challenging, her eventual decision to accept this offer steered her away from the social world of Coworking. She did however continue to work on and pivot her startup idea, subsequently winning a grant to focus her offering around innovation, enterprise and design skills for young women.

Janelle

Janelle is in her mid twenties and works as a freelance user-experience consultant. After graduating with a degree in communication studies, she was offered an internship, and later a full-time position at a major professional services firm. She attracted interest from the firm after writing a tongue-in-cheek blog post about her honours thesis on the role new technology - radio at that time - had played in the organisation of fan communities for country music in the 1930s. Janelle began attending social events in the early Coworking spaces when she was still an employee at the large firm, and developed close friendships with several of the

pioneering Coworkers. In interviews she described participating in the culture of Coworking as a useful way of gaining exposure to new ideas relating to technology, design, and enterprise. However she also felt somewhat conflicted about her place amongst Coworkers, citing her more traditional background and conservative political orientation as points of contrast with the 'left-leaning' and idealistic orientations she associated with the early Coworking community. Early in the period of fieldwork she resigned from her role with the professional services firm due to dissatisfaction with the culture and work ethic, but has struggled to find an optimal balance of stable and meaningful work since leaving organisational employment. Over the course of the thesis, she moved away from the Coworking world as her primary social contacts also moved on.

Robert

Robert is in his early thirties and worked part time for a future focussed think tank as part of a large professional services firm for much of the duration of the field research. He holds a bachelor degree in communication studies and was an early adopter of internet based communications, blogging and twitter. Robert is known and respected by many people in the Coworking world as an 'interesting thinker' who frequently shares unusual and sometimes provocative content through social media applications. Robert is unusually reflective and revealing in some of his online communication, and occasionally shares intimate questions or considerations from his inner life. As such he has something of an affectionate following from friends and supporters online. He also travelled extensively and participated in many creative social occasions, such as Burning Man, and a variety of startup and social innovation experiments in San Francisco and Berlin, throughout his 20s. He consequently has contact with an extensive international network of creative and socially focussed entrepreneurs. At the same time in our interviews Robert also frequently found it difficult to explain what he does. He observed challenges around the gap between his role as an 'explorer in residence' who 'embeds himself in multiple communities' and the translation of these activities into value recognised by his employer, which he

referred to as 'educating them around trends'. As an 'edge explorer' and pioneer of social technology in Australia, Robert was engaged in the social world of early Coworking spaces and their related events, although as he made clear, he was 'never someone that was short on options for a place to work'. He left his part-time employment role over the course of the field research and has experienced challenges in balancing his work-life interests with income generation.

Zahra

Zahra is in her mid forties, has a degree in industrial engineering and computing and was employed as a business strategy consultant for a number of organisations, including a major professional services firm, before founding her own advisory enterprise in 2006. The focus of her advisory work has largely been on 'digital trends, future trends and teaching people about social media in the workplace'. During the period of field research, she also engaged in a major project directing and coordinating a multi-day festival of short, inspiring talks similar to TED, in an alpine location outside of Melbourne.

As a solo self-employed person running an enterprise that advises on digital trends she simply 'fell into remote work', observing and participating in the rise of 'location independent work' in general and some of the Coworking practices that accompanied it. In interviews she acknowledged that although she 'still loves the memory' of watching the pioneering Coworking entrepreneurs establish their ventures in Australia she felt little need to formally participate in membership as the spaces and enterprises grew. Despite this she was a noted and respected figure amongst the early Coworking community as someone who had established a business advising on emerging work and technology trends.

Harry

Harry is in his late thirties and from France. He has a masters degree in linguistics from the Paris-Sorbonne University and enrolled in a PhD program in Australia in 2015. Harry migrated to Australia in 2008 to live with his Australian partner. After initially finding work in the Victorian public service, he left to establish a non-profit organisation in 2011 with a focus on cross cultural language learning especially between Chinese and English, enacted through crowd-sourced translations of blogs and other popular, but previously untranslated, writings. Beginning in 2012 Harry became a member of and visitor at a number of Melbourne Coworking spaces, which he used as places of work outside his small apartment in the central business district and as sites to meet other 'interesting and like-minded people', although his engagement with the community declined after 2015 when, in his view, the 'community changed'. In 2016 he accepted an employment position working remotely as an editor for the publications of a Swedish foundation dedicated to mitigating global risks. Throughout the period of fieldwork, Harry continued to iterate the offering and business model of the non-profit, seeking ways to match his interest in linguistic and intercultural issues with income generating activities.

Wendy

Wendy is in her early fifties and is solo self-employed. A self described 'corporate refugee', she spent decades working in the marketing department of several large corporates before resigning to search for 'more meaningful work'. The change was partly prompted by a divorce and subsequent 'sabbatical' overseas in which she focused on 'healing myself and recovering my spirituality, creativity and self-love'. After a year away she moved back to Australia, but to Melbourne instead of her former residence in Sydney. She found brief employment with a not-for-profit during which she first discovered Coworking. When she exited organisational employment to reestablish her marketing business, she joined the Coworking space in order to connect with 'entrepreneurs doing purposeful work'.

Over the years of field research, Wendy increasingly oriented her marketing business towards 'purposeful work'. Wendy frequently attended events in the early

years of Coworking, and hosted several networking groups concerned with integrating 'good work' with market principles, such as the 'Conscious Capitalism' network and 'B Corp' or 'For Benefit Corporation' network. She has published several books, the first on her experiences leaving the corporate world and undertaking the reflective sabbatical overseas, the second on principles of ethical marketing and the third on the importance of purpose for business. Whilst Wendy was regular participant in the early years of Coworking, she later ceased her membership due to a sense that the focus on 'purposeful business' and community had shifted. She subsequently adopted some informal Coworking practices with her own network through hosting 'Hoffices' and 'Deep Dinners' in her home⁶¹.

Sarawut

Sarawut is in his late fifties and originally from Malaysia, has computer programming skills and is solo self-employed. After twenty years working for a major technology company Sarawut set up an online payments company in 2003 that has enabled him to earn a living without 'working too hard'. Sarawut joined a large Coworking space early on after 'googling flexible office space'. Over the period of field research, in addition to maintaining his primary enterprise, Sarawut experimented with a number of other ventures, including a 'social dining app' and an 'eBay like' digital marketplace for charity auctions. A version of the social dining app idea was accepted into an accelerator program that saw him change Coworking spaces for some time.

Sarawut was an unusual Coworker in that he maintained a stable and routine level of sociality over the years of the ethnography. He was the key organiser of the 'run club', in which Coworkers met to run socially on Wednesday afternoons, frequently followed by drinks afterwards. This was one of the most consistent clubs in the Coworking space, but tended to dissipate when Sarawut was not present.

⁶¹ These informal Coworking practices are described in more detail in [Chapter 7](#).

Charis

Charis is in her early forties and has a PhD in English literature. She first heard about Coworking while working in the UK as an academic, and became interested in the concept whilst 'thinking about leaving academia' to 'write creatively'. Upon returning to Australia and leaving 'institutional employment to do my own thing', she started Coworking. In the early phase of the field research, she introduced herself as a 'recovering academic', that was pursuing more creative and meaningful work. During the period of the thesis she founded a business that designs, constructs and maintains green roofs and walls on commercial buildings in Melbourne. She was highly engaged in the social and participative dimensions of Coworking in the early period, but shifted to a more transactional relationship as her enterprise grew. Eventually she moved to a more 'professional' oriented Coworking space.

Daniela

Daniela is in her mid twenties and has a bachelor degree in international studies. She first encountered Coworking as a university student when she attended an event on 'social media campaigning' in one of the early Melbourne Coworking spaces without 'really knowing what the place was'. After graduating she found a part-time job as an administrative assistant to a 'business coach' that was based in a Coworking space. She became friends with several Coworking members including some of the staff, around shared interests in topics such as 'social justice' and 'female sci-fi authors'. Coworking offered Daniela an arena in which to explore the integration of an ethical orientation towards 'social justice' with paid work which she had previously experienced as 'separate from my work'. After her employer closed his business and left the Coworking space she found a full time 'standard' role working for a non-profit organisation. Although she left Coworking at that point, she 'misses the vibrancy' of her experiences during this time.

Greta

Greta is in her early thirties and originally from Sweden and has a bachelor degree in engineering. She met her husband while working in Australia as an engineer, but sought part-time employment due to her dissatisfaction with 'the culture' of her employer. As she was searching for more meaningful work alternatives, she was drawn to Coworking for the 'independence that comes from working for yourself' and the 'strong story in the early days about collaboration, social impact and sustainability'. Moreover, once she decided to become a member she was interested in a highly participative relationship, 'I wanted to figure out how it all works..how they build community'. Greta works on public space projects that facilitate connections between people, that break down the anonymity we often feel...[for example]...we painted a little free library recently that facilitates book exchanges in public'. In the early days Greta looked to Coworking as a similarly appealing project where 'people gathering in public like spaces, having conversations that are meaningful...create a greater sense of belonging'. Greta eventually left Coworking once she decided the focus on these community building activities diminished. She also found more aligned work interests in the field of human centred and service design.

Warrick

Warrick is in his late thirties, originally from Sweden and has a masters degree in strategic foresight. He migrated to Australia to live in Melbourne with his Australian wife. Warrick founded and managed a language school business with a friend in the French Alps for ten years before selling it. He then became interested in the discipline of futures (strategic foresight) which led him to engage with Coworking in the early days. Warrick was a very socially active member of Coworking in the early days and hosted a 'futures club'. Coworking offered an experimental playground for Warrick to observe and test out new ideas for organising community. He left Coworking and Melbourne in 2013 to move back to Sweden for some time before eventually settling in Perth with his family. There he created his own 'entrepreneurial

community' that furthered his interest in futures, innovation and new ways of organising work.

4.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce and briefly discuss the context and central actors in the ethnography. It demonstrated the growth dynamics and spatial location of Coworking spaces within Melbourne and highlighted the significance of the temporal period of this research. The social world described in the following chapters is drawn from the early period of the Coworking industry in Melbourne which has, as frequently noted throughout the thesis, significantly changed.

The maps provided illustrate how Coworking spaces clustered around the inner, creative suburbs of the city. Plausible theoretical accounts can identify social and economic reasons for this spatial concentration, alongside cultural and symbolic ones. More precise clarification of these questions are significant for research in the fields of economic geography and urban theory, but are only of background interest for the focus of this thesis. In the context of this thesis the significance mostly relates to the way Coworking cultural activities blend seamlessly into the cafes and bars of their inner urban environments. Although I will argue Coworking spaces are important sites for establishing particular kinds of social relationships, many Coworking practices are enacted around and between these spaces as much as within them.

This chapter also highlights how the period addressed in this research makes up an early part in the life-cycle of an industry. I have been engaged with the Coworking world since 2011, over half the lifespan of the industry if we accept its origin date of 2005. The numbers of spaces and quantum of investment have exploded since 2014, with increasing interest from passive investors and the traditional real estate industry. Many of the new operators that open 'Coworking' spaces are quite

disconnected from the early network of social relationships and motivations of Coworking pioneers. Consequently much of the social world described in this thesis bears a greater resemblance to the Melbourne Coworking scene between 2012 and 2015 rather than the present time of writing (2018), or subsequent times of reading.

Finally, the profiles of Coworkers indicate that despite some cultural, demographic and educational diversity, they shared some common experiences in rejecting standard modes of organisational employment in pursuit of more creative, meaningful and entrepreneurial forms of work. These pioneering Coworkers were chosen as research participants precisely because they exhibited such characteristics. The following chapter will explore these early motivations in greater detail as it investigates why they first chose to Cowork.

Chapter 5: Motivations

Why they Cowork

This chapter focuses on origin stories and motivations that moved participants to begin Coworking. I shared the story behind my own 'discovery' of Coworking in the methodology chapter. In every formal interview (and many informal conversations) I asked research participants about their 'origin story', the life circumstances that led them to Coworking in terms of both the occasion of discovery and the decision to pay for services and participate in the social world.

Theorists of entrepreneurial process speak of identifying a customer's real 'problem to be solved' (Shane 2000). Christensen et al. (2007) argue that we should look beneath surface assumptions about what a product or service is used for, to understand the real 'job to be done', the ultimate need users hire a product or service to accomplish. In this spirit it is worth noting upfront that very few of the research participants mentioned the utilitarian need for office space as their most salient problem.

Rather, most began with an account of their dissatisfaction with the work they were doing before discovering Coworking, often accompanied by a period of searching for alternatives to the conventional and popular forms of work and ways of organising. A search for something 'different' was as close to a universal point of departure as any I discovered and one of the earliest unifying frames of *shared organisational identity* (2013 Gioia et al.). During informal conversations, I often heard variations on this theme beyond what I was able to record in the formal interview transcripts. In this chapter I have focussed on four interrelated aspects of the motivations of early Coworkers.

First, the 'Coworking journey' frequently commenced with some problematisation of the conventional work paradigm, a frustration with 'office politics' or perceived petty

restrictions on autonomy of work processes; an exasperation with the bureaucratic form or the ability of government or non-profits to appropriately innovate and solve pressing problems; or wider ethical, social and environmental concerns with late-industrial capitalism. I argue that for many Coworkers, this went beyond mere dissatisfaction with an individual employer, but in their minds pointed to a wider legitimisation crisis with the extant 'standard work' paradigm. Large organisations were commonly identified as a chief culprit, although the spectrum of explicitly social, political and environmental concerns were certainly more acute at Hub Melbourne than some of the other Coworking spaces I frequented.

Second, there were largely two varieties of people that I encountered exploring Coworking as an option in the 'open house tours'. People that had recently left their standard employment arrangements and people considering leaving⁶². Accordingly, reflecting on a recent decision to resign or deliberating on whether to exit organisational employment often became a rich source of material for discussion and sense-making for newcomers.

Third, the decision to forgo standard employment was frequently accompanied by a search for greater meaning through work, work became a form of self-actualisation or identity project rather than a mere exchange of effort for earnings. There were a variety of signifiers for this in the interests and language used by Coworkers - 'social enterprises', 'for benefit corporations (B corps)', 'impact investment, 'disruptive work'; later many of these strands became subsumed under the term 'purpose driven' work.

Finally, when these interests were perceived to align through a Coworking experience, Coworking became a kind of portal into a new world of non-standard work. A place to meet like-minded or complementary others from whom to learn and

⁶² There was also a third, rarer species - people that had been self-employed for some time. This point, that the social learning dimension of Coworking was often most enthusiastically embraced by nascent entrepreneurs or newer freelancers will be further developed in the following chapters.

potentially do business. The following sections will further unpack the theoretical significance of these claims and offer empirical evidence to support them.

5.1 Problematising standard work

Jules: *“What’s catching your eye about the future at the moment - what are you thinking about on the future horizon?”*

Asha: *The future? Um...I like to think that the systems are breaking everywhere. So in my mind what is a system right? It’s a structure in place to provide a certain outcome. So in my mind that’s like big companies that have a system to continue to exist. But the system usually starts with a tool to put some structure. Right? We need a ‘cash flow’, we need people to do ‘this’, we need a product that does ‘that’ for customers. But...I don’t know if it’s human nature, I don’t know what’s the deal but the system ends up becoming this twisted monster at some stage because it’s become all about bonuses and bully managers and making the most margin and then...so I don’t know, I think somewhere back every business was this one passionate person trying to help someone. And all of a sudden they become this huge machine that they need to sort of get their own fuel, their own energy you know. So the purpose, even the people just doesn’t matter anymore. The system just needs to be, just needs to survive. So it finds ways to survive. You know it’s almost like, it’s not the people anymore, it’s not the service, it’s not the customers it’s just this...‘urgh!’. And I see that a lot happening in education, in companies and I think people have had enough. Maybe before our generation there was this idea where life should be boring and should be about work, a house and a job. That’s maybe what my parents had and my parents would think like that. But our generation*

is like 'that's my life', I have eighty years-ish in this world, which I might die any moment, which goes - you know - to dust; or I might have cancer; or I might get hit by a bus. We value a bit more the time that we are here. And we understand that we are going to die. And why would I spend 50 years of my life giving to a system that treats me like an ant, you know? That doesn't value that I'm a person. That I want things. That I love. That I care. So I think that those things are falling apart now because this generation doesn't buy the whole system - security, the whole system, ways to attract people to be part of it."

On almost any weekday during the early years of Hub one could linger by the kettle in the kitchen and overhear earnest accounts of how Coworkers came to be there. Often these exchanges took on an intense, intimate air. Like collaborative confessionals between pairs perched on the edge of chairs, leaning over the small tables, underneath the map of proliferating hubs across the globe hanging on the wall. Snippets of anecdotes would float above the standard kitchen soundtrack of water boiling, microwaves humming and dishwashers throbbing. Variations on a set of common themes:

'After that I just knew I had to get out...'

'It was at that point I stopped believing in it...'

'I witnessed some of the most appalling behaviour...'

'I figured there just had to be a better way...'

'Although I took a significant pay cut, I'm far happier now...'

'I realised we couldn't change the current system with the same mode of thinking...'

The details following the ellipsis varied, but after a while I was struck by how similar the opening phrases were. An exasperation with work as usual, with work as typically imagined. This was, to be sure, not a statistically representative sample of disgruntled workers across the labour force - I never encountered former truck drivers or steel workers; neither do I recall ex-doctors or bankers (although I did meet a few lawyers).

Nonetheless, the departure point most Coworkers shared was the identification of some problem with the existing 'standard paradigm' of work. These ranged from a frustration at the lack of control over work processes to broader ethical, social and environmental concerns with industrial capitalism. Often a mixture of the two appeared in these conversational performances as Coworkers 'talked their experience into existence' (Weick et al 2000). The criticism of organisational experience ranged both broader and deeper than mere individual dissatisfaction with specific jobs, but, as I will argue here, touched on a 'crisis of legitimacy' in the model of standard employment itself.

Legitimation crisis

A legitimation crisis is a term Habermas coined (Habermas 1975) to indicate a rupture in the confidence of an institution or social order to deliver on its putative goals. These conflicts are experienced most accurately in late capitalist societies when the economic, political and socio-cultural subsystems fall out of their mutually stabilising, interdependent alignment. Habermas constructed his argument for crisis upon Weber's concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy pertains to both the justification for and acceptance of asymmetric power relations. Legitimacy is the means of rendering power palatable, it enables people to accept the foundations of authority, consent to be governed. Weber identified three historical modes of legitimacy, acceptance of authority based on 'traditional', 'charismatic' or 'rational-legal' grounds (Weber [1915] 2009).

The concept of legitimacy has featured significantly in organisational theory, especially within institutional theory (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Aldrich and Fiol 1994). An organisational employment contract is essentially a voluntary submission to asymmetric power relations. To accept employment is to consent to 'report to' someone, to being 'managed'. Why do people do this? An immediate answer presents itself as salary exchange - people work for money. Yet work relations motivated by purely financial transactional exchanges are often not optimal for creative knowledge work (Dolan et al. 2003; Deci and Ryan 2005). Discovery oriented work is difficult to accomplish in the absence of some intrinsic curiosity about the topic at hand (Tampoe 1993; Giancola 2010; Pink 2011)⁶³.

Suchman (1995) summarises the application of legitimacy to organisational relations across three dimensions, noting that it has been conceived in both strategic and institutional terms. Strategic in the sense that some organisations undertake activities that aim to improve public perception of legitimacy and employ it as a reputational resource towards strategic organisational goals. Institutional in the sense that legitimacy is often structured by the broader institutional and cultural environment that surrounds and interpenetrates organisations, and thus is shaped by forces beyond their control.

Suchman makes further distinctions between 'pragmatic', 'moral' and 'cognitive' legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy is based on expectations of exchange, that an audience's perception of legitimacy will depend on the degree to which an organisation's goals are recognised to either directly benefit them or at least align with the audience's broader interests. Moral legitimacy pertains to a broader normative evaluation of the goals and actions of an entity. It is less self-focussed and more socio-centric. Do the actions of an organisation promote broader societal welfare? These concerns can become focused on the outputs and consequences of

⁶³ The research underpinning this point largely hinges upon notions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and will be further elaborated in [Chapter 6.3 Declaring purpose over profit](#).

organisations (the goods and services produced), the techniques and procedures, the categories and structures or the leaders and representatives (Suchman 1995). Cognitive legitimacy refers to the ability of organisations to render their actions comprehensible. This is particularly pertinent to novel situations where organisations are attempting to do new things. Organisational leaders must undertake strategies to explain this novelty, either to prospective customers or internal employees, often by adopting metaphors that compare the novel phenomenon to something already known and understood (Aldrich and Fiol 1994). These were precisely the activities that many early Coworking space founders undertook to foster comprehension of Coworking as a concept when the industry was in its infancy. Much energy was consumed in public talks and in crafting analogies to bridge understanding for those unfamiliar with the concept - *'it's like a gym membership for work'*, it's a *'hybrid of a cafe, office and accelerator'* and so forth.

Coworkers commonly construed routine, standard employment inside large organisations as banal, stultifying and ultimately meaningless. This view of bureaucratic life as coercive, stifling, dissatisfying and demotivating is an established theme in both some genres of organisational research (e.g. Heckscher 1994, Adler and Borys 1996) and much popular culture⁶⁴. Often these representations, however faithful to Weber's concerns, paint such indignities as an inescapable feature of modern life. The conversations undertaken during my fieldwork however were different. The hope of escape was present, of finding an alternative relationship with work. This contrast between the old and new worlds of work was especially prominent in the early 'honeymoon' phase of an individual's experience with Coworking:

⁶⁴ Visible for example in popular works such as the 'Dilbert' cartoons and 'The Office' television series.



Figure 15: Problematising standard work

Others made distinctions between an essential character of large organisations and the managerial systems that animated them. Here Ralph reflects more pragmatically on how he evaluates potential employers:

Ralph: *“Then I looked at some other companies and talked to them. I looked into finance stuff, like bitcoin and banking stuff and some of that’s interesting but I realised that they were sort of ‘pre-yammer’ companies - they work on email and more of a hierarchical system still. Not because they don’t have the technology because they’re tech startups, but because...that’s just what they do. And I realised that...I can’t really go work for a company that doesn’t have a social network and openness as a foundation.”*

Some younger Coworkers didn’t have stories of creeping disengagement that accumulated over years, but rather told of an impatience at not being able to undertake work they believed important immediately. Here Asha shares her initial attempts to organise more creative and collaborative responses to problem solving in her time as an employee:

Asha: *“When I started working, my brief was ‘we have a big problem’, we need you to just fix it; and I thought it was really interesting because they didn’t tell me how to do it and by trying trying to fix this problem I realised that communication was the only issue they had, it was not anything else. So that was how I started to connect to design thinking and innovation. But that was still, it wasn’t so clear you know it was just a kind of meta level you know, I was like ‘oh that sounds cool’, I don’t know what this is, it was fun. Then I started working for Kmart and it was a big disappointment because I didn’t connect to the team, I hated the job, they didn’t give me any opportunities, I felt like I was the underdog just doing crap that no one wants to do.”*

Similar sentiments were expressed by a number of young Coworkers that had voluntarily left ostensibly ‘good career jobs’. This cohort often appeared hard working, well presented and articulate, in many ways embodying archetypal images of ‘young talent’ that would be sought by corporate human resource departments. But they displayed little sense of commitment or loyalty to their former employers. One former analyst in a strategy consulting firm summed up her experience in the organisation, and reasons for leaving, as *‘feeling like a foot soldier in someone else’s private army’*.

Sometimes the standard employment model was framed as an inversion between what is important between work and life. Here Zahra speaks about her ability to prioritise her life commitments in ways that she found difficult within standard employment structures:

Zahra: *“I think with all of the work-life balance commentary that’s been so prevalent in the last decade, that there’s been such a focus on work being the primary lens through which we see life. And having had corporate roles and feeling like there was something missing, I*

think for me it's now I've got the lens around life and work where it fits into that. So life for me is that...suddenly someone in your family or your friends is going through a divorce or something and you go help pack boxes at their house. Now if I was working a corporate job nine until five, well these days often at times eight to seven; I wouldn't be able to suddenly do that - or at least I might have to go through a few levels of approval to be able to do that."

Importantly, her current solo-self employed status did not mean less work on average (often the contrary was true), but the flexibility to structure work time in idiosyncratic ways:

Zahra: *"So life for me is that I've just run really fast for a year, so I run two jobs which has meant lots and lots of hours and lots of different emails and meetings and my calendar a month ago was often times twelve meetings in a day, day after day after day after day and then working around that, and running workshops which as you well know takes a lot of energy and focus and intention and so...I guess life for me is about that fact that...I can take May off to a degree, like I'm still checking emails but I'm slow to respond and I'm having days where I've got nothing in my diary where I can go, I think I just feel like wandering or I think I feel like going down to the coast with a friend or, so if I compare to 10 years ago working in corporate jobs for me; now it feels like life is really beautifully balanced around personal growth, around new connections developing relationships with lots of people that I care for and love."*

The culture of large organisations in particular was a common target of antipathy. Here Harry reflects on his experiences working in universities and state government:

Harry: *"The organisations that I've been in, there have been ridiculous and disgusting competition - funding, attention etc - where*

the group that does A doesn't want to collaborate with the group that does B because it's not clear whether it would come from budget A or budget B to do this project and so the manager of A wants to go ahead of the manager of B and they just fight against each other. I actually profoundly dislike competition. I think there's been a lot of talk about how it encourages people but often, there's nowhere near enough writing about how destructive competition can be."

The attitude that Coworking should represent a discontinuous break in the calibre of organising was often baked into the Coworking space founder's aspirations for their enterprise. One founder, when reflecting on his prior experiences studying a Masters of Business Administration, confided:

Graham: *"It reaffirmed for me that the old models don't work. I honestly think that the core stuff taught in an MBA is part of the problem. You know how they say if you want to see into the future study the past. If you want to see into the future of business, study an MBA so you can see the past."*

All of these reflections were offered in the context of comparing previous experiences of work and organisational life with their current Coworking experience. However in the most optimistic accounts, Coworking was explicitly held up as an example of building an alternative system, even more morally legitimate culture, of work relations:

"[Coworking is] essentially a new way of doing things, business let's call it, that creates wealth in the community beyond economic metrics, where people and the planet are included and evaluated as a normal part of operation...and where things like vacuous consumption (of products and entertainment) is treated with disdain as the socially redundant behaviour it truly is."

Another expressed these moral ambitions in grander terms:

“[Coworking is] A new paradigm! One no longer dominated by the redundant concepts of economic rationalism and faceless corporate culture where the voracious appetite of corporations has plundered the earth and made it and us, the people, sick and distracted from what's important. Things like culture and community, people and the beauty of all, the wonderment of nature and the truly amazing biodiversity of our finite planet we're destroying without conscience.”

The above examples illustrate all three forms of legitimation work, cognitive, pragmatic and moral. However it was a mixture of moral and pragmatic legitimacy that was most commonly problematised in the early phase of Coworking culture I encountered. Concerns over the moral legitimacy of influential actors in late capitalist society was, there is little doubt, unusually high during the phase of this research in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Research has illustrated generally declining levels of public trust in major institutions over past decades, that became noticeably acute just after the post-crisis economic woes (Foth 2009). The Edelman trust barometer has found a consistent shift in trust away from public leaders and institutional authorities towards, ‘peers’ or ‘people like me’ over the past decade (Edelman 2016). As the following sections will demonstrate, Coworking became a focal site for these peers to find each other, human mirrors to reflect each others experiences and concerns and come face to face with other ‘people like me’.

5.2 Leaving standard employment

It is early 2015 and I'm sitting alone at a large table in the large central ballroom at Hub working on my laptop. A few attendees to the 'open house' sit down at the same table. Open house is a weekly tour of the space for prospective Coworkers. It is an opportunity to offer newcomers a tour of the space, and effectively aggregates inquiries into one concentrated sales activity.

A man is left over with a current female Coworking member who has been speaking with them, potentially 'helping' with the tour.

Benson: *So you don't actually work for Hub?*

Sarah: *No, I don't.*

Benson: *So why do you do all this stuff?*

Sarah: *I just love it. I'm passionate about it. I love running events and organise things for the 'Get Stuff Done club'. We're a really nice community.*

Benson: *So is it a paid thing?*

Sarah: *No, but I'm a natural people person and I just really like the culture.*

Benson: *And you can make a living from this?*

Sarah: *Well I do copywriting, that's primarily how I support myself.*

Benson: *Well I have a corporate career and a young family, and I'm thinking about leaving but I have a lot to think about...*

Sarah: *We could almost write a book about Hubbers who have left corporate to 'do their own thing'. I'm also trying to start something new, but I've got so involved here it's going kind of slow.'*

Benson: *I think it makes sense, I'm happy to make that kind of investment for a few months. If it works, it works. If it doesn't it doesn't.*

Sarah: *Come to our happy hour tomorrow!*

At this point the 'community catalyst' stops by the table. The community catalyst is a staff member tasked with responsibilities for facilitating interactions between Coworkers, including overseeing new sales through the open house tours.

Jarod: *How'd it go?*

Benson: *I'm sold. You should pay her commission!*

Jarod: *Here's a sign up form.'* (laughter)

Benson: *Do people actually talk about work in social times?*

The community catalyst sees me at the end of the table and decides to bring me into the conversation:

Jarod: *What do you think Jules?*

Jules: *Yeah I think they do...in my experience people are less trying to escape work in their social times, more trying to find relevant connections...what are you looking for in a place like this?*

Benson: *I just want to do something for myself, I always feel I'm working for someone else. I'm in a really good company, but it's not really an entrepreneurial startup environment...*

Jules: *But why are you thinking about leaving a good job?*

Benson: *To me the ultimate motivation is to do something for myself...*

In addition to the aforementioned institutional critiques of large organisations, accounts such as these of wanting to '*do my own thing*' were remarkably common responses when asking prospective Coworkers why they wanted to leave standard employment. There are estimates that somewhere between 50% to 70% of the workforce are not 'engaged' (Wollard 2011). The construct of 'engagement at work' relates to the expression of a 'preferred self' across 'task behaviours that promote connections to work and others, personal preferences (physical, cognitive and emotional), and active, full role performances' (Kahn 1990:10).

Exit, Loyalty, Voice or Silence

In his celebrated 1970 work, Albert Hirschman theorised that in the face of deteriorating organisational experience, employees have three choices, 'exit, voice or loyalty'. Choosing exit is to 'vote with one's feet' and, in the case of organisational employment, resign. Choosing voice is to speak up, complain, or otherwise attempt to change the circumstances. In introducing this framework Hirschman brought together both economic and political thinking, the expression of a consumer-like choice versus the attempt to influence the structures and practices of an organisation

⁶⁵. *Loyalty* was considered a psychological variable that could shape or mitigate the immediate expression of either choice, at least for a time. The notion of loyalty itself was considered most problematic, critiqued (for example by Barry 1974), and later found to be as dependent on the perception of alternative employment options as intrinsic support for an organisation (Withey and Cooper 1989). In fact, the frequent difficulty in establishing a bright line between behaviour that indicates proactive 'loyalty' and merely passive 'acceptance' led to the subsequent addition of 'silence' as an additional response (Kolarska and Aldrich 1980; Donaghey et al 2011). Finally, 'neglect' was also later added as an employee response, where workers maintain their formal employment relationship but become withdrawn and disengaged from their responsibilities (1983 Farrell).

The Coworkers I encountered had either already chosen or were in the process of choosing to exit organisational employment altogether. To some, voluntary decisions to choose self-employment over employment may appear puzzling at first blush, particularly as the self-employed have been shown to generally earn less and work longer hours over their lifetimes (Hamilton 2000; Astebro et al 2011). Explaining this 'entrepreneurial wage penalty' puzzle has been the object of considerable attention in the field of entrepreneurial studies (Sorensa and Sharkey 2014). Often these explanations are summarised as the 'nonpecuniary benefits of self-employment' (Hamilton 2000). Self-employment has been conceptualised as a vehicle to express achievement (McClelland 1961), greater autonomy (Hamilton 2000) or a broader utilisation of skills than a standard job (Benz 2006). In common parlance, these distinctions become fused together in phrases like '*being your own boss*' or '*doing your own thing*'.

It can be difficult to tease apart rational calculation from emotive optimism when assessing an individual's decision to pursue entrepreneurial activity. Some research emphasises worker's deliberation on cost benefit analysis of options, such as the declining security and benefits of standard employment (Jacoby 1999), or the

⁶⁵ We will return to these notions in [Chapter 6.6 Shaping the institutional logic](#).

structures of remuneration within a firm (Sorensa and Sharkey 2014) as factors motivating exit. Others emphasise the declining startup and transaction costs of micro-enterprises (Fonseca et al. 2001), especially the recent ‘cambrian explosion’ of low cost digital enterprise tools (Siegele 2014).

Research suggests that for ‘nascent entrepreneurs’ subjective perceptions shape decisions to pursue entrepreneurship over objective analysis of the probability of success (Arenius and Minniti 2005). A salient factor here may be that entrepreneurship as a field, like arts and sports, is highly susceptible to the economics of ‘superstars’, where the majority of benefits are captured by a small number of highly visible, disproportionately successful ‘stars’ (Rosen 1981). Thus decisions about work are equally likely to be affected by a burgeoning discourse of online articles variously celebrating, encouraging (and occasionally warning) people about the dream of ‘quitting your day job and becoming an entrepreneur’⁶⁶. Such articles and images valorise the apparent freedom of self-employment, often fused with ‘digital nomadism’, or combining work and travel in exotic locations.

Of course one should be attentive to the notion of constrained choice here, sometimes discussed in the literature as the distinction between ‘necessity entrepreneurs’, often lower wage earners that can’t find full-time employment, and ‘opportunity entrepreneurs’, often higher wage earners, that have left full-time employment to pursue a venture (GEM 2004). It is possible that many such celebratory accounts of self-actualisation through self-employment, especially those

⁶⁶ Such stories on blogging sites like medium.com proliferate daily, to the extent that they had become a subject reflexive irony. Here are just a few examples of titles that illustrate this trajectory:

- ‘8 reasons to choose a startup over a corporate job’
- ‘Corporate grinder to conscious digital nomad’
- ‘Dear mum, I quit my corporate job to go work in a startup!’
- ‘How I quit my job, sold everything, and became a millionaire while travelling the world’
- ‘How I quit my job at age of 5, rode unicorns off into the sunset while pocketing 25k a day’

promoted through social media, are attempts at ‘making the best of circumstances’, and a form of impression management, potentially even self deception, in constructing stories of life success⁶⁷ (Goffman 1959; 1967).

Nonetheless, almost no Coworkers I engaged with in this research appeared to desire a return to traditional employment relationships, despite many experiencing frequent ‘bulimic’ work flows and financial instability. In terms of organisational relationships, the Coworkers I encountered generally came in three categories. First, the majority had already exited standard employment and were working as solo self-employed or nascent entrepreneurs attempting to build larger businesses, and a very small number had already become employers of others. Second, I would occasionally meet part-time or prospective Coworkers who were still employees but considering leaving, weighing up the risks of resigning, including how much to establish their next venture before leaving, versus the value of stepping into the unknown. The anecdote shared at the beginning of this section represents such an encounter. A subset of these were engaging in forms of ‘hybrid entrepreneurship’, working part-time as an employee and part time on building their own venture (Raffie and Feng 2014). Third, there were a small number that were technically employees, that is they were paid a regular salary, but were afforded the freedoms of ‘non-standard’ workers, at least following Kalleberg’s (2000) definition. These were principally employees of technology startups that didn’t have offices in Melbourne and used ‘remote management’ techniques. Their Melbourne-based employees generally had as much control over the time, place and process of work activities as any self-employed Coworker. They were a small minority that appeared to have the best of both worlds - the freedom of autonomous work practices coupled with the security of a regular salary.

The discourse within and symbolic representations of many Coworking spaces themselves actively encouraged exit from organisational employment. When a decision was finally taken to leave, it was often presented as a cause for celebration

⁶⁷ This point will be examined in more detail in [Chapter 6.3 Declaring purpose over profit](#).

by the Coworking community, despite, and sometimes because of, the absence of a concrete plan on what someone would do next for work. Consider the following poster, introduction of a new Coworker and invitation to attend a ‘corporate to freedom’ seminar:



Hey Hubbers, please meet  is a commercial lawyer from Brisbane who just quit his job wanting to do something more entrepreneurial. He is using the Hub as a base while he takes some time to explore and experiment and try some new things.



UNLIKE REPLY SHARE ...

 Welcome to Hub sometime. Cheers Hub's a great place, you'll love it. Looking forward to meeting you

 Corporate to Freedom 1 day startup bootcamp this Saturday Hub Members get a 25% Discount.

Are you a corporate employee dreaming of starting your own business? Perhaps you know someone ready to quit the corporate world?

Corporate to Freedom is run by a group of passionate entrepreneurs who have all started successful businesses worth over \$1m. They offer programs that de-risk the process of starting out, by helping people build a business BEFORE quitting their day jobs. Their speakers include  (PayPal seed investor),  (Fortune Institute),  (PushStart),  (SHE Business),  (League of Extraordinary Women), to name a few.

On Saturday 27 July, Corporate to Freedom will hold their second 1-day Startup Bootcamp in Sydney. If you know someone interested in starting their own business or are interested in attending yourself, we've partnered with Corporate to Freedom to obtain a 25% discount on tickets for the event.

You can use the code THEHUB to get the discount on any ticket type that takes your fancy. Click [here](#) for more info and to buy tickets.

Their website and facebook pages have a whole bunch of videos, articles and other useful goodies which are well worth checking out too.

<http://corporatetofreedom.com>

Figure 16: Quitting the corporate world

‘Quitting the corporate world’ came to signify the beginning of an explorative journey that marked something of a boundary between insiders and outsiders in the

Coworking world. This desire to escape standard employment was assessed to be widespread enough to warrant paid programs to support people in exiting corporate life. During interviews, many participants reflected on the period when they were thinking about leaving employment. Here is an example from Charis, who now runs a small rooftop garden enterprise, recounts her explorations during this period:

Charis: *'During that time I was thinking about leaving academia because I wanted to write creatively. I couldn't see how to make that work in the UK for visa reasons. So I never actually went to a Hub but it was one of my greatest regrets when I left that, it had just opened and it was my sort of place and if I had been able to stay in the UK to do what I wanted to do - leave institutional employment and do my own thing.'*

In the retrospective accounts of Coworkers this 'deciding to exit' phase tended to involve uncertain, sometimes stressful deliberation before a trigger event influenced a final decision. Henry, who now runs a government community digital engagement platform, shares his pathway into Coworking:

Henry: *'For a while I had lost a sense of belief in the corporate consulting game. But it was only when I enrolled in the leadership for sustainability program that I got the push to finally leave and launch my own venture. It was through that program that I got introduced to Coworking...'*

Coworking sometimes provided a context for this exploration, a physical and social space to consider steps beyond current employment. A space to observe others with more established enterprises, ask questions and find support for nascent ideas. Rather than resigning outright, some workers reduced their hours to part time, persisting for a while in both the standard and non-standard worlds of work. Here Warrick reflects on working part-time for a non-profit while Coworking during his days off:

Warrick: *“So I started at Hub in maybe 2011 in the autumn I think when I still worked for the [major Australian non profit organisation] and it was quite small. There weren’t many people but I got to know like Ralph, Garry and Rick. There were like 10 or 15 people there. But it was good - going to the drinks on Fridays...there were only three or four people so you got to know those people. I worked for the [major Australian non profit organisation] at the time, and I also studied futures at Swinburne...I just loved the vibe, they were really interesting people not doing at all what I was doing because there was no innovation or creativity or collaboration or anything interesting at [major Australian non profit organisation].”*

J: *“What did you see as so different about Hub at the time from the other forms of work and organising you’d been involved with?”*

Warrick: *“It was totally different because it was totally the opposite. [At [major Australian non profit organisation]] We were sitting in cubicles and working at computers. [major Australian non profit organisation] has an interesting organisational culture because it’s so noble and the values are so high that no one can really live up to them...so there’s almost like a pressure on the staff to be really quiet and hard working, it was this serious environment. So that’s one thing, like Hub was more fun. But it was also more open, like you could talk to people in [major Australian nonprofit organisation]...but in Hub you could sort of work together. Garry had his ‘tactical Tuesdays’, there were the drinks and, shared lunches. We had a shared lunch at [major Australian nonprofit organisation] as well but it wasn’t the same. And then the third was the community of like minded people.”*

In this interview Warrick goes on to describe an initial entrepreneurial idea to establish links between standard organisations and the world of social innovation and entrepreneurship he discovered at the Hub, but his faith in the project declined in tandem with his assessment of the legitimacy of standard organisations and their capacity to renew their practices:

Warrick: *“[The idea] was an innovation lab for intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs...and it would be based at Hub...So larger organisations would basically fund younger people with a shared set of innovation practices and entrepreneurial spirit so there was an exchange. I still think it’s quite...it’s valuable. But the more I think about it...I’m not sure if it would work. Because I’m quite negative towards intrapreneurship now. I see those systems, organisations as slowly falling apart and fading.”*

Other workers persisted for a time in this hybrid part-time employment and explorative Coworking phase before deciding that self-employment ultimately wasn’t optimal for them. Here is an extended excerpt from an interview with Greta where she describes her deteriorating organisational experience working for an engineering firm, failed attempts to shape the culture and subsequent decision leave employment and Coworking:

Greta: *“So I felt that there was not a good cultural fit with the company I was with. I felt the nature of my role at the time was not involving interactions with people. I was just sitting at a computer or communicating through Skype. So there was a lack of interaction with other human beings.*

Also, a lot of decision were made in a secretive way. They were very clear that we run the business behind this closed door and they’ll let you know after something had been decided. There was no invitation to participate. Even to the extent that they would hire new employees

without telling anyone. Someone new would just be sitting next to you one day and no one had said anything. You'd be like 'hi'...

Revisiting Hirschman's framework outlined earlier, Greta attempted to shape the culture of her former workplace towards becoming more socially interactive:

Greta: *"Early on when I was the company I suggested that we get a little table in the kitchen area that we could lean on so some of us could take a coffee break and talk, get to know each other. And the suggestion was shut down straight away. 'It's an OH and S issue', because the kitchen was narrow was the main reason given. I thought this would have been a simple way to build basic human relationships but there was no real interest in that.*

Also, a lot of people were just treated badly, got really overworked and burnt out and then replaced. I could feel that was happening to myself as well. I was starting to get migraines and just really feeling like I didn't want to be there. So I resigned and went back to Sweden for a time.'

After resigning from full time employment Greta persists for some time between the Coworking and standard organisational worlds:

Greta: *Then they actually got in touch with me and invited to come on board on a casual basis for a few weeks, but I ended up staying working for them part time. And looking for more meaningful work on the other days of the week. That's when I started going to Hub.*

J: *Why did you end up going to the Hub?*

Greta: *I was drawn to the hub for a few different reasons. There was a strong story in the early days about collaboration and social impact*

and sustainability. And I guess that independence that comes from working for yourself. I remember I went along to an early event where we had a discussion about freelancing that was quite inspiring. That was an interesting session.

There was also a definite attraction in what was being created there. When I took the step to join, I realised I was quite interested in what was being created. Not just being a participant, but I wanted to figure out how it all works, Coworking, how they build community, what's going on etc."

Sometimes the social learning proffered through Coworking led participants to renew their search for organisational employment. Despite her previous negative employment experience, Greta decided to resume her search for a company with a more 'supportive culture' after spending some time experimenting in the Coworking world:

Greta: *"Yeah I think I'll go back to being an employee as long as I can find a company with a supportive culture. Not being in situations where I have a good fit with my employer has not been very good for my confidence or wellbeing. I think my experience of working with people in an aligned sense has been so empowering because I have a lot of experience of the opposite. Working towards a shared goal is what I'm looking for. Having to provide the full spectrum of work that working on your own entails is daunting, the sales and marketing and delivery. And there's already so many people doing amazing things I'd like to join forces with other people doing great things."*

This section has argued that declining experiences of work led many Coworkers to exit organisational employment altogether. This decision took place in the context of assessing alternative options at a time when the salience of non-standard work was growing. The Coworking context provided a variety of opportunities for learning about

strategies and resources to improve their prospects within the new field of self-employment. Many only discovered Coworking after they were already self-employed. But for others, engaging with the 'Coworking world' through the assemblage of formal events, informal conversations and burgeoning discourse on the merits of self-employment appeared to influence their assessment of options for work outside traditional organisations. In this sense Coworking experiences provided opportunities for closer observations of non-standard working lives. For many the view was attractive, and the proximity strengthened their resolve to pursue this mode of work. For others, the social learning afforded through Coworking helped clarify their decisions to return to organisational employment. Underpinning these decisions frequently lay a 'search for greater meaning through work', which will be explored in detail in the following section.

5.3 Searching for meaning through work

It is late 2015 and I'm speaking with Daniela some time after she has left the Coworking world and returned to full-time employment in a traditional office environment. Daniela was an unusual Coworker in that she was previously the single employee of an otherwise solo-operator that offered business coaching services. I ask her about the experience of returning to the world of standard employment, albeit for a small non-profit organisation that focuses on certification of products from sustainably managed forests.

Daniela: *"My current boss comes from a regulation background, the EPA, he's only been in the organisation six or seven months. It's been a transition to get used to a very different working style. One of the things he always says is he considers us at work to be 'on loan' from our families. He has literally repeated that many times.*

J: *And he means this as a good thing?*

Daniela: *Yeah he means it as a really positive thing. He means it as your time here at work is valuable, you should be developing yourself, feeling respected and valued and this shouldn't be taking away from your time when you're not at work. And he means it in a very...he's the first person I've had that says something like that and really means it. 'Like I genuinely feel like I'm taking you on loan from your family'. He has internalised that in a way. And I just can't identify with it! I've really tried to connect with him, and I like him - he's a really nice guy - but I just can't...*

J: *I can't imagine someone in a Coworking space saying that...*

Daniela: *No! Exactly. The first time he said it to me, I was like... 'what do you mean?' Because to me I'm all of myself regardless what I'm doing. And the idea that...when I leave work I'm no longer thinking about it, for better or for worse, if you give all of yourself to your project - and perhaps that's more likely in a Coworking environment where people are more likely to be working on a startup or a small business or something where it really just is them. Or in a small team where they're doing something they're passionate about. Then maybe you do give more of yourself and it's harder to separate out from work and home. And maybe if you do work for the EPA and you hate your job it's easier to say this is the time when I'm at home and this the time when I'm at work. But to me that's absurd. If I really care about the work I'm doing and the way that I...kind of see myself and see my own worth...if I see that in things that I'm able to do in my work, of course I'm taking that home. I'm not literally writing emails when I'm at home, but I'm coming up with ideas, it's still a part of me and if I care about it - which to me is the only reason to do stuff, otherwise why would I bother? If I don't care about it enough to think about that when I'm in the shower, think if there's a new and better way to do something, why would I stay?*

J: *Well a traditional answer to that might be because they pay you a salary that allows you to cover your rent and shop and drink wine and do these other things. What's your response to that?*

Daniela: *Well that's never been my driver. If I wanted to do a job for money so that I could work from nine to five and come home and not think about it. I wouldn't be working for a non-profit. I wouldn't have looked for a job in a small business or with creative companies that would allow me to work in a Coworking space. I just wouldn't because the pay is terrible, the hours are awful. I travel heaps for work and don't really get anything in return for it. It's completely*

thankless work when you're trying to make such a huge difference to a huge problem in the world and something as big as 'what does responsible forest management look like?' No-one knows the answer to that question. No one can even...we're like chipping away at a tiny corner of one of the biggest problems in the world that intersects with so many issues with human rights, tenure, food security, climate change and industrialisation of the developing world. There are so many issues that the work I'm doing now intersects with, you're never going to solve it, you're never going to get that sense of the reward that the project is finally finished. So you have to believe in it. If you don't believe in it there's no point."

Daniela's desire for a full commitment of herself to her work was a theme commonly expressed in the Coworking world. In fact the search for greater meaning through work was often one of the primary reasons offered by participants to seek out non-standard work arrangements and a sense of community with other Coworkers. The question of just what makes work 'meaningful' has been a central concern throughout the history of social theory, from the founding theorists of sociology to current popular literature on finding 'purposeful' work (see for example Guillebeau 2016). Contemporary questions of meaningful work relate to notions of dignity (Bolton 2007); autonomy and control of work processes (Roessler, 2012); identity and self-esteem (Ashforth et al. 2016); purpose, significance and impact (Pratt and Ashforth 2003; Wrzesniewski 2012); social connection and belonging (Hogg and Terry 2000). However, at the foundation of contemporary debates we still encounter some core concepts first offered in the contexts of early industrial societies. These include Marx's theory of alienation, Weber's instrumental rationality and Durkheim's anomie and organic solidarity. These will be briefly reviewed before integrating them into a contemporary framework on the meaning of work.

Classical concepts

The industrial transition, the rise of waged employment and the consequent effect on mediating socio-economic relations through the 'cash nexus' were acutely observed by Marx, Durkheim and Weber (Baldry et al. 2007; Bolton 2007). Each of these founding sociologists identified a distinct way that capitalist employment relations eroded the dignity of paid work, and introduced enduring analytical concepts that will be briefly reviewed here.

Alienation

For Marx, 'alienation' was a specific product of capitalist relations, it fundamentally arose from divergent class interests and was thus considered inevitable under such conditions. The processes of industrial mass production fragmented the artisanal skills that previously resided holistically within craftsmen, extracted the embodied skill into a commodified form, and divested it across conveyor lines within factories and later, Marxist scholars would argue, across multiple production sites around the globe. The deskilling of individual workers in order to transfer the intelligence of 'the new system of management' has been recognised as an explicit goal later pursued by Taylor under the rubric of scientific management (Braverman, 1974).

From this perspective, the very processes of organising lead workers to become alienated, not only from the end products of their labour but from themselves and each other. The historical massification of production and managerialist control was said to reduce workers' sense of agency, or the ability to influence the larger systems surrounding their work activities (Giddens 1971). 'Naked self interest' and 'callous cash payments' were understood to be elevated above all other relational bonds with work, and it thus became an instrumental means towards pecuniary ends, stripped of any intrinsic value or meaning (Marx and Engels [1848] 2002).

In the Marxist orientation, because profits for the owners of capital are maximised when costs are minimised, workers and capitalists are locked in an ongoing struggle between exploitation and domination versus resistance and subversion. The only

redemptive path for dignified working conditions is for workers to gain control over the means of production and the processes of organising. Although early Marxist conceptions framed the culmination of this process in societal revolution that would collectivise ownership of capital (Yack 1992), the analytical perspective introduced by Marx persists in liberal democracies behind arguments for protective regulation of labour markets through minimum wage laws, occupational health and safety standards and other safeguards.

Instrumental rationality

For Weber, alienation was not only a product of the cash nexus of market relations but the growing pervasiveness of an 'instrumental rationality', instantiated through the spread of bureaucratic institutions and their reordering of social relations through the prism of legalism. 'Rationalization' was described by Weber as a historical process by which modern states became emancipated from their religious and cultural traditions, which led, in more poetic terms, to a 'disenchantment of the world' (Weber [1920] 1993). One consequence of these changes was the separation of what Weber termed 'value spheres', clustered activities of human endeavour that came to operate by distinct modes of logic. Weber enumerated six value spheres: religion, economy, politics, aesthetics, the intimate and the intellectual (Oakes 2003). Habermas later synthesised these into a Neo-Kantian conception of three value spheres with their own mode of 'validity': science or theoretical reason; morality or practical reason; and art or aesthetic-expressive reason (Habermas 1984)⁶⁸. Whilst these spheres were imagined to previously exist in an 'unbroken whole', the very processes of modernisation involved their separation and set their trajectories apart. By this reasoning, modern individuals attempting to live a life that pursues all three (or six) in an integrated fashion can experience a 'fractured' or 'fragmented' experience of being. The logic of the economic sphere can appear irreconcilable with

⁶⁸ The notion that different value spheres harbour distinct 'institutional logics' which can be evoked through particular social practices will be further explored in [Chapter 6.6 Shaping the institutional logic](#).

religion, politics, art, sexual intimacy or intellectual life, said to lead to a peculiarly modern sense of dislocation and disempowerment that ‘permeates and fragment everyday consciousness’ of the self (Habermas 1984). More recent empirical surveys suggest that the family and work are still the most meaningful parts of most people’s lives, yet are frequently experienced as realms in conflict and competition (Cully et al. 1999).

This drama plays out in an acute way within the administrative logic of organisations. In explaining social action, Weber contrasts ‘instrumental-rationality’ (*zweckrational*), or the concern only with means to achieve ends; with ‘value-rationality’ (*wertrational*), or the consideration of ends that are good and worth pursuing in themselves⁶⁹. Modern capitalist societies saw the growth in size and administrative complexity of organisations; technical knowledge that enabled systems of calculation and control, and a valorisation of management by formally codified rules that efficiently allocates resources and separates working roles into areas of functional specialisation. The logic of instrumental-rationality thus shapes social relations inside organisations, as employees become ‘human resources’, mere objects to be directed towards ends decided by managers, leaders and owners. This framing of human relations can be construed to violate a definition of dignity that traces its roots back to Kantian ethics, that human beings should be treated as ends in themselves, never merely means to an end⁷⁰.

This view sees the growth of instrumental rationality as an imperial project within the economic and organisational spheres, colonising all other areas of human experience, social, emotional, embodied, within the calculus of efficiency gains and legitimate rewards derived from hierarchical offices. It positions other forms of

⁶⁹ Weber also discusses ‘affective’ and ‘traditional’ modes of rationality but considered these largely unreflective or unselfconscious.

⁷⁰ “*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end*” (Kant [1785] 1997). This principle was first introduced as a second formulation of the *categorical imperative*, and is also known as the *formula for humanity*.

sociality at work as subservient to the regime of formal rules. “*Value-rational action may thus have various different relations to the instrumentally rational action. From the latter point of view, however, value-rationality is always irrational.*” (Weber 1922:26). This move ultimately displaces ‘shared values and sentiments and...undermines meaning and dignity at work’ (Hodson 2001:27) as ‘each man becomes a little cog in the machine’ (Weber on Bureaucratisation, quoted in Hodson 2001:28). Thus the Weberian perspective sees more than mere economic relations between classes as the source of workers’ antipathy but the creeping reach of instrumental rationality into organisational and other areas of life.

Anomie and solidarity

Durkheim’s observations on the causes of alienation shared much with Marx and Weber but were more hopeful in their estimation of possible remedies. *Anomie*, or an absence of appropriate norms, was his term for the social dislocation wrought by the advent of industrial capitalism through its ‘melting’ of prior social structures. Durkheim claimed this left workers either without purpose and meaningful frames of social identity, or captured by the ‘mechanical solidarity’ of regimented forms of labour that fail to keep pace with the social changes. Both ends of this spectrum resulted in a form of social paralysis.

In place of Weber’s grim fatalism concerning the loss of freedom through modernisation or Marx’s anticipation of class based revolution, Durkheim held that these problems could be mitigated through the cultivation of new shared orders based on an ‘organic solidarity’ (Baldry et al. 2007). Anomie was understood to result from the fracturing of ‘unity of purpose’ undergirding the collective identity of workers and the relationship between the products of their labour. The Durkheimian response, therefore, was to revive a sense of the moral contribution that workers roles hold within the wider system, and thus engender a positive sense of social identity. These elements would constitute an ‘organic solidarity’ (Giddens 1971). Organic solidarity emerges as groups voluntarily associate and recognise their

mutual interests, constructing shared norms that 'give direction and meaning to work and...provide safeguards against abuse, exploitation, and overwork' (Hodson, 2001:26).

Whereas Marxist analyses construe expectations of meaningful work within a capitalist system as misplaced, the Durkheimian perspective holds the prospect of constructive reform from within the existing framework of employment relations as a plausible goal. For these reasons Durkheim's ideas were drawn upon in the early human relations literature that argued constructive management practices could temper the alienating experiences of labour, fostering intrinsic rewards of work through, for example, devolving more control over the whole job or supporting participatory organising practices (Starkey 1992).

Coworking and classical concepts

As the empirical material presented so far illustrate, for many Coworkers non-standard working arrangements beckoned a promise of escape from both the Marxist and Weberian dilemmas. Marx argued that alienation was inevitable once workers were separated from fashioning the entire products of their labour, and the ownership, control and profits of firms were in the hands of others. But choosing self-employment, or '*doing your own thing*', nominally returns ownership, control and benefits (or losses) of the work into the 'hands' of the worker. Indeed the post-Fordist explosion of niches in services and digital products in the creative knowledge economy has been described as a recapitulation of some dynamics of the pre-industrial, artisanal economy of the past, where workers become closer to their 'craft' (Hutton 2004).

Similarly, Weber assumed that the continued growth of organisations under the rubric of instrumental rationality would inevitably absorb the individual pursuit of intrinsically meaningful goals by the logic of ends decided by superordinate authorities. Yet solo self-employment putatively returns decisions about both the ends and means of work into the 'hands' of workers. In fact the opposite problem

often becomes more salient, that freelancers and early stage entrepreneurs are overwhelmed by having to constantly make and take responsibility for strategic decisions in the midst of delivering quotidian tasks.

Yet non-standard working arrangements alone, especially the common isolation of solo self-employment, do little to mitigate Durkheim's diagnosis of anomie and are unlikely to provide his remedy of appropriate organic solidarity. This is one reason why Coworking has become an important feature of the non-standard working landscape. Coworking provides a context for social identity formation through the exploration and construction of shared norms appropriate for the social and economic context in which non-standard creative knowledge workers find themselves. The next section will briefly consider contemporary themes in the literature concerned with meaning and work, before offering an integrative framework that synthesises these subsequent turns.

Contemporary debates

Whilst the classical work reviewed above continues to frame many of the scholarly debates and empirical research on what gives work meaning, subsequent directions have left the field somewhat fragmented, especially between the psychological and sociological literature. The early sociologists focused on the contexts in which work transpires, including questions of power relations, the construction of ascribed and achieved social identities, and mutuality in social relations. The psychological research on meaningful work has foregrounded the individual worker, focusing on motivations, beliefs and personality preferences. For example scholars have examined the relationship between meaning and the impact of transformational or charismatic leadership (Kirkpatrick and Locke 1996; Schlechter and Engelbrecht 2006); the relationship between personality traits and job characteristics (Grant 2008; Barrick et al 2013) the achievement of 'flow states' or optimal experiences when performance skill and challenge intersect (Csikszentmihalyi 1990); and questions of 'happiness', 'wellbeing' and 'fulfilment' at work (Ryff 1989; Ryan et al. 2001).

One path through this fragmentation is to distinguish between meaning *in* work, or in the nature of working tasks themselves; and meaning *at* work, or in the social participation with working colleagues at the place of work. Whilst these have been recognised as useful analytical distinctions for scholars (Pratt and Ashforth 2003), in practice they were usually fused as a kind of gestalt experience for workers. Standard employees, by definition, have little choice, not only over what they do, but where and with whom they work. But Coworking offers a curious decoupling of working tasks from working context and, potentially, a climate that can provide a 'cosmology of meaning' for non-standard workers, conditions in which identity and belonging can be explored so that individuals can find their place in the grand 'scheme of things' (Pratt and Ashforth 2003). But we can advance further than this single distinction between work tasks and workplace when conceptualising the core components of the meaning of work.

Rosso et al. (2010) provide an integrative framework that articulates many of the dimensions of meaning associated with working experience discussed across the psychological, sociological and organisational literatures. They do this by mapping some of the core concepts within various disciplines to archetypal polarities of 'Self, Others, Agency and Communion'. The authors construct this framework in two parts. First, they order the literature into four sources of meaningful work, 'the self', 'other people', 'the work context' and 'spiritual life'. The literature organised under the category of 'the self' includes research on the role of values; motivations; and beliefs. The literature organised under 'other people' includes research on the role of colleagues; leaders; groups and communities; and the family. The 'work context' category includes research on the design of job tasks; organisational mission; financial circumstances; national culture; and non-work domains of life. The literature under 'spiritual life' includes research on the role of spirituality; and sacred callings.

Second, they examine underlying mechanisms that drive perceptions of meaning through work. If the above sources of meaningful work are largely tangible and observable phenomena, the mechanisms are mostly invisible psychological and

social processes that can span multiple sources. These are defined by Rosso et al. (2010) as:

- *Authenticity*, or ‘a sense of coherence or alignment between one’s behaviour and perceptions of the ‘true’ self” (p. 109);
- *Self-efficacy*, or ‘individuals’ beliefs that they have the power and ability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference’ (p.109);
- *Self-esteem*, or ‘an individual’s assessment or evaluation of his or her own self-worth’ (p. 110);
- *Purpose*, or ‘a sense of directedness and intentionality in life’ (p. 110)
- *Belongingness*, or ‘a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships’ (p. 111);
- *Transcendence*, or ‘to connecting or superseding the ego to an entity greater than the self or beyond the material world’ (p. 112)
- *Cultural and interpersonal sensemaking*, ‘largely concerns the production of *meaning* rather than *meaningfulness*’ (p. 112). Whilst the other mechanisms focus more on fundamental human needs as intrapsychic processes, this category includes research in the interactions and social constructionist traditions that posit meaning is constructed through context bound social interactions.

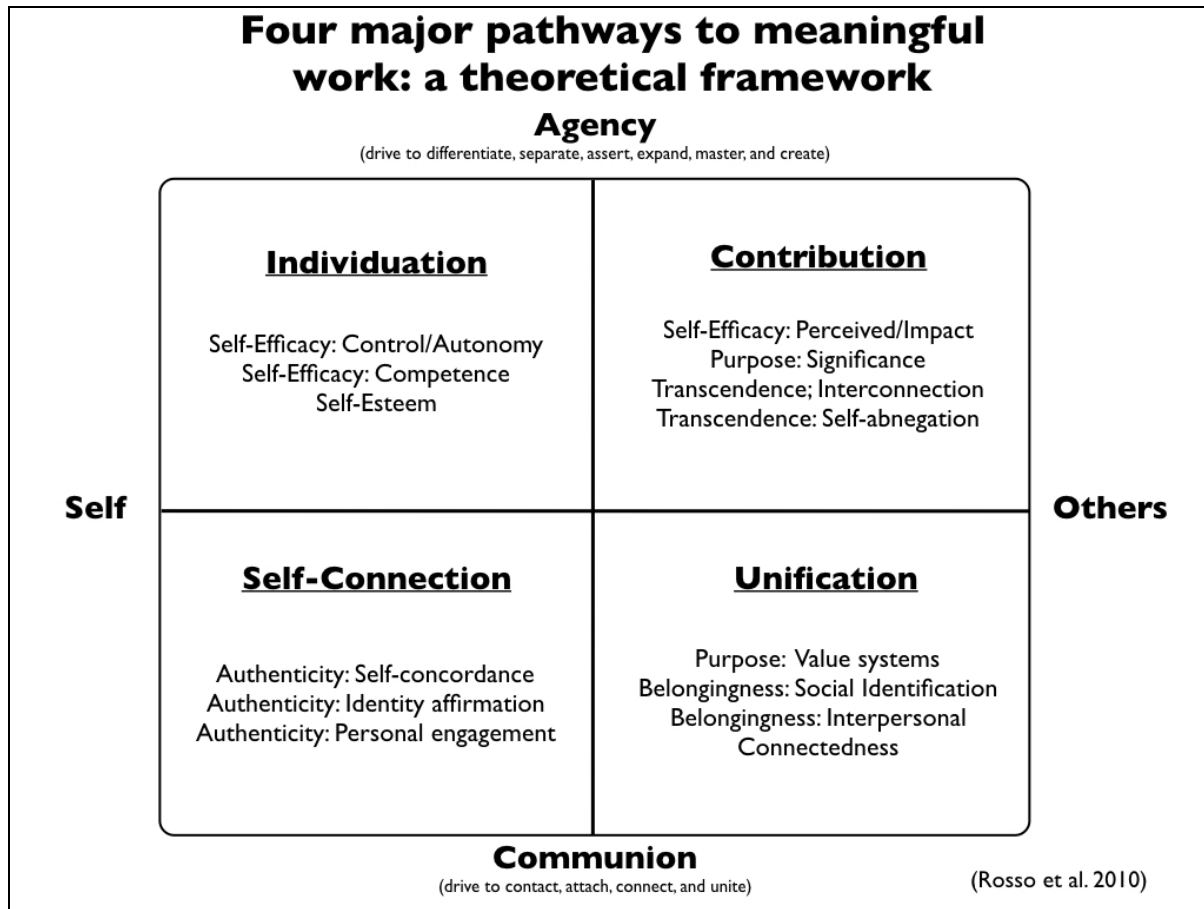


Figure 17: Pathways to meaningful work

These underlying mechanisms of meaningful work are then mapped onto four conceptual polarities: ‘agency’⁷¹, or the drive to differentiate; ‘communion’, or the drive to connect; ‘the self’, understood here as ‘self-concept’ or the complex assemblage of facets and social roles rather than a single discrete ‘whole’; and ‘others’, including other individuals, groups, collective, organisations and ‘higher powers’. These culminate in four pathways towards meaningful work, *individuation*, *contribution*, *self-connection* and *unification*. An optimal experience of meaningful work is imagined to be found at the intersection of these paths, where work enables clear individuation and autonomy over a domain of skill; contribution to a larger cause than self advancement; self-connection through alignment between various

⁷¹ The definitions of agency and communion are drawn from the psychological and philosophical traditions, exemplified for example by Bakan (1966) and should not be confused with the use of the word ‘agency’ in economics and political theory, as used, for example, in the ‘principal-agent problem’ to denote ownership.

dimensions of the self in working roles; and unification through a sense of identification and connection with working others.

Integrating classical and contemporary themes

We can locate the classical sociological concepts previously outlined within the theoretical framework advanced above. Marx's concern with the alienation of workers was provoked by a perceived lack of control and autonomy over work processes, a decline in self-efficacy and competence through the deskilling of craftsmanship brought about by industrial massification; and a consequent self-estrangement from worker's imagined authentic inner nature. Weber's concern with the dominance of instrumental rationality, was galvanised by the perceived distancing of workers from ends values, or the perceived impact, significance and ultimate purpose of their work. Finally, Durkheim's concern with organic solidarity, was fundamentally about the social identification, interpersonal connectedness and sense of belonging to a group with appropriately calibrated norms to support engagement with the current social terrain of work. These underlying mechanisms are apparent in the search for greater meaning through work via non-standard working arrangements and Coworking practices. We will now return to the empirical material to observe how these themes of contribution, self-connection, individuation and unification are apparent in the social world of Coworking.


PEOPLE	PLACE	INDY HALL EST. 2008	PURPOSE	MEMBERSHIP
<h2>Purpose</h2> <p>For Indy Hall, our ambition is to make Philadelphia (and ultimately the world) a better place to make a living doing what you love.</p> <p>The Greeks had a word - eudaimonia - which translates to "the good life". More specifically, they described the good life as "...rich with relationships, ideas, emotion, health and vigor, recognition and contribution, passion and fulfillment, and great accomplishment and enduring achievement."</p> <p>Sound appealing? Then Indy Hall might be for you.</p> <p>At the heart of Indy Hall, you'll find great people having authentic and meaningful experiences. We are living - and working - the good life.</p> <p>We believe in sharing the good life & actively working towards it together.</p> <p>Come pursue these goals with us, as a member of Indy Hall. We're excited to meet you!</p>				

Figure 18: 'We're a community with purpose'⁷²

Contribution

The notion of 'purpose' was frequently offered as a foundational normative anchor for work in the Coworking social world. The image above is taken from the website of 'Indy Hall' in Philadelphia, one of the earliest Coworking spaces. Their community is positioned as a place where work resides within a larger context of 'eudaimonia', the ancient Greek term popularised by Aristotle for a broad sense of human flourishing. Whilst this case is unusual in invoking a concept drawn from classical philosophy, the search for a language of meaning through work beyond the mere exchange of effort for earnings was a common endeavour amongst Coworkers.

The following excerpt is of a conversation with Harry that took place in 2014 where we discussed why he voluntarily left a public sector job to found a non-profit organisation. Here I ask him specifically what he means by 'meaningful work':

Harry: *"I migrated to Australia in 2008 after meeting with an Australian in Europe, and as a migrant I thought I need to find*

⁷² This image is from the website of Indy Hall one of the pioneering Coworking spaces in Philadelphia

something to do in this country. I need to find something that has meaning...

J: *How would you define what is meaningful work?*

Harry: *Hmmm...I'm trying to come up with a definition that will sound nice. I'd say to do an activity that contributes to changing or achieving something in the world I think is important. Possibly difficult and a bit challenging. And will make people more intelligent or happier. There's an attempt at a definition...*

...The thing that struck me when I first visited Melbourne and Australia is the importance of Asia. The Asian presence was just visible physically, in city centres. And the fact that Melbourne is a literary city. And so when I came here I had this ambition - we'll call that ambition - to say 'I think Melbourne would be an amazing place to build a big centre for translation of Asian writing - books and ideas - into western languages. And I'd like to contribute to that. So I thought, ok I've come to Australia that's what I want to work towards. And so the actual organisation that I'm now running and the festival are very closely aligned, it's not all of Asia it's just China; it's not all literature it's just online, so it's kind of a smaller...smaller version of the bigger picture. But that's...what I'm doing.

And the reason I'm doing it is that I think it's both important and extremely exciting. It's probably one of the...to me it's one of the four, five, six important things that are happening in the world at the moment - how Asian and non-Western traditions are entering into intellectual dialogue. The rise of China and the rise of Asia means that we are now...we've reached that stage of globalisation where we need to really...talk to each other as equals including with traditions that have long been distinct from...whatever we're from - the

European tradition. And so...engaging with the people there is exciting because it's new and important because successfully doing that will allow us to build...whether it's global governance through exchanges of ideas, diminish racism and all of these outcomes. And what I'm doing, is part of the picture, I'm not the only one doing that...I hope that what I'm doing at the moment contributes to an outcome which is better mutual understanding."

The idea of 'contribution' to a cause that transcends mere personal gain is evident in Harry's explanation. This theme of a vocational search, of framing work identity within a larger sense of purpose or moral concern than mere financial success or functional fit, was one of the most recognisable cultural qualities of the early Coworking world, especially at the Hub⁷³. Here is another excerpt where Warrick responds to a question on what made the early Coworking community 'likeminded', or recognise a mutual social identity amongst each other:

J: *"What was 'like' about the early Coworkers?"*

Warrick: *I think wanting to do something 'beyond' work, not just sitting around and working for someone else. Curiosity. We say here in Enkel 'ideas people', people with ideas. They were also quite 'conscious' about everything - in the beginning at least. Like Reconciliation Victoria and...Children Out of Detention Now and Inge and those people who wanted to change the world...change-makers. So that was another attractor for me. But I hadn't been at all in that space myself, I was into education for ten years before. So I've realised now that that's my thing, I'm back in education now."*

⁷³ This point is further developed in [Chapter 6.3: declaring purpose over profit](#).

Self-connection

In addition to the putative moral purpose or social impact of their work, some Coworkers revealed a satisfaction in discovering a personal fit, of performing a role that is somehow deeply natural, whose origins were often located in childhood experience. Non-standard work arrangements enabled them to undertake a bespoke form of 'job crafting' (Berg et al. 2013), or design a role constituted by a combination of tasks and relationships tailored to an individual's unique personality and experience. Here Harry continues:

Harry: *"But meaningful is also something else. I come from this storytelling tradition, my father is a real-estate entrepreneur, I grew up with him saying 'the important thing is that things have meaning - that things have meaning for you'. And so meaning also comes into my personal story somehow...I don't know if it's a bizarre narcissism...possibly. But I grew up on the German border in Strasbourg, that that city that has spun between France and Germany. From a family that wasn't from there originally but came from the Mediterranean. So I've always been this kind of cultural outsider, or a cultural go-between. And so doing work that has to do with bridging across cultures has always made sense in relation to my own personal history. So that's another area of meaningful which is more...personal...doing that kind of bridging across cultures, makes sense to me because it relates to my own stories and to things that I have personally experienced as important...or lacking.*

J: *That's an interesting reframing because I can now see your current work as an expression of a particular kind of role that you played as a child...*

Harry: *Exactly, it's a role that I've adopted and I think that growing up it's - whatever it is - archetypal role or something but that kind of*

cultural go-between person that is able to understand people from different languages, cultures, elements, backgrounds whatever you call it. And that coming as a migrant it's the thing that would make my position meaningful in Australia. That's what I'm bringing."

I habitually began every formal interview by asking participants what they did and why. I was initially surprised at how many responded to this question by recounting experiences from their childhood. Many interviewees intuitively connected the distinct working role they now inhabited with social experiences from their early life. It appeared as if through pursuing entrepreneurial career paths they had found a concordance between their working and non-working facets of self, or were at least attempting to find such a consonance. Here Ralph gives an initially simple answer to the first question, before expanding on activities he did with his friends as adolescents.

J: *"Why do you do what you do?"*

Ralph: *Well I found that I'm mostly connecting people in a way that makes some ideas happen...quite broadly. Um...how much of a detailed answer do you want?*

J: *As much detail as you want - like what have you done for work over the last few years?*

Ralph: *I'll just tell you forever then. So when I was growing up my Mum ran a serviced office business and Dad was an electrical engineer. So he brought home a computer one day. Which had a one colour screen. And you had to type in the program that you wanted it to run. So I started learning about computers. And then how to build them together. And then how to network them. And how to play games obviously because you start playing games before you start doing anything serious with computers.*

J: *How old were you then?*

Ralph: *I can't remember...primary school some time. Yeah...building networks, at first it was networks - just local networks to play games literally with four or five friends. Well we'd bring our computers together into the shed and plug them into each other. Which took a bit of effort back then. That was before the internet became popular for that stuff.*

This was in the mid nineties. Then there was a stage where we'd dial each other's phone using a modem. Not on the internet but actually calling each other with a modem. To play games again. Then when I was in year ten at school. I did a CISCO networking class. So I was learning how you build the internet networks.

J: *So you were in year ten but you elected to do that?*

Ralph: *Yeah so I went every Wednesday afternoon out to a TAFE CISCO course. Which was a good call. During that time we looked at computer programs and also the internet when that happened. How do you code HTML and how do you build the backend web stuff as well to build programs and collections of stuff.*

And then social media came out, and that was really interesting...before then to put something on the internet you had to program and after then - like with twitter and youtube now - you don't have to program you just push the button. So that really shifts the focus of, well my interest, from how do you build it to what do you do with it. And so it has a lot of parallels with, if you wanted to print an idea say fifty years ago, you'd need a printing press, you'd need lending for that, you need paper you need editors you need writers,

you need more editors, you need distributors, you need marketers, you need bookshops, or newsagents.

And today you just have the twitter account and you have the publish button. And it's just one click so everyone can do it. If you have the internet."

Ralph then offers an explanation of how he sees the world changing and positions his own personal interests and productive role amid the turbulence:

Ralph: *"Yeah so I've always been drawn to change and seeing things differently and doing some things differently. And helping other people with that. And that's why technology's interesting because - like the first computer I had, you had to program it. So it's like 'what do you want the computer to do?' You had to think about the system and how it fits together to operate it as a computer operator.*

Well I've just sort of over time fallen into this space in some ways which seems to be a good fit of helping people with new stuff. So not necessarily being the first person, not necessarily being the founder of something, but I like being at the front or near the front and that's always had benefits. So I've always been, I guess, well positioned in some of these things. Like being the first employee or playing with bitcoin before it was a big deal. Or whatever the new idea was - playing with blogs before they were a big deal. So not everything works - I had a minidisc player once and that was shit. That didn't work out.

Yeah just simplifying stuff as well. Like taking a really complex idea and putting it into plain English is a thing. And so I guess I've been able to make a career out of doing that - taking complex systems, explaining them and there's value in that...

...So there's this other spectrum as well. So if I look at the world I see everything moving towards this more planetary perspective through the internet. So broadly, once people get mobile phones, they have the internet, they have a connection, they can send information to each other instantly with a blog or a social network. And out of that people reorganise a lot of systems and organisations in the way they work. The next step will be sending money, energy I guess, to each other. And that's why bitcoin is interesting in some ways. But I feel like that's too...up in the air still. And we still haven't fixed communication. So most organisations still run with a form of email or these systems that aren't open and direct. And so with Yammer we saw this impact of what if you apply these open systems to a company? So not to flatten the management, but just to flatten the communication. And it's very...transformative. And it helps the company operate better. And that's the diversity thing too, a diverse team usually outperforms a team of the same people - if they're well networked."

Ralph and Harry's stories illustrate how they have crafted contemporary working lives that enable them to perform social roles rooted in their pre-working histories. Many other Coworkers were searching for work that 'authentically' fit their 'unique selves' or expressed who they felt themselves to be. From this perspective work then enacts forms of personal engagement that affirm identities through reconciling working and non-working facets of self.

Individuation, self-efficacy and flow

Ralph' working life has also benefited powerfully from his pioneering use of social media and the reputational capital that has stemmed from these practices. Scholars have conceptualised social media activities in 'gamified terms' (Fromme and Unger 2012), where increasingly skilled production of messages translates into 'points

scored' in the form of likes, retweets, comments and other forms of social acknowledgement. In Ralph' discussion of his childhood role above, it is easy how these early experiences of playing with emerging technology, building computer networks with friends, explaining how they work and what they afford to the uninitiated runs parallel to his paid work as an adult translating novel technology into enterprise contexts. Finding alignment between role identity, wider belief systems and an optimal blend of skill and challenge has been described as experiencing 'flow states', where barriers between the self and work are dissolved. Research has linked such experiences with finding meaning in working life (Gardner et al. 2002).

A search for working experiences that optimise the expression of personal competence was a common subject of conversation within the Coworking world. Here Robert reflects on his recent 'flow states' from being appropriately positioned to share novel and useful knowledge across diverse social networks.

Robert: *“And so like right now I've actually been in flow really intensely the last since I moved back to Melbourne, just because I'm jamming with so many ecosystems, so recently Do Lectures, that was...like a peak experience. Not so much for me but for like, others which gets me excited. And then yeah so like right now I've been focused in Melbourne on Deloitte, Hub and School of Life and...like it's not about knowing lots of people right? It's about knowing the key nodes in different ecosystems and when you're like that 'ecosystem diplomat' with different sort of heads of state of different ecosystems, then you can bring the knowledge from what like you can make partnerships happen more fluently so like I'm friends of TedX, Brisbane Founders, South Bank, Sandbox Network...”*

On a similar note Zahra reflects on the difficulty of finding such flow states during her time as an employee.

Zahra: *“I left Deloitte and I felt that something was missing and I couldn't quite explain it, many people did look at me at that time and thought that I was very successful...But for me now I feel like I've had so many moments of feeling like I'm in flow, I'm starting to get what that state is like and starting to bring it about more often.*

J: *I've noticed you've used many times the word 'productive' and 'flow', so tell me more about their importance...*

Zahra: *I think what you've picked up on is probably the difference in energy around or feeling around it because the flow and productive space is still work in progress. And the feeling of space and ease that I have on the great ocean road yesterday is this, every now and then I'm starting to feel that with my emails. So it's being able to bring the two into a similar sort of feeling and I don't know, I think it's less emails Jules, but I think it's also about more targeted or more intentional or more emails that are much more relevant to me. It would be nice to bring this about about for anyone else I know or everyone else in the world, but that's kind of what I'm aiming for... that feeling of flow and ease-fullness.”*

Unification, social-identification and belonging

Coworkers often used the explicit search for (non-pecuniary) meaning through work as a boundary that separated the 'Coworking world' from the world of standard employment. Some Coworkers framed the boundary in near Manichaeian terms. Here Janelle discusses the difference she sees with people she knows that have a job 'just for the money' and who think 'life experiences happen outside of work':

Janelle: *“The main difference is it’s employment and not a career. I think that’s the difference. She’s looking for a job to tick the boxes financially, she firmly believes that life’s experiences happen outside of work. And so you’re never really going to be happy at work if that’s your approach. If it’s just a by-product and not something that drives you. And that’s a very unique way to look at things - having the ability to have work drive you. And that’s probably speaking more to the Hub community. They do work that drives them. And some people make a lot of money from that and some people don’t.*”

J: *Do you notice differences between people who think ‘life experience happens outside of work’?*

Janelle: *I think there are two extremes. I’ll say that I see the common culture and what we all have in common in order to talk about Coworking or whatever, you’re all typically doing something that you’re passionate about. So it means that you’re generally happy, but when you’re not, you’re really miserable. Because, you want to be doing what you love and when work isn’t delivering that...high that you’d normally get it’s almost excruciating and you get so restless about it. Whereas I think if, your career isn’t - if you don’t believe that your career is going to bleed into your personal life and that’s - you know - for some people they’re always going to intersect, and for people that don’t, that do nine to five and then go home and that’s where their life is at, I don’t think there’s a general, I don’t think they’re necessarily unhappy or happy I just think that the feelings they have about their job are par for the course and the extremities of the polarising emotions are for different reasons.”*

This attraction to the ‘highs and lows’ of non-standard work, even while tacitly recognising some of the ‘dark side of entrepreneurship’ (Kets de Vries 1985) and the fusion of personal meaning, even personal identity with entrepreneurial ventures,

was also a common theme of discussion amongst Coworkers. Later on in the same interview I quoted at the beginning of this section, Daniela, somewhat unexpectedly given the context of our interview, reflects on how she is considering leaving her current job:

J: "What do you like about the startup space? You mentioned the stress and volatility of income so I'm curious why you want to return?"

Daniela: I don't know...the only way I can think of to describe it is vibrancy. The lower the lows you get in that space, the higher the highs. And working for a non-profit - I can't say the same for corporate because I haven't worked there - it all feels very flat. Everyday is the same. The worst thing that happens is some environmental organisation talks shit about us in the Financial Review. That's a really bad day...and it's really not that bad...

Many Coworkers held similar views, that entrepreneurial and non-standard workers were unusually driven by intrinsic motivations in their work, and thus many felt out of place amid the perceived extrinsic motivations of standard organisational employment. This was a significant frame for social identification, and why Coworking spaces became a locus for belonging and solidarity. In their words, many Coworkers described this experience as 'finding their tribe'. These themes of connection, belonging and solidarity will be explored further in the next chapter which analyses the effects of many Coworking social practices.

This section has argued that alongside 'problematizing organisational employment' and 'leaving standard work' arrangements a common facet of Coworking culture was a search for greater meaning through work. This search often adopted the language of seeking 'purposeful work' to distinguish itself from a perception of the experience of much work under the rubric of standard employment arrangements. This search often began as a reaction against, to invoke David Graeber's term, an impression that many organisational roles were ultimately 'bullshit jobs'.

Although regarding work this way was frequently described by Coworkers as an unusual or novel practice, the themes discussed by research participants intersect with both classical theory and contemporary research on the meaning of work. In the empirical material presented here, we can observe Coworkers grappling with and attempting to circumvent enduring challenges within capitalist and bureaucratic employment, described in sociology as experiences of alienation, instrumental rationality and anomie. These can be positioned within the contemporary theoretical framework of a competing drives for a greater sense of individuation, contribution, self-connection and unification through work. Pursuing non-standard working arrangements enabled participants to frame their work within a broader sense of purpose, to close the distance between value and instrumental rationality, to experience greater autonomy and the associated dignity in control of work processes, including choosing their preferred time and place of work.

The following sections will demonstrate how Coworking offered participation within a social milieu that valorised purposeful and autonomous work, to find and create more appropriate social norms and an experience of community or, in Durkheim's language, organic solidarity, that helps mitigate some of the distinct challenges of non-standard work and solo-self employment. In fact for many participants, Coworking spaces became 'portals to new worlds of work', and Coworking practices encouraged the sharing of information and fostering of trust that underpinned social learning relevant to these forms of work within the less certain conditions of the new economy.

5.4 Portals to new worlds of work

Jules: *“What was the moment you discovered the Hub like?”*

Graham: *It was like ‘this is it! This is the answer!’ I hope that Hub becomes a portal to those different things.”*

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Matthew: *I joined Hub Melbourne to expand my view of what is possible in terms of social change. The Hub is an extraordinary space that hums with hope and energy. The future of conscious human civilization is being made daily in this space. The Connect membership allows me to attend events, meet people and really refresh my view of our individual and collective capacities. Through this community, I have consolidated the belief that government as it operates today is obsolete and wasteful, especially of its talent. Coworking spaces like the Hub offer alternative organisational models for design, testing, delivery and implementation of social goods and services for the 21st century.*

Once upon a time in 2010 there was a girl named @meditatecreate who had been adventuring in NYC, following her dreams of becoming a documentary filmmaker. She had returned to Melbourne, expanded, alive, energised, buzzing and determined to carry this creative surge back into her life at home. She spent days on the internet searching for interesting Melbourne happenings as if she was a tourist in her own town, and stumbled upon an interesting chap, @rosshill. He seemed to be on the edge of everything tech, hip and global and so, the friendly, and at times overenthusiastic gal that she was, contacted him for a coffee and chat. There she learned of all things tech and innovative including @trampolineday, @patterndynamics, spiral theory, @twitter, @pozible, @hubmelbourne, and @crowdsourcing. As the conversation moved from tech to spirituality and meditation, @rosshill guided her to the wise and humble @janstewart who would write eloquently at posterous about her thoughts of the unfolding of human consciousness.

Over time it seemed that all roads led to @hubmelbourne and she found herself happily pulled into an Alice-innovation-Wonderland, where she met new people who were doing fantastical things, like @drfroth the bubble-ologist, @chantellebaxter turning school dresses into schools and @davidahood who was making magic happen through creating collaborative communities explaining that @wegatherhere to create better futures. She wondered how she could integrate this brave new world into her pre-existing reality as a doctor and continue to explore the landscapes of technology, social good and innovation. She was introduced to so many @delicious treats like @twitter, @storify, @hootsuite, @wordpress, @instagram, and @yammer that seemed to @flickr with subliminal "eat me" messages.

... And eat them she did.

After developing a little tech-indigestion from twitter overindulgence, she started to wonder whether these treats were healthy or making her obese with distraction. She wondered how she could use all the new tools she had learned since her serendipitous encounter with @rosshill in a way that would benefit her and others she knew, and perhaps even those she would never know.

One day, whilst sitting peacefully in meditation, being entertained by her mental "thought feed" a neon sign flashed in her mind: "Mindful in May". Seemingly out of nowhere, an idea was born. An idea which seemed to bring together so many of different passions that she never knew could be connected: meditation, social media, personal development, community, creativity, music, poetry, learning, internet, twitter, fun, contribution, and generally trying to make the world a better place.

It was as if, hanging around @hubmelbourne and colliding with so many wonderful hubbers, she had been infused with knowledge, confidence, enhanced creativity and a sense of possibility that bubbled in her subconscious. Meditation was the place where these seemingly disparate ideas sparked off and allowed something new to emerge.

Figure 19: An Alice-Innovation-Wonderland

This chapter has been guided by the question 'why do people Cowork?'. I have argued that these pioneering actors shared some common experiences that came to permeate the early culture of Coworking in Melbourne. These included 'problematism standard work', 'leaving standard employment arrangements' and

'searching for greater meaning through work'. I have separated these aspects for analytical purposes, but they can be conceived of as facets of a general problem - a dissatisfaction with working life as usual. Non-standard working arrangements, whether seeking temporary contracts as a freelancer or aspiring to build a company and become an employer, present a different set of challenges however. Some of these are quite instrumental, questions such as where to go to meet other people with the complementary skills to learn from or to contract. Others are more symbolic, problems such as where to go to 'feel at home', find a sense of solidarity amongst a community of workers that appear share your worldview. This section will demonstrate why and how Coworking become 'an answer' to these questions, by becoming 'portals to new worlds of work'. It will argue that Coworking spaces have become 'focal points' of mutual interest which other Coworkers use to 'tacitly coordinate' actions - by frequenting these spaces they anticipate discovering others with complementary interests, values and skills. Coworking, however, is a larger project than a mere mutual coordination point in urban geography. Through blending the material space with conceptual, social and digital practices, Coworking becomes a 'boundary object', not only a point in which various communities can coordinate activities around, but an object that disciplines communicative practices and becomes a source of social identification. Before discussing boundary objects in more detail I will first introduce the notion of 'focal points' of mutual coordination, which will help clarify how Coworking spaces take on the properties of boundary objects.

Focal Points

"Its purpose is to bring people together that might otherwise not find each other, but have some common meta-patterns. Better world, making change, doing it outside the box, going it alone outside organisations."

One of the defining characteristics of entrepreneurial work is uncertainty. Among a wide range of possibilities and an absence of formal rules, figuring out just what to do

next, and with whom is always a challenge, but most of all for those new to the field. Despite persistent cultural myths of heroic individualism, this process of discovering and appraising options, even for the experienced, is largely a social activity (Emami 2012). As the above quote from a Coworker indicates, *'bringing people together that might otherwise not find each other'* can provide a lot of value, an experience Coworkers frequently celebrated as *'accelerating serendipity'*. This shared experience of uncertainty, along with some other particular challenges of self-directed enterprise, was a compelling source of social solidarity and cooperation amongst Coworkers. Here Wendy reflects on some of the challenges she faced upon starting her own business.

Wendy: *"When I started my own business after twenty years of corporate indoctrination...I realised I did not know one entrepreneur. I did not know one business person. I had no idea of what it was like to run a business. I had no friends in business. I had absolutely zero empathy, understanding, knowledge of how the small business world worked.*

And so when I moved and started my own business and just threw myself into being a marketing consultant - because I was in marketing in corporate - I thought well how hard can it be to be a marketing consultant and transfer these corporate skills where I was being paid a good wage into running my own marketing consultancy. I thought it would be really easy but it was freaking hard - I had no idea".

Once Wendy discovered the Hub, it came to be viewed as a solution to a number of these new challenges. Practically it was a place to meet *'other entrepreneurs'*, simple access to other entrepreneurs can enable forms of social learning, whether through observation and imitation or direct questions and answers, that can help solve functional problems: *'do you know a good accountant for solo-self employed workers?'*; *'should I use wordpress or squarespace to host my website'*, were typical

questions. Having access to a knowledgeable and helpful 'crowd' is very useful for such work, especially for newcomers to the field. Wendy's response however demonstrates a larger, symbolic project at play in her relationship to Coworking - the search for a place to feel at home amongst a cohort that shares her struggles and worldview.

Wendy: *"I remember meeting Graham back in 2011 and just hearing for the first time about what Coworking was and just being fascinated by being able to hang out with all these entrepreneurs and business people. And fascinated by the community thing because I've always been a 'community builder'. I'm a very...it's something I've always enjoyed. I love meeting new people and interesting people, it's just part of my DNA really..."*

I was very excited about the intention of the space and what it was all about. The space was very eclectic and there were things I hadn't seen before, even back then in the early stages. Having grown up in the corporate world, and you know, being so used to office spaces that were quite clinical, it was really quite earthy and random and...I loved it. And it was something that I hadn't been exposed to, like many people I guess back in 2011 was just like - what's that?

And the fact that it was in an old building...and then Graham shared the vision...and I was really excited about this new way of working. I think I then read a great article in the good weekend magazine - I think that was one of the first stories that was done about Hub.

And then I came back a couple of times because my interest was piqued. So when I left the not-for-profit I knew - even before I left - that in the next stage I was going to join the Hub. And just because I wanted to immerse myself with predominantly entrepreneurs that I really felt were doing purposeful work."

In the excerpt above, Wendy discusses wanting to ‘immerse’ herself with other entrepreneurs doing purposeful work, but didn’t know precisely who these individuals were or what they did. There are two parts to the challenge of building these relationships. The first is simply the problem of knowing where to go in order to meet such people. The second is how to get to know them, to *‘immerse yourself’* with them in order to build up enough trust to form productive relationships and learn from them. Wendy’s example highlights one of the core dynamics that drives the social interactions amongst Coworkers, *the desire to meet others with complementary knowledge or resources to help solve a particular problem*. In the Coworking world these complementary resources, whether transactional or relational, are generally (but not exclusively) embodied in other Coworking members. When asked about their reasons for Coworking, some members did emphasise these instrumental and transactional exchanges. One Coworker for example explained:

“Connecting with other professionals that offer a complementary service. Connecting with the younger, savvy online entrepreneurs – has made me more technology savvy.”

But many also highlighted the symbolic or affective dimensions, such as a search for inspiration:

“It’s a place to connect, to share, to explore, and of course to work, but more importantly it’s a place that inspires me. It opens up doors and creates opportunities that I never knew existed before.”

Although the material aesthetics and spatial ambience, the music, colours, plants and the curation of the space⁷⁴ are an important part of the Coworking experience, the geographical location of the space itself provides a *focal point* that enables ‘tacit

⁷⁴ This dimension of spatial and atmospheric curation will be described in [Chapter 6.1: Welcoming, introducing and curating.](#)

coordination' between Coworkers. The theory of focal points, sometimes called 'Schelling points' after their originator, was developed by the economist and game theorists Thomas Schelling in his work 'Strategy and Conflict' (Schelling 1960). Schelling ran a number of experiments with his students in which they were presented coordination puzzles which could only be solved by 'guessing each others guesses'. The most famous of these asked respondents to meet someone at a location in New York without knowing the time and place. Most respondents selected 'Grand Central Station at noon', and this point became 'each person's expectation of what the other expects him to expect' (1960:57). Schelling identified these salient points of mutual expectation as enabling 'tacit coordination', a way of coordinating preferences in the absence of direct communication. Focal points are often strongly cultural, situational and contextual - they rely on a collective understanding or framing of a shared situation. Grand Central Station naturally become a focal point for people familiar with the problem of negotiating meeting places in New York City, even in the absence of direct communication. Coworking spaces become focal points for people like Wendy, interested in meeting other '*purposeful entrepreneurs*' in Melbourne, even without directly contacting them⁷⁵. The critical element that positions the Coworking space as a relevant focal point is the appropriate signalling of what the space represents to the wider social environment. We can see how this interpretation is received in this Coworker's response:

"It's not the status quo. It's not held back by the dominant paradigm, the old way of doing things. People are open and reaching out for the new, the better, the different. Often I say think of a 1980s, grey and drab generic office environment dominated by cubicles and dour faces in suits. Then realize it's nothing like that."

Whilst Coworkers themselves are unlikely to discuss their actions in terms of Schelling points and tacit coordination, many are aware of the underlying dynamic of

⁷⁵ Focal, or 'Schelling' points and the economic theory underpinning this argument is further elaborated in Waters-Lynch and Potts (2017).

strategically increasing the probability of unforeseeable encounters. They frequently discuss these occurrences in terms of ‘*serendipity*’ or ‘*collaborative innovation*’:

“It’s where I can meet people—by design or by serendipity”

“The new ideas that are born in the synthesis between different people and them bumping into each other.”

The reputation of Coworking spaces to the wider social environment of non-standard workers, instantiated through a blend of material aesthetics, social and digital practices, enable Coworking spaces to become points of mutual expectation, places Coworkers can go to increase the probability that they will meet ‘complementary others’ who have also selected the same site. In doing this, entrepreneurial actors do not quite ‘solve’ their uncertainty problem, but do reduce it through mutually coordinating around a focal point. Once identified as such, these spaces then provide a shared context in which Coworkers can reveal useful information, identify each other and mutually engage in activities that construct trust and afford cooperation. Their properties as ‘boundary objects’ enable this to happen.

Boundary objects

It has long been observed that social networks and communities of practice do not operate in a material vacuum, but coordinate around focal objects of mutual interest. The sociologist Leigh Star brought this phenomenon into view when she introduced the concept of ‘boundary objects’ (Star 1989; Star and Griesemer 1989). Boundary objects can take a variety of forms, both material and conceptual, and are a core feature of communities of practice theory. Boundary objects can be ‘artefacts, documents, terms, concepts, and other forms of reification around which communities of practice can organise their interconnections’ (Wenger 1998:105). A single boundary object, say a forest, can serve multiple communities with quite distinct interests, hikers, loggers, biologists and conservationists may all negotiate use of the forest for very different ends. The creation of abstract representations of

the object, like a forest map, can discipline forms of information shared between otherwise disparate communities. For boundary objects to persist, they must be adaptable enough to enable different uses and viewpoints and robust enough to maintain a stable identity amongst diverse actors. In this sense 'the creation and maintenance of boundary objects is a key process in developing and management coherence across intersecting social worlds' (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393).

For boundary objects to serve such diverse purposes, they require some distinct features:

- *Accommodation*: A boundary object must be able to lend itself to a number of different activities or uses;
- *Modularity*: Single actors can attend to a specific portion of the boundary object;
- *Abstraction*: All perspectives are served at once by the deletion of features that are specific to individual users;
- *Standardisation*: Information contained by boundary objects is in a pre-specified form so that each community of users knows how to deal with it locally.

(Star, 1989 as summarised by Wenger, 1998)

Boundary objects can enact these features by acting as:

- *Repositories*: that index and order piles of objects such as libraries, museums and many internet sites.
- *Ideal types*: that delete idiosyncratic features of a specific example to create an abstract representation, such as maps, diagrams and species (rather than specimens).
- *Coincident boundaries*: objects with commonly recognised boundaries but diverse internal contents, such as state boundaries.
- *Standardised forms*: that package local information in a way that enables it to travel, be compared and aggregated.

(Star and Griesemer 1989)

The Hub and some other early Coworking spaces became boundary objects by weaving together the material, conceptual, social and digital aspects of Coworking.

Materially, the Hub and other Coworking spaces offered a shared work and social environment with 'coincident boundaries' in which a diverse cohort of actors could pursue their own goals and interact when desired both through informal encounters and structured, even ritualistic events.

Conceptually, the Hub and some other early Coworking spaces served as abstractions, or ideal types of places where creative knowledge work is produced through non-standard collaborative relations. Places where, to return to Elise's words at the beginning of this section, '*all things tech, hip, global...innovative...where collaborative communities...create better futures*'. Mathew, who at the time of writing the following words was a full time government employee, viewed the Hub as '*an extraordinary space that hums with hope and energy*' where '*the future of conscious human civilisation is being made daily*'.

Socially, the Hub became a symbolic resource employed in conversations in which recognition of mutual membership or even awareness of the concept served as an anchor in interactions for the expectations of shared perspectives on work. These conversations often took place outside of the physical boundaries of the space in cafes, bars, and private gatherings, but the strength of the conceptual ideal of Coworking enabled a shared mental reference point, a heuristic that extended the social sphere. For the most enthusiastic of Coworkers, the Hub came to represent the best possible face of the world of non-standard world, a kind of reverse mirror for the most unfavourable qualities of standard employment. As Matthew continues in the earlier quote, '*through this community, I have consolidated the belief that government is as it operates today is obsolete and wasteful, especially of its talent*'.

Digitally, largely through yammer, twitter and the platforms through which members communicated, Coworking spaces functioned as *repositories* of information shared between Coworkers, indexed through hashtags (#), mentions (@) of other Coworkers and, at least in yammer's case, sometimes placed in subject specific feeds (Elise's post above for example was posted in 'hub stories'). The affordances and limitations of these digital platforms disciplined communications so they approached *standardised* forms that enabled translation of ideas across the different social perspectives within the Coworking world. These technical features were supplemented by particular styles of writing that lend themselves to readable posts in social feeds. For example, shorter posts, often accompanied by an image, and the use of hashtags to index and summarise the subject of the posts. Some of the older or less digitally experienced Coworkers confided they learned significantly by observing and imitating the (often) younger or more digitally experienced Coworkers' communication. Here Veronica, an older Coworker reflects on this last aspect:

Veronica: *"I did make a lot of connections with the idealists with a strong background in social media and capacity with new platforms and stuff. So even though we never actually worked together, I was always able to say to Barry and Cheng and all sorts of people who were there: how do I do this? what should I do? what would recommend? Really I knew nothing about social media when I first came to the Hub. And after a year I was really good at it. This was huge benefit for me."*

These dimensions of Coworking were woven together in a 'constitutive entanglement' (Orlikowski 2007), integrated so that participants experienced a socio-digital-material whole. This entanglement was, in my view, what was most distinct about the Coworking experience - the close proximity between the digital, social and physical interactions. The following incident illustrates this case well. Harry's invitation to be part of the 'Hub language challenge' on Yammer generate forty four responses and quickly transitions into a number of face to face meetings in the physical space, and a subsequent language learning group with a dedicated

digital space on Yammer. I have included some of the responses to illustrate the apparent enthusiasm, but there is no need to read the content to take the point⁷⁶.



Figure 20: The spontaneous foreign language club

⁷⁶ Although despite this apparent early burst of enthusiasm this group did not end up lasting long.

This example highlights the 'entanglement process', how the digital medium disciplined communication, acting as a public repository for information; indexing through the use of hashtags so it becomes searchable and retrievable; the modular nature of the comments thread enables other actors to contribute further additions or compartmentally respond only to their specific interests. But the presence of the material workspace - the spacious kitchen, meetings rooms and whiteboards, supported a rapid and easy transition from digital interactions to physical conversations.

These conversations were not 'public' in the sense of fully open to all members of a society (or even anyone with access to the internet), but neither were they 'private' in the sense that the communication was directed at designated individuals and hidden from others (like email). The problem of how to conceptualise and describe this form of communication - a digital 'noticeboard' visible only to a membership club - has been mulled over by others. Some scholars conceive of emerging forms of 'privileged' social and work spaces (Harrison 2002; 2015) residing somewhere between the public and private. Others imagine new media opening up 'counter-publics' (Downey and Fenton 2003), active attempts to create alternative public spheres guided by non-hegemonic logics. Coworking, in a sense, weaves these two ideas together. For a period the Hub projected the 'yammer fall' - the digital wall which participants post on - on the main physical wall of the 'ballroom' space. This meant that the above conversations were not only visible through screens, but to anyone working in or passing through the physical space.

In the following interview extract Harry reflects on his experiences of Coworking, and articulates how the various layers of material, symbolic, social and digital fit together as part of the experience.

J: *"Tell me a little bit about why you choose to work from a Coworking space?"*

Harry: *Well there's a number of reasons why I wanted to be in a Coworking space. There was that very clear 'I wanted to hang out with the cool kids'. And that's...it's a complex mixture of seeking status, seeking just, whatever companionship and ah...the fun of it. So there was that. And being with other people. There was a kind of loneliness in being in my apartment. Like sometimes I have interns or volunteers coming in, but a lot of the time I was also working alone. It's a pretty apartment, it's nice in the city. But it can get a bit insane working alone here all day all the time.*

J: *Do you remember your first impressions of Coworking?*

Harry: *I remember that the place seemed...nice...it felt like entering some sort of cool, luxury lounge. It's kind of an abstract impression - but it was kind of a cool club to be a part of. Like oh, this is where the cool kids hang out. I'd like to hang out with the cool kids. So that kind of impression, you know the mix of colours, seeing Rick who's the embodiment of the cool kid. And the plants and the music...etc*

Coworking spaces. Ok so there's different levels of value, there's a basic value um...beautiful space. There's a kitchen. There's always milk in the fridge. The hosts are all outstandingly good. There's a printer, it works. If anything doesn't work, you ask them and it's fixed. So I just get...a good space to work where everything works. And I can ask someone if there's a problem and that has value - I get value out of that. And that's value that if or when I start making an income I would be very willing to pay for. Because I really see it in a kind of direct way.

J: *So transactional right?*

Harry: *It's very straight, transactional - there's a nice table, it's clean, the air smells good, it's pretty, the chair is comfortable, there's a kitchen, there's milk, there's tea, there's a printer, it works, there's a nice person who encourages me whenever I have a question. So basic office provision. Well, high quality office provision I think. So that's, value. It's the value of a good space.*

Another value that I see which would be, kind of more subtle or different is just emulation - there's all these other people working and doing cool stuff. So I don't feel, I just feel a kind of a buzz - oh there's other people doing cool things and going to work as well rather than just...being down...and it's yeah, it's better than staying home. To just, imitate other people working. So I think yeah, imitating other people who do a work activity, or that you think are doing...productive work activity encourages you to do it as well. Or at least this works for me.

Ah, it's kind of a smart community to ask questions of and test things with. Like overall I think the people there are rather benevolent and intelligent as a general thing. So I have an idea I want to try something, I can ask on yammer with people that I see there and I expect them and haven't been proven wrong. They've got to be smart, they've got to understand and they've got to be benevolent. They're not going to give me feedback that will be targeted at destroying me but on the contrary, help lift up the idea to the extent that they can...

J: *Although yammer is quite open it also has this boundary of hub members - through the hub yammer network. So I'm interested in the way you put a message on that, or what people share on that, and the strategies for sharing, let's call it 'strategic sharing'.*

Harry: *Yeah, well on yammer or any social media I actually use private messaging a lot. So I'd have about as much private messages as public messages. And the private messages are typically to one person.*

J: *And when you do the public messages, do you think a lot about the reason for sharing, is it just whimsical observations?*

Harry: *So the public messages...it's generally when I want feedback on an idea - that's when I'm most likely to share. And then there's the promotional one, there's not that many. Especially not on yammer, it's not the forum I try to push things. But it's more kind of seeking feedback, and it can be very limited - I've got a technical problem I need someone to help me find the right way to create an online form. I'll do a public message plus tagging the people that I know are likely to have expertise. You know, it's just simpler than sending ten private messages or a private message to ten people and it's just: "I have a technical problem - I want to do that - and I don't know what's the best tool". For that I will not think twice, just send it. And sometimes it's a new idea so these I will kind of think about it and draft a message multiple times before sending it. There's probably stuff like...' I could share that...should I do it' and it will turn in my mind for a while before I say 'ok, I want to send this thing' at a moment when you feel the impulse...so I'll share. "Lately I've had this idea and I want to do this thing...what do you think?*

J: *And has that been valuable?*

Harry: *It has been! Yeah yeah yeah. Yammer has been. So there was one recently where I said, 'I want to try this possibility of opening a forum where people can share failure...blah blah blah'. And there's been, whatever, thirty people engaging with the trial. We*

had a stone soup⁷⁷ and there's something coming out of it. So generally these have been very beneficial. I remember doing a thing at Hub last year where I tried to set up a language group. In the end it failed people stopped coming but there was a lot of engagement on the trial. So typically these will have quite a lot of people."

Naturally, not all Coworking experiences were immediately so rich and multilayered. Here Janelle describes the contrast between her early impressions of Coworking spaces and her later perception of their value after more intimate social experiences.

J: *"When did you first come into contact with Coworking?
What was your first experience of Coworking?"*

Janelle: *December 2010 Hub, just before Hub launched a Coworking space they had a Christmas party - which was a social Melbourne Christmas party. Two of my close friends were working at Yammer at the time and they launched their company out of Hub and so I was going there to catch up with them for lunch...I became more involved in the community and began to understand how it worked and the cost and benefits of working in those spaces. As I got more involved in Hub I got more involved in the tech community in Melbourne and kind of branched out and built relationships with Nathan and Pat over at Inspire 9 and Nick [at Electron Workshop] and kind of got to understand the geography of technology and communities in Melbourne. What they are, how they work, how they interact together, why they're different. I think spending more time there, that's when I kind of developed more of a relationship with the Coworking community in Melbourne...*

⁷⁷ 'Stone Soup' was a regular potluck-style dinner event where participants would bring food and a brief story to share based on a theme. These various sharing practices are further elaborated in the following chapter.

J: *And what was your first impression, what did you think Coworking was?*

Janelle: *I didn't really know, I just thought that...initially I just thought Coworking was a bunch of hippies sitting in a space...sharing and listening to music because they couldn't afford a studio. That was my initial impression.*

J: *And did you include your friends in that?*

Janelle: *Well no, a lot of my friends were...I think kind of exceptions, they were part of the successful startups, or they were the person who worked at the Hub company who is a bit more...a bit different...I got to look at people who were highly involved in the community and observe how they were involving themselves and they were staying on a Friday afternoon to have drinks and have these incredible conversations and this was early on with the community was a lot smaller and everyone would hang around on a Friday night and they would talk about this, we will talk about everything from their future of working, the future of the dark areas of West Africa and how the cables that they're laying down were essentially going to die out in a few years, and how that was going to affect the future of the internet. The conversations back then were very interesting and that was just around this smaller more intimate community, that was before we had really created a reputation.*

J: *Who are the people you remember from that time?*

Janelle: *...the early members had very strong personalities and they were also at the forefront of what was going on at the time and Hub was the first of its kind in Melbourne, so they were the early adopters*

of a culture and they worked very hard to I guess informally form...this feel, it was a very intimate feeling, that was great at the beginning and that's how I really perceived great Coworking to be - which was that you knew everyone in the space. You could work very silently and kind of still bounce ideas off each other, because I felt like there was that trust and the knowledge on what other people were doing, but also the ability to stumble on something great because people were 100% engaged in what they were doing. And that was my impression of it...

Janelle's initial impression of a '*bunch of hippies that couldn't afford a studio*', gave way to a sense of '*incredible conversations*', amongst a '*small, intimate community*'. Janelle goes on to foreshadow the tension between the community and commercial goals underpinning the organisation of Coworking, a theme which will be returned to in the final chapters.

During the period described above, Janelle was a full time employee of a large professional services firm, although she later resigned from her role to pursue freelance work. As her example illustrates, one did not need to be looking for an office workspace to be drawn into this social world. Here Asha describes her discovery of Coworking through attending a design jam whilst also still a full time employee at Kmart.

J: *"How did you become involved with Coworking?"*

Asha: *'Well the first...point of connection was the first design jam I'd been to. So the first jam that really changed my life was at the Hub. So I came to this place coming from Kmart, everybody was happy. The walls were colourful. They were there because they wanted to*

be. They were talking about design. I was like - 'this is amazing!' That was the first spark that I needed to do something similar.

J: *So I want to ask you more about this first experience - what was your impression about what the place was?*

Asha: *I didn't understand a lot of the Coworking concept. I thought it was a design office, I thought it was an agency that ran the event. I was really not ...even service design was super new to me. So I walked in, they were doing the event already, everybody was screaming, having a very fun, brainstorming session. And then I started understanding - no I wasn't understanding anything, I was just enjoying a lot, it felt really good to be there.*

I couldn't understand everything that was going on. But during the weekend I think maybe through questions and people explaining to me what the space was about and the event and getting - oh everybody works from different companies and this is an event that we are coming together - so I started to feel more like understanding the whole point. But I thought it was amazing.

So when I decided to do my first event. I started attending events here at the Hub - so Collaboratory events and innovation events so I could meet people and invite them for my jam. So that's kind of how I started and it's working a lot. So for a long time Coworking spaces for me was about me going into events, meeting people, and possibly hosting events. It's only now, so 2014, that I don't have a job - I'm starting my own company - it's only now I'm looking at them as a Coworking space to work from."

Asha wasn't looking for an office environment, she was looking for a way of working that was different from what she had experienced in the corporate world. The answer

she found was at an event held in a Coworking space. Like Janelle, this was the beginning of a process that saw her eventually exit organisational employment to pursue her own venture.

For these participants and many others, Coworking spaces became portals to worlds of new conversations and new ways of working. In the Hub's case, the undergirding logic of cooperation was sustained in the early phase by a mythos - encouraged both by the enterprise and other Coworkers - of being non-standard, not the 'status quo' or 'business as usual'. This mythos, drawing on institutional logics rooted in the cooperative dynamics of communities, was enacted and sustained through a range of Coworking *social practices*. These practices, such as 'welcoming', 'introducing', 'connecting' and 'sharing', will be discussed in analytical detail in the following chapter. Their collective effect, in addition to the aforementioned discussion of social identity and organic solidarity, was to foster the requisite pool of trust that enabled the discovery and exchange of useful information. This trust was important in supporting productive relations and innovation in an entrepreneurial context that relied on the open discussion of ideas in the absence of formally detailed contractual arrangements (Nooteboom 2007).

The larger 'Coworking project' assembled material, conceptual, social and digital components into distinct experiences that frequently blended work with learning and a playful sociality. These factors positioned Coworking *spaces* as 'focal points' of mutual identification for actors attracted to emerging forms of non-standard work. The conceptual, social, material and digital dimensions of Coworking enabled the spaces to become 'boundary objects' around which various communities of practice could coordinate and cohere. Their status as boundary objects was assisted by Coworking *practices* which create methods for the discovery and exchange of useful information and help foster trust between Coworkers. These aspects combined in the experience of many actors to position Coworking as a doorway for learning how to find meaningful and enduring work through non-standard arrangements. When these elements were appropriately arranged and aligned, many Coworkers had affecting experiences, as described in the following account:

“[Coworking] has this magical dimension that although people come from all sorts of backgrounds and with a variety of experiences, there is something which unifies us. Maybe it’s a collective set of values? It seems to underpin every interaction and conversation I have. We all seem to be coming from the ‘same space’ of believing in the good of the world, our opportunity to effect change and confidence that an open collaborative approach is the best way to achieve that.”

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has been guided by the question why people Cowork. Based on the origin stories and motivations illustrated in the empirical material gathered for this thesis, it has argued that many Coworkers were engaged in some core common activities. These included:

- problematising standard work;
- leaving standard employment arrangements;
- searching for more meaning through work; and
- viewing Coworking as a portal to new worlds of work.

Whilst for analytical purposes I have separated these processes and represented them as logically distinct, even sequential phases, in reality these processes were overlapping, iterative and often took place concurrently. Few Coworkers were following a clear plan or cognisant of how their actions accorded with the above categories. As discussed, perhaps the most defining quality of the non-standard creative knowledge work is uncertainty about what one is or should be doing. Many Coworkers felt they were forging a unique path with little guidance from received models of work and, perhaps ironically, this is partly why discovering a mutuality of

working experience in others through Coworking became such a valued experience. The claim made here is not that the above categories were equally applicable to all Coworkers' experience, but that they formed defining aspects of the early *culture* of Coworking, a culture that was often set in opposition to perceptions of standard work and organisational life. That the Hub and other early Coworking spaces came to be viewed as thresholds hidden in plain sight that, once crossed, opened the Coworker to new relationships, new ideas, a new sense of what is possible through working experience. This was felt most profoundly in the early stages of experience with non-standard work, when uncertainty was at its height. As Coworker's enterprises or practices matured, some of this enthusiasm for serendipitous encounters waned, and their relationship with the Coworking enterprise adopted a more transactional flavour. The thesis will now turn to *how* people Cowork, and examine in more detail the particular social practices and affordance of Coworking spaces that enabled this value to be realised.

Chapter 6: Practices

How they Cowork

This thesis has employed communities of practice theory as an overarching theoretical framework in which to investigate Coworking. Social practices, as the name suggests, are a central feature of communities of practice theory (CoP). This chapter will focus on a collection of Coworking practices, how they are related and what they afford their practitioners. In doing this, it is guided by the second research question, 'how they Cowork' by describing and explaining Coworking as a 'project' - a collection of activities enmeshed with the socio-digital-material world that collectively carry a 'purpose' (Schatzki 2001). However, before launching into this analysis of Coworking, it is worth stating something about the field of practice theory, the significance of the 'practice turn' in organisational studies and the theoretical repertoire employed in analysing the empirical material in this chapter.

On practice theory

Most accounts of practice theory begin by noting the diversity of the field, that there is no single formation of practice but rather a collection of theories of practice. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's 'Outline of a theory of practice' (1972) and Giddens' 'Central problems in social theory: action, structure and contradiction in social analysis' (1979) are generally regarded as seminal works in the genealogy of the tradition⁷⁸. Both texts were concerned with the most enduring puzzles of social theory: the appropriate conception of how the social world is constituted and reproduced, the extent to which 'the social' affects 'the individual' through the influence of institutions, systems, even 'society' at large; and how 'the individual' can affect 'the social', or the capacity of actors to make choices, innovate in their actions

⁷⁸ Reaching back further into philosophical roots, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Marx and even Aristotle are also often cited as earlier sources of inspiration.

and (sometimes) transform their circumstances, including the institutions and systems in which they are embedded. What distinguished these early works were their attempts to offer an alternative path through the protracted dualistic debates between materialism and idealism, determinism and voluntarism, structure and agency that had dominated social theory for over a century. In this sense the 'practice turn' beckoned a recasting of the sociological imagination.

Bourdieu, Giddens, Ortner, Taylor, Schatzki and other practice theorists implore us to examine social 'practices' as the primary unit of analysis in understanding human affairs, rather than look to 'individuals' or 'systems' as the fundamental causal agents⁷⁹. Social practices are nexuses of human activities, collections of 'doings and sayings' that occur in arrangements with the material world (Schatzki 2016). Usually for human activities to be considered 'practices' in these formulations, they need to be socially 'recognised forms of activity' (Barnes 2001) and thus tend to contain routine, identifiable elements, at least from the view of a 'practice literate' community (MacIntyre 1981). However, just like biological reproduction in the natural world, the enactment of practices over time always contain small irregularities or unexpected elements. Furthermore, practices do not persist as hermetic islands of activity but are performed in proximity with other practice bundles so that copying, borrowing and hybridity is an inevitable feature at the edges (Warde 2005). Thus the practice lens positions change as much as stability within even apparently innocuous forms of social activity.

Practices are organised in relation to other practices and arrangements with other bodies, organisms and artefacts. Practices can also be conceived within hierarchically nested relationships within which we may analytically distinguish

⁷⁹ It is important to note that these theorists have some notable differences in their conceptual schemes surrounding practices. Several authors (Reckwitz 2002; Nicolini 2012) also make the point, drawing on Wittgenstein, that the term 'social practices' is tautological, as for activities to be 'recognised' as practices they must be inherently social, and thus necessarily overlain with normative and moral dimensions. As compelling as this logic is, I have initially included the prefix 'social' to emphasise this dimension for readers that may be less familiar with these debates.

narrower 'tasks' that constitute broader 'projects' (Schatzki 2001). For example 'cooking practices', may contain within them tasks such as washing, cutting, boiling and serving in arrangements with their accompanying material artefacts, taps, knives, stoves, pots and plates. But cooking practices might themselves make up a broader project of 'entertaining guests', where cooking is conjoined with other practices such as cleaning, lighting candles, selecting music, welcoming guests etc. As such any empirical investigation of social practices may involve 'zooming in' to examine fine grained activities or 'zooming out' (Nicolini 2009) to consider how these local practices are influenced by other networks of associations, relationships and 'entanglements' across time and space (Latour 2005)⁸⁰.

Practice theory points to the importance of the body in routines⁸¹ (Wacquant 2004), and its 'entanglement' with objects, materials, and technology (Orlikowski 2009) rather than viewing language as the primary window into the social world (Rouse 2006). This theoretical leaning bolsters the case for ethnographic methods and their emphasis on field observations and participation in bodily practices and routines in motion with the sociomaterial environment, rather than exclusively relying on the accounts and post-hoc explanations of actors through interviews (Barley and Kunda 2001).

Varieties of practice theory have left a marked effect upon anthropology (Ortner 1983) and sociology (Giddens 1987) but have also spread to other disciplines such as science and technology studies (Rouse 1996), media studies (Couldry 2004; Postill 2010), entrepreneurship (Johannisson 2008) and organisational studies (Brown and Duguid 2001; Miettinen et al. 2009; Nicolini 2012). Over the last two decades, the broad field of practice theory has had a significant impact on the turn

⁸⁰ Whilst Latour does not consider himself part of the practice theory community, 'Actor Network Theory' has had a considerable influence on recent debates within practice theory, even if it is sometimes positioned as an alternative theoretical formulation of the social from which to distinguish itself (for example in Schatzki 2016).

⁸¹ Postill summarises the field of practice theory as '*a body of work about the work of the body*' (2010:8)

away from viewing *organisations* as (initially) bounded entities, or (later) communities of discourse, towards the study of *organising* as open ended social processes (Clegg et al. 1996). Amongst these influences, theories of situated learning and communities of practice were early contributors to this reorientation of the field (Lave and Wenger 1991; Gherardi et al. 1998)⁸².

Whilst 'practices' are at the heart of its formulation, communities of practice theory has tended to emphasise the network of social relations that sustains a regime of practices, and how learning and socialisation into such a regime is entangled with intersubjective experiences of meaning, identity and belonging more than some practice theorists⁸³. 'Legitimate Peripheral Participation' (LPP) was the earlier concept introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) that sought to demonstrate how learning and skill development occur through habitual activities distributed amongst a network of social relations rather than being primarily a cognitive process undertaken by individuals. LLP proposed a diffuse form of apprenticeship amongst a community of practitioners as a contrast to individualistic cognitive theories of learning. Whilst this early work was influential and generally well received (see for example Weick 1995), Wenger's subsequent promotion of the term 'communities' (of practice) has led to some consternation amongst practice theory and organisational scholars (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998; Fox 2000; Contu and Wilmot 2000; Swan et al. 2002; Contu and Wilmot 2003; Handley et al. 2006; Roberts 2006; Amin and Roberts 2008)

⁸⁴.

⁸² Corradi et al. (2010) claim that in addition to this 'learning as practice' stream, a 'technology as practice' and 'strategy as practice' also did much to steer the field of organisational studies towards the practice lens. Nicolini (2012) argues that if we relax the condition of the word 'practice', we might add the influence of Bourdieu's Praxeology, Engeström's Activity Theory, Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology, Latour's Actor Network Theory and Czarniawska's Neo-Institutionalism as all supporting the case for the investigation of organisation as social processes.

⁸³ For example Orlikowski's (2009) emphasis on the role of the 'sociomaterial' or Schatzki's (2016) recent insistence on a 'flat ontology'.

⁸⁴ The Journal of Management Studies (2006 43:3) dedicated a multi-author discussion to such controversies.

Although these critiques have been sustained for close to two decades, they generally fall into four interrelated classes. First, practice theory adherents express a concern that the term 'community' may unintentionally reintroduce static, functionalist assumptions about the social world that neutralise the processual ontology that underpins much of the innovative character of practice theory, and thus diminish its analytical and methodological power (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998; Gherardi 2001). Second, that the term community can gloss over the contested nature of social relations, and its subsequent foregrounding in the literature has been accompanied by a backgrounding of robust theories of power, including references to ideology, hegemony and alienation and a recognition that learning practices are conditioned by history and language that serve particular interests (Contu and Wilmot 2000; 2003; Fox 2000). Third, that the discourse of communities of practice has been instrumentalised and exploited as a rhetorical device to serve the interests of managers as a 'technology of control' that may not align with workers' interests (Swan et al. 2002; Contu and Wilmot 2003). Finally, there is a concern that 'communities of practice' has become something of a homogenised, reified term applied to many forms of collective learning activity, especially in the field of management, and social interactions and that practices would be better analysed using more precise constructs (Amin and Roberts 2008; Lave 2008)⁸⁵.

Nevertheless, these critiques, as insightful as they are, do not reveal fatal flaws or dispute the fundamental insights about the social character of learning and practice first proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). As long as we clearly define what we mean by a 'community' of practitioners, we can employ the term without unwittingly falling under the spell of an outdated functionalism, a romantic longing to discover a *Gemeinschaft*, or a manipulative managerial instrumentalism (Amit 2010). We can be attentive to the complex asymmetries of power relations and the wider systems and

⁸⁵ Many of these critiques take aim more directly at Etienne Wenger's later work than the earlier collaboration with Jean Lave, and often note the burgeoning offers to 'help' organisations construct 'communities of practice' by management consultants, including by Wenger himself.

institutions in which practices are embedded, and recognise that learning and participation are always affecting the conjoined fabric of 'power-knowledge' (Foucault 1966). The use of CoP framework here assumes that it is the shared Coworking *practices* that distinguish an objective 'community' of practitioners (as an observable network of social interactions between actors) and give rise to a subjective sense of 'community' (as experiences of meaning, identity and belonging described by actors) rather than a notion of 'community' as some stable social entity that gives rise to practices (Nicolini 2012). In this sense, it adopts CoP as a way of looking at the social world, not a 'thing to be found' out in the world (Lave 2008: 290).

This approach should be quite intuitive considering the recency and transience of the Coworking 'community' discussed here. LLP and CoP theory was developed drawing on ethnographic studies of learning and apprenticeship largely in contexts 'far from late capital'⁸⁶ (Lave 2008: 288). By contrast Coworkers are adopting the term community within the innards of the 'new economy' and 'late capital'. These Coworkers are of interest here precisely because at first glance they appear to represent the very opposite of 'traditional communities', and yet in many instances are finding meaning, reframing identities and crafting a sense of belonging through a novel bundle of social practices which make up Coworking as a larger, shareable project. As argued in this thesis, *learning* how to work well under non-standard conditions forms an underpinning logic that gives coherence and direction to these practices. Learning how to be a 'better' (social) entrepreneur or freelancer frames the 'teleoaffective structure' (Schatzki 2001) of Coworking.

⁸⁶ Five ethnographic case studies were presented in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. These included Yucatec Midwives in Mexico, Via and Gola tailors in West Africa, Navy quartermasters in the USA, non-drinking alcoholics from Alcoholics Anonymous in the USA and meat-cutters in supermarkets in the USA. Lave notes that only the last example covers 'situated learning in its alienated, commoditised relations in contemporary life' (2008:288). The non-USA examples in particular can lend themselves to interpretations that posit an ahistorical community passing down traditional knowledge and practices over time.

This is why CoP and LLP theory help elucidate the present analysis of Coworking social practices and interactions. They make the case that learning ‘techniques’ can not be shorn from the complex sets of social relations that surround the practices, perhaps even the range of cultural accoutrements that accompany practitioners (such as styles of dress, topics of conversation, bodily postures and forms of emoting, tastes and habits of leisure etc⁸⁷). These cultural markers coalesce to distinguish the boundaries of the group from others and assist in enabling mutual recognition amongst insiders. Increasing ‘legitimate participation’ within a community of practitioners tends to involve negotiating many of these aspects surrounding the performance of the practice in question.

In this chapter I analyse seven practices in detail that make up Coworking as a ‘project’ that is distinct from merely working alongside others in any public or shared environment. These include ‘welcoming, introducing and curating’; ‘connecting and constructing shared heuristics’; ‘declaring purpose over profit’; ‘blending the personal and professional’; various ‘sharing practices’; and attempts at ‘shaping the institutional logics’. Whilst CoP theory provides an overarching theoretical framework which guides the analysis, I have followed the more eclectic ‘toolkit’ approach suggested by Nicolini (2012) and adapted the conceptual repertoire from some other practice theorists in dialogue with a wide variety of social and organisational theory where appropriate to make sense of the empirical material at hand.

⁸⁷ In my field research I found that these extended to discussions of television series, films, novels, new bars and cafes, new travel destinations. Whilst these topics of discussion certainly overlapped with other communities of interest, they had a particular flavour, Bhutan or Burning Man were more likely to be discussed than Disneyland or Las Vegas. Shared lunches were instructive here, Coworkers tended to bring items like fresh avocados and goats cheese to these events rather than industrially packaged food, or takeaway ‘fast’ food etc.

6.1 Welcoming, introducing and curating

Charis: *“It’s so funny now, because I didn’t know much about it...but when I walked into this Hub in Melbourne I had this sense - as lots of people say - of a ‘homecoming’. Like this is my place and this is how I imagined it would be. But I don’t know concretely what that was...And then we came in and spoke with Elizabeth who was on the desk. With Elizabeth it’s hard to put your finger on what is so special about her. But kind of some of the same things - not a self-promoter, she’s a great listener, and she gives you some structure or something. I don’t know. Did she introduce us to someone? I don’t know, she was just friendly.”*

Jules: *Warm and welcoming?*

Charis: *Yes but not ‘sweet’ welcoming in a bad way. And I guess the other thing was...it was clear that Elizabeth took it seriously and took the people in the space seriously. She was warm and friendly in a professional environment and so there was respect for what people were doing. It wasn’t like ‘hey guys let’s all try this...’ in a university level way...I was actually surprised when I saw her age...because it seemed like this was a ‘hip’ young place. But then I immediately respected that too. That this was not a one dimensional place.”*

Whilst the material and aesthetic aspects of Hub and other Coworking spaces did much to distinguish them from standard offices, the first human interactions were crucially important in establishing an affective relationship and positioning the appropriate sociality of the Coworking environment. Most Coworking spaces have ‘community manager’ or ‘host’ roles dedicated to this process. These roles are

usually the primary conduits through which new members are inducted into understanding how to use the space and 'socialised' into the distinct set of 'Coworking practices'.

Organisational socialisation

'Organisational socialisation', or the process by which newcomers become insiders, has been an object of significant scholarly interest over the past thirty years (Bauer et al. 2007). Van Maanen and Schein (1977) produced an early theoretical framework of organisational socialisation that has remained influential to this day. While their work precedes much of the explicit recognition of the practice theory orientation, their 'interactionist' conception of an organisation as 'collections of individuals' that develop a 'tacit mandate concerning what is correct and proper for a member of the group to undertake as well as the...proper way to go about such an undertaking' (1977:13) sits comfortably within a practice based view. Their model of organisational culture can be understood as a distinct, dense local collection of practices. In their words, upon becoming part of a new organisation, newcomers are socialised into 'long standing rules of thumb, a somewhat special language and ideology that help edit a member's everyday experience, shared standards of relevance as to the critical aspects of the work that is being accomplished, matter-of-fact prejudices, models of social etiquette and demeanour, certain customs and rituals suggestive of how members relate to colleagues, subordinates, superiors, and outsiders, and a sort of residual category of some rather plain 'horse sense' regarding what is appropriate and smart behaviour within the organisation and what is not' (1977:1). Although the formal body of organisational socialisation theory has largely been applied to standard organisational models of employment, it should be clear that this broader conception of organisational culture applies to club-like organisations such as Coworking spaces and even less formal communities of practice.

As outlined in the previous chapter, many newcomer Coworkers were engaged in a search for alternative forms of organising, especially a 'search for greater meaning

through work'. The Hub in particular made efforts to distinguish itself from the negative experiences of alienation, instrumental rationality, anomie and violations of autonomy that many Coworkers associated with the depersonalising effects of bureaucracy and corporate life (Hodson 2001), and which initially motivated them to exit standard employment arrangements to pursue self-employment and Coworking. Through cultivating this oppositional identity to representations of 'standard work', the Coworking project became constructed as a kind of mirror world, a canvas upon which Coworkers could project their preferred images of alternative work futures from the orthodox models they were attempting to leave behind. This effect was initially inculcated by Coworking staff members through two bundles of activities, 'direct communication practices' and 'indirect curation practices'.

Coworking space 'floor staff' - hosts and community managers⁸⁸ - were usually the initiators and leading carriers of these practices, although many of their prosocial aspects were also performed by a highly engaged inner circle of members, 'old timers' in CoP terms, and explicitly intended to be adopted and practiced by the wider Coworking membership body. Ideally, both the human hosts, and the digital-material environment, 'embodied' these qualities of difference in a way that was seen as 'authentic' - rather than a manipulative facade driven by a commercial agenda - by both prospective and established Coworkers, 'newcomers' and 'old-timers' alike. In practice this meant that interactions between hosts and Coworkers frequently took on a personalised, idiosyncratic (or 'non-standard') tone, even when instantiated through non-verbal acknowledgement such as smiles, nods, winks, waves, and various forms of touch (from hand clasps to hugs and kisses). Skilfully, appropriately and reliably reproducing this effect amongst Coworkers

⁸⁸ The appropriate name for this role has actually been the subject of some debate within the Coworking world. Whilst the rather generic 'community manager' has grown over time, some of the early Coworking actors argue the term misunderstands the innovative character of this role, and its use represents something of a regressive instrumentalisation of the original Coworking impulse. For a good example of these debates see the blog post and comments on '[*To build a strong community, stop 'community managing', be a tumbler instead*](#)' (Hillman 2014). The Hub network original advocated for the term 'host' which I will principally use here.

required a significant amount of ‘care work’ and ‘emotional labour’, a ‘managing of the heart’ (Hochschild 1983) or a self-disciplined affective performances on the part of hosts and the inner circle of members.

In the early years of Coworking, at least amongst the international Hub network, the host role was commonly performed as a part-time, rotating position amongst several core Coworking members. Hosting responsibilities were often undertaken in exchange for a waiver of membership fees to use the space on other, ‘non-hosting’ days in which a Coworker would pursue their own initiatives. One of the early hosts at the first Hub in Islington, London told me, *‘the essence of being a Host is being interested in people, and you can’t do that as a full time job because people can’t truly be interested in other people all the time’*⁸⁹. The early phase of Hub Melbourne attempted to implement this voluntary, exchange based arrangement but moved within the first year of opening to contracting and advertising for hosts as full-time employees. This change in strategy responded to the recognition that the host role often entailed ambiguous expectations, frequent interruptions and requests from members and was consequently both tactically challenging and emotionally draining. As one Coworker put it, *‘[the early era] was very hard on the hosts...people wanting things from them constantly’*. The transition to hiring hosts in formal employment roles did not entirely mitigate this effect, ‘backstage’ discussions of hosting still frequently entailed references to ‘burn out’ and the role appeared difficult to sustain for many employees beyond a year or so.

Merkel (2015) in her study of the Coworking host role across several sites distinguishes between ‘service provider’ and ‘visionary’ hosts, and notes that the latter in particular involved a considerable amount of ‘emotional and affective investment’⁹⁰. Appropriately describing the essence of the hosting role itself was

⁸⁹ This sentiment was expressed in private conversation outside of the formal interviews for this research.

⁹⁰ These distinctions broadly align with the framework presented in [Chapter 2.2](#) that observed the younger Coworking industry’s emphasis on immaterial value through culture,

often an object of inquiry by both hosts and some Coworking members. Although the reference to hospitality practices and the mystery of what ‘great dinner party hosts’ do was explicit and intentional, additional embellishments were often grasped for. In the Coworking circles I observed, good hosts were often said to ‘engineer serendipity’, or be comfortable navigating a ‘chaordic path’⁹¹. Merkel also notes how creative or organic metaphors were employed to make sense of their roles and gesture towards a different collection of practices than more familiar and instrumental roles such as ‘receptionist’, ‘facility manager’ or ‘conciierge’. Coworking hosts have described themselves as ‘social gardeners’, ‘orchestral conductors’, the ‘mother of the space’ and, perhaps most influentially, their practice as ‘curatorial’⁹² (Merkel 2015: 131).

I worked with two of the early hosts at Hub Melbourne to ‘codify’ their understanding of what hosts do for Coworking members in preparation for a workshop and they developed the following representations:

social connections and collaborative activities as distinct from the older serviced office industry’s emphasis on the material components such as location and office amenities.

⁹¹ The ‘chaordic path’ was a deliberate reference to Hock’s (1999) construction of an ideally creative organisation situating practice at some optimal point between chaos and order.

⁹² Merkel defines curatorial practices as ‘the intentional creation of interconnections between people, ideas, objects and places within a new context and narrative’. She further breaks down these curatorial practices into ‘assembling and arranging’, ‘creating and signifying new meanings’, ‘reframing, caring and exhibiting’ ‘all in order to create new work-related and social experiences in the city’ (2015:131).



Join [redacted] and [redacted] for a BDM hosting workshop April 19th 8:30am-10:30am



What is hosting?



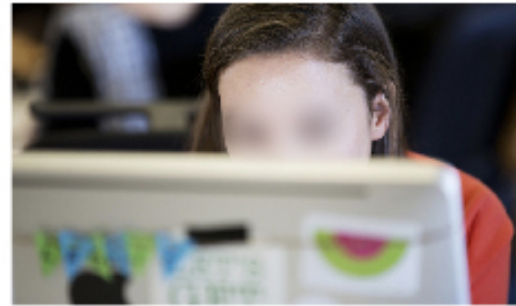
Introducing community members to the resources and knowledge they need



Building bridges between people that wouldn't ordinarily make a connection



Create a welcoming environment on behalf of your organisation



Making connections online



Listening to feedback



Identifying opportunities to enhance community collaboration

Figure 21: The essence of hosting

These metaphors and practices suggest that the goal of hosting was not simply to provide friendly transactional interactions with Coworkers but to cultivate a particular form of sociality, conceived here as a bundle of social practices, that Coworkers themselves take up and pass on. The adopted language of ‘curation’ implied that the realisation of this goal involves leaving symbolic traces in the physical and digital environment through the creation and arrangement of information and artefacts⁹³. Such ‘curatorial practices’ performed by hosts included frequent rearrangement of furniture (desks, chairs, plants, couches and whiteboards) to create an experience of novelty, of ‘freshness’, when entering the space. These acts forced Coworkers out of their habitual routines of navigating the environment, requiring them to choose anew where to walk and sit each day. This work, by necessity, was usually performed after hours and blended both creative design - in formulating new and pleasing arrangements, and physical labour - in actually moving chairs and tables in their new places.



Figure 22: Artefact curation

Other curatorial activities included the sourcing and placement of appropriate communication materials such as posters, artwork, postcards and poems on walls⁹⁴;

⁹³ This point, enabled by a ‘stigmatic environment’, will be further explored in [6.5: Sharing and working out loud](#).

⁹⁴ These artefacts were seldom neutral in their messaging but tended to carry either normative or irreverent messages.

the arrangement of books⁹⁵; the selection of background music (Hub commonly played a variety of ambient music genres throughout the day), the placement and care of plants, the location of games and recreation artefacts (such as bean bags, hammocks, gaming consoles, ping pong tables) and regular activity on the internal Coworking social media sites (posts, photos, likes and comments). Hosts were also typically responsible for the overall neatness of the physical environment, including handling the typical office politics around managing dishes and the kitchen⁹⁶.

Whilst the details of these material aspects are no doubt significant, the phenomenon of 'funky offices' that (at least superficially) blend work and recreation aesthetics have been covered elsewhere (for example Van Meel and Vos 2001) and are not the area of focus for this study. My purpose in reviewing these curatorial practices is simply to point out that not only were they 'fun' but that their symbolism tended to highlight values other than mere transactional efficiency, and that they were designed to position Coworking as representing an alternative form of working and organising in the minds of members. Finally, although I have teased apart various hosting practices for the purpose of analysis, they appeared most effective when they were both organised and animated by an overarching, almost counter-conventional narrative. I vividly recall for example that after witnessing some tensions around the amount of work required by hosts to sustain the positive affective atmosphere, one of the primary hosts at Hub Melbourne looked at me earnestly and spoke in the quiet and familiar terms of a confidant, *'it's not an easy endeavour Jules, we're trying to build a new world here...'*. Finding hosts that had

⁹⁵ Two early Coworking spaces in Melbourne had a trust based borrowing system where members could freely take books home and were only asked to 'tweet' when they borrowed and returned a book.

⁹⁶ I haven't dwelt on this issue here because it is a rather familiar example of the challenges of prosocial 'organisational citizenship' behaviour that equally exist in many non-Coworking office environments. Nevertheless, members taking responsibility for their own dishes (and sometimes others' dishes) was frequently held up as an example of a 'healthy' Coworking culture, so much so that one Coworking pioneer in NYC published an ebook called *'No more sink full of mugs: lighten your workload, increase participation and build better culture in your coworking space'* (Bacigalupo 2015)

this sense of belief in how their work contributed to such a vision was not an easy task.

Welcoming newcomers

One of the most important 'direct communication' practices that hosts performed was the 'personalised welcome' to newcomers. There was a distinct flavour to the Coworking welcome, paramount was the recognition of each Coworker as a 'unique individual' with particular interests and needs, as an 'end itself' rather than simply another customer or 'number' - a mere means toward a commercial end. This was enacted through finding out specific information about a member's background story, interests and what they might be looking for next; usually blended with positive affirmations about the members' ideas or projects. The welcome was most effective when it led quickly to relevant introductions to other members with matching or complementary interests, skills or resources. In the Hub, a group welcome was typically performed on Yammer accompanied by some private introductions to specific members. Here is an example:



Figure 23: The Coworking welcome

Introducing oneself

The invitation to introduce oneself via the digital platform established another Coworking practice, this time performed by the new member. Like the welcome, the 'Coworking introduction' had distinct qualities, introductions emphasising technical expertise, functional role or explicit sales pitches were rarely well received and often ignored. By contrast, the well crafted Coworking introduction did at least one of three things. First, it revealed a concern with values beyond the market, such as social justice or environmental sensitivity. Second, it displayed an interest in innovation and an idea of a novel approach to a conventional activity or status quo way of solving a problem status quo. Third, it blended a sense of personal narrative, some journey that began with a departure point (like exiting an employment role or moving to a

new city) and singled a destination, or at least an explorative adventure, and tended to reveal unexpected interests along the way. Here is an example:

Thanks David! Hello Hub Melbourne members! This is Angela and I've just arrived to Melbourne 4 days ago! I was Hub New York's Events Manager for 2 years and looking to work with innovative community and food organizations here in Melbourne where I can offer my community and events management expertise. Food is a huge passion of mine, and now I figured it's time to work on some yummy food projects during my stay in Melbourne :) I heard Melbourne is a foodie city like New York!!!

In addition to finding food projects to keep me busy, I'm also looking for a place to live here. If anyone has a room they are renting, please let me know. Thanks so much and I really look forward to being part of this wonderful community while I'm here!

These three elements, gesturing towards the importance of values or institutional logics beyond market transactions, embracing new ways of looking at problems and blending the personal and professional aspirations into a single story, did much to characterise the 'culture' of Coworking. Each of them can take the form of a social practice in itself which will be explored later in this chapter. The importance of this opening tone of engagement was especially clear when newcomers enacted the opposite - transaction oriented introductions that came across like advertisements. Introductions like the following were seldom responded to with enthusiasm:

Hey everyone I am new to the Hub so I thought I would introduce myself. My name is Sally Chen and I work at Magnetic Alliance, Magnetic Alliance is the growth partner for businesses worldwide, they help plan, implement and improve a business' growth by crossing three separate industries - consulting, recruitment and training. By combining these industries we have identified a way to

help our clients grow exponentially and with our company culture being focused on win-win -win situations we know that we have to not only implement our own recommendations but provide our clients with the best recommendations so when they grow and win out of that so do we.

The most artful introductions revealed information that was potentially useful to other Coworkers by helping clarify a newcomers' field of interests and expertise, but did this without violating any of the norms of Coworking culture - enacted here as 'discursive practices' through the preferred tone of communication. The importance of these explicit references to values, innovation and personal story lay in how they commenced the delicate social process of constructing trust (Weber and Carter 2003).

Feeling like home

The construction of trust between erstwhile strangers lay at the heart of the Coworking project. The greatest challenge was to foster trust, not only between interacting dyads, but in the common pool of Coworkers, nurture the expectation that simply by virtue of 'being there', others were likely to share some common values and a prosocial orientation. This trust, delicate as it was, formed the cultural foundation that enabled forms of cooperation and social learning between Coworkers that would otherwise be unlikely in the absence of more formal agreements. Such introductions that revealed some personal information only began the process. The practice offered an invitation for others to reciprocate, to 'humanise' social relations before engaging in explicit economic exchange. The process of reciprocal exchanges of personal information as a trust producing practice has been long recognised by social exchange theory in anthropology (e.g. Maus 1925), and sociology (e.g. Emerson 1976) and hostage theory within game theory and economics (e.g. Nooteboom 1995). Some of these explanations however have been critiqued for assuming an overly rational and self-interested calculation on the part of individuals, often downplaying the possibility of either altruistic behaviour or affective

commitment to a bounded 'community' (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). They also tend to frame exchange dilemmas between two actors (or organisations) rather than the multi-actor complexities of common resource pools (Cardenas and Ostrom 2004). The observation that Coworkers often employed alternative institutional logics in offering 'gifts' to the community will be further explored in the description of 'sharing' practices later in this chapter. The opportunities and challenges over time evoked by the cultivation of this immaterial, 'common pool of trust' will be theoretically elaborated and unpacked in Chapter 8. For now I simply make the observation that these distinct 'introducing practices' functioned as collections of doings and saying that 'signalled trustworthiness' to others in the Coworking community (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001).

The meeting of these two sets of practices, introducing and welcoming, in concert with the material aesthetics evoked a strong affective response in many Coworkers. This was commonly expressed as a 'feeling of finding a home'. Throughout the field research, I was struck by how frequently the word 'home' was used. Here are a collection of such responses:

- *"It's been like 'coming home' to a community that I haven't ever had before"*
- *"My home - my working home"*
- *"It just felt like home...from the first moment I walked in"*
- *"I feel very at home here"*
- *"Hub's like home for me"*
- *"Feeling like someone cares that you turn up, this is different to working at home"*
- *"In Hub Melbourne I've found business work here, I've embraced the whiteboards and hammocks. Energy, inspiration...finding a home."*

Maria's description below of the meaning behind her discovery of Coworking is an apt, if extreme example of this wider phenomenon:

Jules: *“What was happening in your life during that time when you discovered Coworking. Did you have a group of friends you would have called a community at the time?”*

Maria: *I didn't because I'd moved around so much. I was completely dislocated. I went from Melbourne, to Sydney to living literally on couches in LA to back. I had no sense of home at all and I constantly craved it. I started taking photographs of all the beds I was sleeping in, because I was sleeping in so many beds and different places that I didn't know where I was. I brought this little sign called 'home'. And wherever I was my little home and I'd put the sign up saying 'home'. It was my suitcase. I didn't have a home, except where I was. And that was really stressful, I really love home and a sense of place. It's probably from when I grew up, family was so important and I'd become so distant from that - chasing these dreams and these weird things. And that why the Coworking space was an anchor for me...”*

The feeling of being a 'misfit' inside organisations, of finding dissatisfaction with some of the basic requirements of standard employment was an unsettling, even crisis inducing experience for many Coworkers prior to exiting organisational membership. Consequently the discovery of a 'place' for them, populated by others 'like them' was a source of early, if short-lived, comfort. The cultivation of this feeling of homeliness thus provided an enduring sense of affection and loyalty for the Coworking enterprise. The feeling evoked an alternative institutional logic than the market dynamic of customers and services providers, after all 'homes' are usually shared by 'families'. The following chapter will explore how in many cases this perception did eventually erode, and was accompanied by some degree of mourning at the loss.

The purpose of this section has been to outline the distinct features of Coworking welcoming and introducing practices that often resulted in a feeling of homecoming, of belonging to community. These direct communication and indirect curation practices were usually led by Coworking hosts, but supported by the old-timer inner circle that would welcome newcomers, especially if they performed the appropriate signals of trustworthiness in their introductions. These practices formed the initial phase of organisational socialisation. Finally, hosting practices left markedly affective responses in newcomers, but this required significant emotional and physical investment to sustain. The next section will examine other techniques Coworkers themselves employed to establish social connections and bridge cognitive distance through the recognition or construction of shared heuristics.

6.2 Connecting and establishing shared heuristics

In early 2012, Hub Melbourne had just opened the larger ‘ballroom’ space, more than doubling its physical size from the previous two ‘green’ rooms. The membership was rapidly growing but still discovering how to actually work together. This involved Coworkers experimenting and making sense of the relationship between social norms and territorial boundaries within the space. Exploring what kind of subtle signals, such as eye contact and smiles, encouraged conversation; and which others, such as wearing headphones or fixing gazes on screens, implied someone should not be interrupted. These practices tended to cluster around particular territories within the Coworking space, some areas developed an atmosphere of uninterrupted work whilst other zones appeared more encouraging of interactions. Like most workplaces, the kitchen in general and the kettle in particular became focal points for interactions between strangers, mostly because the few minutes it took waiting for the kettle to boil was easily perceived as idle time for conversation. In most office environments such occasions are relatively ‘safe’ spaces in which to initiate interaction, there is a short and clear time horizon on the exchange - the time it takes for the kettle to boil - and a clear excuse to end the conversation politely if so desired once this time is up. The following incident describes one such encounter from this time between myself and a Coworker I hadn’t previously met.

Jules: *Hey buddy I’m Jules. What are you working on here?*

Warrick: *Ah...my name’s Warrick and I’m just trying to finish off writing a master’s thesis...*

Warrick slightly looked away, appearing somewhat ambivalent about actually talking to me. Nevertheless, being in an enthusiastic mood that day I pressed ahead.

***Jules:** Oh great - I love research. What is your masters thesis about?*

***Warrick:** It's sort of about creativity and creative processes and futures...*

Warrick trailed off vaguely in a tone I've become much more familiar with since undertaking my own thesis - offering the most general possible sentence about the topic which offers someone the chance to either change the subject and thus gauges the sincerity of their interest in the question. In this case I had both an interest in the topic and suspected I knew which program Warrick was enrolled in - there was only one 'futures' program in Australia and a small number in the world.

***Jules:** Oh you must be doing the Masters of Strategic Foresight and Swinburne! I know a few people there. What sort of theory are you drawing on in your thesis? I might know some of it - Csikszentmihalyi's flow states? Some of the design thinking research on cognitive processes? Are you looking at any psychological developmental models - Robert Kegan's or Suzanne Cook-Greuter's work?*

Warrick's eyes widened in surprise and he suddenly appeared much more interested in the conversation.

***Warrick:** Oh...you know about all that stuff?*

Jules: *Yeah, I've been pretty interested in it the last few years and know some of the folks in the integral theory scene here. I was actually thinking we should start a regular meetup or club for folks interested in these ideas which we could run out of the space...maybe we could set it up together?*

Warrick and I ended up sitting down for over an hour and discussing his masters program, the boutique disciplines of strategic foresight, integral theory and its (now contentious) use of models from adult developmental psychology. Warrick not only became a great research participant and regular interlocutor about the culture of Coworking but an ongoing friend, despite eventually moving away from Melbourne.

If social participation and collaborative activity lies at the heart of the value proposition of the Coworking project, then working out whom to connect with and how is one of the central activities. Whilst the 'welcoming, introducing and curating' practices previously outlined were often led by Coworking staff, much of the credibility of the culture promoted by Coworking enterprises tended to be assessed through the variety of experiences when 'making connections' with other Coworkers. It was within the field of these experiences that Coworkers often made decisions about how much the Coworking project 'walked its talk' or genuinely enabled collaboration and reflected a felt sense of community.

I recount the exchange with Warrick above for two reasons. First, because such simple encounters were some of the most commonly celebrated experiences by Coworkers. Over the years I was told numerous versions of the same basic story, '*we just got talking in the kitchen one day and discovered that we were both interested in [X]...*'. In the simplest sense, the bounded digital-material environment of Coworking provided a spatial context for strangers to encounter each other and discover some shared interests and complementary skills. In many ways Coworking

spaces operated as a kind of microcosm of the dynamics of the city itself⁹⁷. Second, despite the commonality of basic form, this particular anecdote stood out in my notes as one example of an exchange that rapidly moved from polite disinterest to deep and sustained social engagement. In fact this story became something of a running joke between Warrick and I - that we met under circumstances in which he had little desire to talk to me until he realised that instead of merely distracting him I might be able to assist with the very conundrum he was mulling over. In this case, the change happened because we quickly located a rather esoteric set of 'shared heuristics'⁹⁸. I will return to this subject of establishing 'shared heuristics' after a brief discussion on some underpinning theory that points to the importance of this process for Coworking.

There were a number of key practices that supported the possibility of connecting with others and the discovery of mutual or complementary interests. The interaction with Warrick I describe could be called a spontaneous encounter between individuals. Naturally, such interactions led easily to planned encounters between individuals in the future, whether with the same actors or through personal introductions to others. The digital platforms inside Coworking spaces also enabled a form of spontaneous encounters as groups. Here is such an example of a simple invitation to celebrate a birthday:

⁹⁷ Here I am referring to the major theories used to explain why cities, and indeed particular locations within cities, have long been recognised as centres of human innovation. These include dynamics of agglomeration, density, specialisation, proximity, clustering and sorting that drive efficiencies in production and learning (Storper and Scott 2013).

⁹⁸ This process of pleasant surprise at encountering shared esoterica in conversations with others should be familiar to many academics.

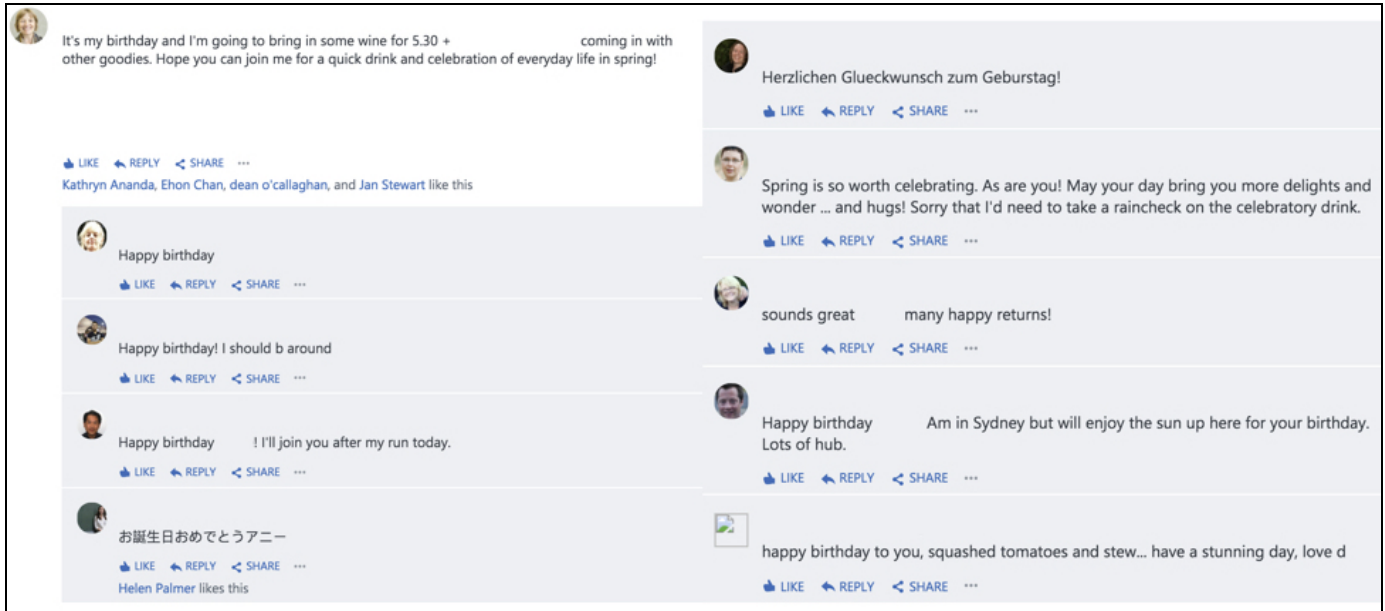


Figure 24: Join me for my birthday

These social occasions supported introductions between various members. There were also encounters planned group encounters, not only the regular open house and shared lunches but often organised around a particular theme:



Figure 25: The Bcorp morning tea

Amiability and utility

In broad terms there were two dimensions which I observed being considered when Coworkers were assessing the ease and value of connecting with others, what we might call ‘amiability’ and ‘utility’. By amiability I refer to the general responsiveness and friendliness of the group towards newcomers, and questions or interruptions posed by other Coworkers. As previously discussed, a small inner band of ‘old-timer’ Coworkers were consistent in welcoming newcomers, suggesting connections and responding to general questions. By utility I refer to the relevance and value of information discovered through such connections towards solving the distinct problems each Coworker faced. Some common categories of these problems included finding appropriate introductions for sales opportunities; discovering insights towards developing new products or services; seeking perspectives that help think through a new business ideas or even a new career pathway. In general, the solution space provided through Coworking involved the discovery of either new information; new connections to people; or a strengthening of existing ties. These activities and alliances are recognised components of ‘entrepreneurial deal-making’ (Scarborough et al. 2013)⁹⁹.

Coworking experiences were most valued when these two vectors of amiability and utility intersected - that people were friendly and the information exchanged useful. For this ‘sweet spot’ to operate, Coworkers needed to share enough to find common ground but be different enough to offer complementary information, skills or

⁹⁹ Scarborough et al. (2013) provide a rich discussion on the iterative processes of ‘*entrepreneurial deal-making*’, or ‘*securing resources in pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities*’, making the case that it is a much broader social process than simple economic exchange or legal promise, but entails the ‘*creation and exploitation of social ties*’. ‘*The deal making process requires entrepreneurial actors to create and maintain wide networks of weak ties while simultaneously developing stronger collaborative ties that will enable opportunities to be realised.*’ (2013:1203):

“First, deal makers are involved in selecting particular ties from a large number of weak ties...Second deal makers need to develop strong collaborative ties that support the intensive information exchange and joint problem-solving required between the parties”

(Scarborough et al. 2013:1204)

connections. In reflecting on why she Coworks, one participant summed up this point well in the following response:

“It’s about friendly and like-minded people to connect to but also the opportunity to connect for those that are from ‘outside’ of normal networks (for example corporate and government). It’s a place to test your ideas and build ideas, networks and knowledge.”

Optimal cognitive distance

Theoretically we can understand this sweet spot as a zone of ‘optimal cognitive distance’ between Coworkers. Nootboom (2000; 2012) developed this theory when considering how organisational cultures can best support innovation¹⁰⁰. Cognition is used here in its maximal sense, including mental schema, value judgements, emotions and feelings. Cognition is also conceived as socially situated, bound to the unique array of personal connections that make up the social world of an individual and frame the process of sense-making. As such, different life paths are understood to result in distinct cognitive and moral schema that are used to interpret, understand and respond to the world. A group of individuals with similar cognitive schema are said to have ‘low cognitive distance’, a group with very diverse schema are said to have ‘high cognitive distance’. Nootboom proposed that cognitive distance and innovation performance have an ‘inverted U-shaped relationship’ (Nootboom 1999). In other words, that too small a distance within a group will have a tendency towards ‘lock-in’, or ‘group think’ and not promote the novel combinations of ideas that

¹⁰⁰ In developing the theory of cognitive distance Nootboom drew upon on insights from American Pragmatist philosophy (James, Peirce, Dewey and Mead) into the iterative processes of how meaning is made in the context of ‘what works’; and what he calls the ‘school of embodied cognition’ (Damasio 1995, 2003; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Although he doesn’t cite ‘practice theory’ as an influence on the development of his thinking, his description of ‘*entrepreneurial bricolage*’ and how meaning and intention are bound to action is remarkably commensurate with the practice based approach outlined in the beginning of this chapter.

characterise innovation. As cognitive distance grows, other things remaining equal, innovation performance should improve, as a wider repertoire of concepts and experiences are able to be drawn upon. However, once cognitive distance passes a certain point (of optimality), performance will likely decline, as the shared mental frames required for the absorption of novelty and translation between actors deteriorates, resulting in fragmentation of knowledge and connections. Hence Nooteboom proposed this zone of optimality where the diversity of perspectives is counterbalanced by enough social coherence that enables quick connections and trusted exchanges. To the extent that participants are seeking innovative solutions to common problems through Coworking, we would expect (optimal) cognitive distance between various actors to play a positive role.

Shared heuristics

For this reason identifying and fostering shared mental heuristics featured as a crucial practice that helped establish mutual understanding, engender trust, hastened the translation of ideas between actors and aid their diffusion throughout the network. In the early days there were a number of Coworkers that would stay back late during 'wine down', the regular Friday night gathering over drinks, to 'whiteboard' - physically draw and discuss various frameworks on the mobile whiteboards, explain them, and invite others to adapt and iterate them. These late night sessions in the physical Coworking space often overlapped with prior, looser connections that had been formed through internet mediated communication. Here is an example of how prior, looser connections became established:

Jules: *How did you connect with these people from Melbourne?*

Robert: *Just spontaneously, I think it was on Twitter and there was this crazy guy named Steve McDonald, and he was like this shaman guy and he posted this thing about Spiral Dynamics, and I was like what the fuck is that shit? But it got me really curious right? And then from that I got connected with Ralph, although I think I already knew*

of Ralph in an ambient kind of way, anyway I started talking Ralph John, Steve and the few others, and I remember coming down to see them a few times, but yeah our central connection was Spiral Dynamics.

Jules: *So it was Twitter plus Spiral Dynamics? That was the combination?*

Robert: *Sort of, yeah yeah... Plus like evolution of consciousness and like you know...but more recently I've also been going pretty nuts with GTD (Getting Things Done). Steve and I talk every week about this."*

In the early years, discovering shared frameworks had the kind of currency that shared acquaintances play in other social contexts. When Warrick and I first sat down to talk, this became a primary topic of conversation: *'Do you know Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis framework? No? Oh it's really cool, it's like an iceberg with four layers...'*. Frameworks that could be visually represented and easily sketched were the easiest to share through both the physical whiteboards and various digital media, and variations on 'complexity' and 'systemic' approaches were a common theme, underpinned by a notion that these were lacking in conventional approaches to problem solving, organising and commercial activity. Here is such an example:

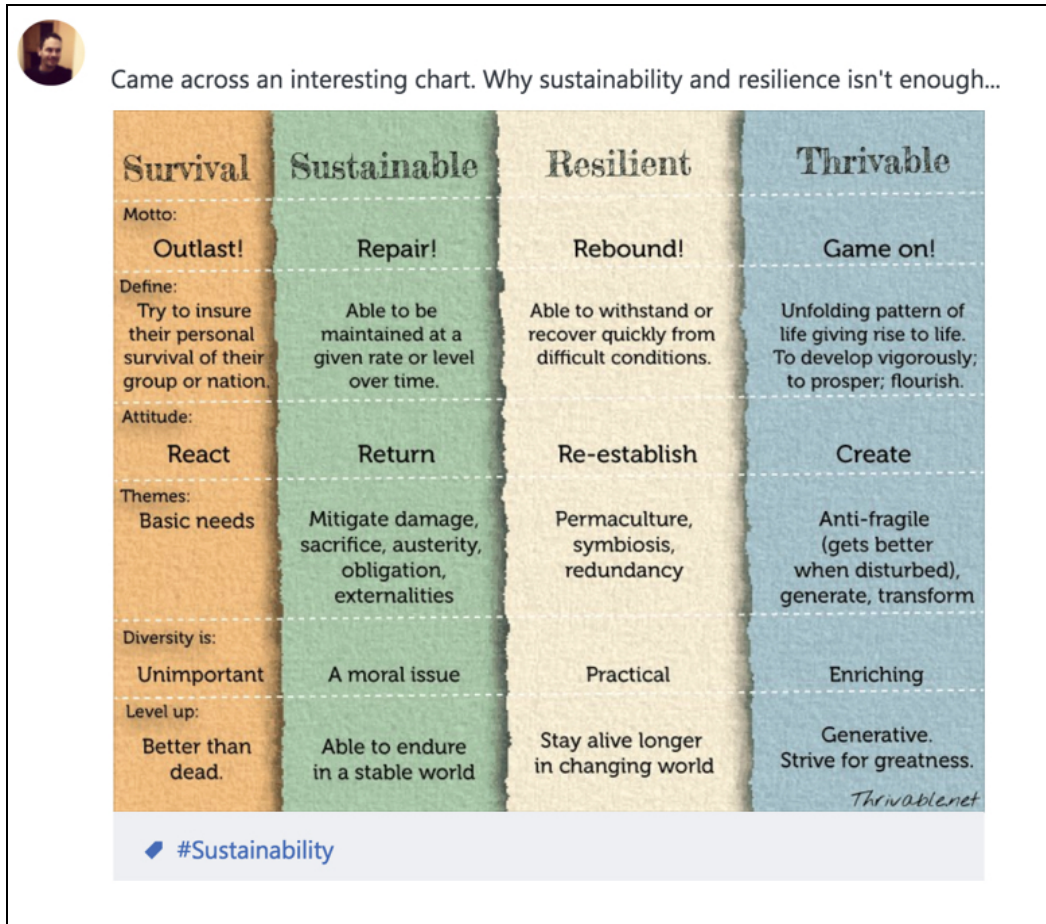


Figure 26: Why sustainability isn't enough

The sharing of such representations revealed information about the interests, values and worldviews of Coworkers that enabled others to determine with whom they would like to connect. Posting them across digital media or sketching them in the physical space left open invitations to connect and fuelled material for conversation. The accrual of these mutual mental representations over time, supported by the sharing and connecting practices that strengthen social ties and the density of the network, constituted a common pool of immaterial resources cultivated by the Coworking community. At its height, this enabled both rapid diffusion and a collaborative 'tinkering' of ideas amongst a network of trusted relations, anchored around the physical-digital Coworking environment. A 'healthy' cognitive distance between actors was balanced by the inflows of newcomers and the 'integration work' of old-timers. 'Welcoming', 'connecting' and 'sharing' practices were all essential in maintaining the optimality of these flows. In my observations, these periods of

optimal balance were rich but fragile. They required constant attention to - in the words of the more experienced hosts and Coworkers - the 'health of the ecosystem'. They were easily disrupted by less socially inclusive practices, and appeared to gradually erode as the size of the network grew. If trust was the fertile soil that was both an input and output of prosocial practices, encountering more 'calculating' or 'transactional' relations tended to lead Coworkers to exercise caution in enacting these sharing and connecting practices over time. These activities required cognitive and emotional resources, and thus always incurred an opportunity cost. Perceptions of a lack of reciprocity in contribution, a sense that these resources were being exploited, waned their practice over time. The community and commons oriented institutional logic that supported such prosocial sharing practices will be further described and analysed later. However, one of the key strategies employed to counteract this transactional, extractive impression was the signalling of a Coworker's deeper 'purpose' underpinning their work. This practice, what I called 'declaring purpose over profit' will be the subject of the next section.

6.3 Declaring purpose over profit

“The flourishing of humanity in the planet that's my big why. And like I believe that happens through unlocking dormant potential in humans and collectives and that's sort of the raison d'être, or the center of gravity behind all the things I do. I think there's other deeper 'whys' but I think that's sort of the main one I've got right now...”

“As some of you may know I am in the process of exploring the set up of a new startup called Conscillience. Our higher purpose is to unlock the magic between people.

How we do this is by bringing together exceptional people (elders and younger entrepreneurs) who have a desire to change the world and who want to work with others to do this.

What we do is profile people based on their unique strengths, passions and experience. We then match these people so that they can work together to commercialise a new idea or grow an existing business.

We are currently in the process of designing the start up and we are keen to understand the perspectives of our potential customers.

So I wonder if you have 5 minutes to participate in this survey...”

Declaring that one's work was driven by a larger sense of 'purpose' was a common and distinct practice in this early phase of Coworking. Common, because it was a frequent point of exchange between Coworkers, and the ability to answer such a question featured as a sign of status or maturity in social interactions. Distinct because I had not previously encountered a group of workers that so frequently discussed such themes and expected others to hold, or at least be searching for, a

response to the question. For some, these declarations approached a near ritualistic recitation of a key phrase that had been discovered and crafted, such as *'my purpose is...'* or *'the deeper 'why' behind my work is...'*

For Coworkers, these discursive practices took place amid a growing awareness and approbation of legal categories that inscribe 'purpose' into the identity of an organisation, usually in the form of explicit social or environmental objectives, alongside 'profit'. These legal categories included social enterprises, social businesses, for-benefit-corporations (B corps), cooperatives, mutuals and community interest companies. Many Coworkers were not only interested in these emerging hybrid forms, but applied for certification and structured their enterprises accordingly. Many publicly promoted B Corps in particular as a nascent social movement.

The unstated assumptions accompanying these declarations of purpose suggest that much work and many organisations have inadequate, perhaps even harmful, intentions or effects. The common perception of a 'legitimation crisis' with regard to conventional organisations and standard employment held by many Coworkers and the subsequent 'search for greater meaning through work' were discussed at length in the previous chapter. This review included the classical sociological concepts of 'alienation, instrumental rationality and anomie'; and the more recent literature that outlines drives towards 'individuation, contribution, self-connection and unification' as underpinning meaning in work. These fundamental drives were argued to be sought through entrepreneurial work and Coworking arrangements and this claim need not be recapitulated here. Of the latter four however, 'contribution' is largely the domain that deals with the practice of present focus, of 'declaring purpose', and will be examined in more detail below.

There is an important scholarly and public debate on what constitutes 'real' social value, and moreover that standard accounting measures of organisational and economic value are inadequate representations of many human concerns (as discussed for example by Graeber 2001; Gallarza and Saura 2011; Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013). But contributing to this debate is not the purpose of this section.

Rather I analyse examples of the social practice of '*declaring* purpose' that was prevalent amongst Coworkers and attempt some plausible explanations for this phenomenon. In attempting to comprehend and explain this practice I drew upon two theoretical domains, the first primarily psychological, the second sociological and anthropological.

Meaning and motivation

Wendy: *Driven by passion and purpose, I work at the intersection of creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship and impact.*

Like all of the discursive practices presented here, there are many Coworkers I met during the field research that could have uttered the words in the above example. Most would have claimed to be '*driven by purpose and passion*', and for that matter, many aspired to work '*at the intersection of creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and impact*'.

What might explain this fixation with purpose in the context of self-directed, creative knowledge work under conditions of entrepreneurial uncertainty? One answer likely lies in the study of intrinsic work motivation advanced in 'self-determination theory' (Gagne and Deci 2005). Intrinsic motivation means doing something because it is inherently interesting, enjoyable or meaningful; extrinsic motivation means doing something because it leads to external rewards, often in the form of praise or payment from a source of authority (Ryan and Deci 2000a). The relative influence of *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* factors on human motivation and behaviour has been a hotly contested source of debate in the social sciences and organisational studies.

Behavioural psychologists (Skinner 1938; Watson 1958) argued human activity is chiefly influenced by responses to systems of environmental rewards and punishments. Philosophies of management founded on these assumptions have tended to emphasise systems of extrinsic rewards and punishments as the primary

levers of work motivation. Indeed many contemporary management practices, from pay incentive schemes to performance monitoring, owe their genesis to these assumptions (Ferraro et al. 2005; Heath 1999).

By contrast, humanistic psychologists, pioneered by Maslow (1954), and developed by the likes of Herzberg (1966); Alderfer (1972), emphasised systems of personal meaning, values and self-actualising drives. Philosophies of management inspired by these assumptions have emphasised alignment with personal values, autonomy, skill variety, task significance and critical feedback as sources of intrinsic motivation (Hackman and Oldham 1976).

In management theory one of the earliest and most concise presentations of the differences between these two orientations was found in McGregor's 'Theory X and Theory Y' (McGregor 1960). McGregor deliberately introduced this dichotomy to highlight the difference in foundational assumptions regarding human nature. Theory X assumes workers are inherently amotivated, and thus require external forms of control and rewards to be managed. Theory Y assumes that workers are intrinsically motivated towards some aspects of work and the goal of management is to comprehend their drives and, where possible, remove obstacles, align work with their interests and help guide workers towards realising their potential¹⁰¹.

Like most conceptual dichotomies that describe complex human affairs, closer empirical examination of motivation has revealed gradations of experience rather than boolean binaries. Accordingly, recent formulations of self determination theory have distinguished a spectrum of extrinsic motivations from the completely 'externally regulated' ('I only work when the boss is watching'), to 'introjected' ('If I don't work I feel ashamed'), to 'autonomous' ('I work because I believe in the goals') to 'integrated' ('I do this work because it expresses who I am') (Gagne and Deci 2005). These last two forms, autonomous and integrated, function much like intrinsic

¹⁰¹ "Another way of saying this is that Theory X places exclusive reliance upon external control of human behavior, while Theory Y relies heavily on self-control and self-direction" (MacGregor 1960: 170).

motivation even though they have been developed through paid work and thus are collectively referred to as 'autonomous' in contrast to 'controlled' motivation. 'Autonomy involves acting with a sense of volition and having the experience of choice.' (Gagne and Deci 2005: 333).

Accumulated evidence now organised under the mantle of self determination theory¹⁰², suggest that the three most important factors affecting intrinsic (and autonomous) motivation include 'perceived autonomy', or that workers feel a sense of choice and control over their work; 'perceived competence', or that workers feel a sense of increasing skill in their work; and 'perceived relatedness', or that workers feel a sense of respect and connection with others (Deci and Ryan 2005; Deci and Ryan 2000b). The key proposition of self determination theory is that an individual's perceptions of control by an external agent can undermine a sense of autonomous motivation. To the extent that aspects of work such as requests from clients, externally set deadlines and so forth prompt a change in the perceived experience of the locus of causality, they are understood to crowd out a sense of autonomous motivation.

There is some evidence that motivation is not simply a quantitative concept, but the *quality* of motivation affects the performance of particular tasks (Sheldon and Elliot 1999; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). Tasks that require creativity, novel problem-solving or cognitive flexibility under conditions of uncertainty appear better served by autonomous forms of motivation (Amabile 1983; Grolnick and Ryan 1987)¹⁰³. These

¹⁰² Much of the experimental evidence here was initially advanced under the name cognitive evaluation theory (Deci 1971; Deci et al. 1999) which first raised puzzling examples of how extrinsic incentives, or tangible rewards, appeared to reduce intrinsic interest and motivation, at least under some conditions. More recent advances have now positioned 'cognitive evaluation theory' as a subset of 'self-determination theory'.

¹⁰³ This is a somewhat complex and controversial area of research. This finding has been interpreted by some as suggesting that any pay for performance schemes inevitably crowd out intrinsic motivation (for example by Kohn 1998 and Pink 2011). More recent research has contested this on empirical grounds, arguing, not that perceived autonomy and competence are unimportant, but that pay for performance schemes can actually enhance autonomous

tasks have been called 'heuristic', requiring some novel human ingenuity, rather than 'algorithmic' or simply accomplished by following a standardised set of procedures (Amabile 1983)¹⁰⁴. Importantly, these differing qualities of motivation are not immutable, they can be shaped by a worker's perceptions of the task. Factors that can offset experiences of reduced autonomy, competence or relatedness, include managers articulating a meaningful rationale for performing a task; acknowledging that workers might not find the tasks interesting; and emphasising choice rather than control, such employing the language of a request rather than a directive (Deci et al. 1994). Incidentally, as previously noted, such algorithmic tasks face the greatest danger of automation and offshoring, a projection with which many Coworkers were familiar.

Entrepreneurial activities and creative knowledge work, almost by definition, largely involve heuristic tasks such as figuring out new combinations of products and services that haven't been assembled before, experimentally adjusting different variables in a business model, or interpreting the responses from customer interactions. The majority of Coworkers in this study were working in the absence of what would be recognised as conventional forms of management, certainly any recognisable derivatives of Theory X. The solo-self employed Coworkers, whether identifying as entrepreneurs or freelancers, certainly had work to do - meetings to prepare for, proposals to submit, presentations to rehearse, workshops to design, release dates for products and client deadlines. But the 'how, when and where' they worked was usually up to themselves to determine. Very few could rely on hierarchically managed systems of extrinsic rewards and punishments, so called 'carrots and sticks', as sources of motivation or guides for direction. Rather, they had to depend on internalised sources of motivation to inspire action. In such situations believing that one's work is driven by a sense of larger 'purpose' can play a

motivation if evaluated as a signal of competence rather than a reduction in autonomy (Gerhart and Fang 2015).

¹⁰⁴ Whilst this distinction is still useful, it may be that its value erodes over time as advances in artificial intelligence decipher the 'algorithms' of more complex and creative forms of human labour currently labelled 'heuristic'.


constructive role in driving motivations to work. Invoking ‘purpose’ inspires a kind of situational alchemy, where otherwise frustrating and precarious circumstances can be reimagined as part of a heroic journey towards a greater goal.

Occasionally Coworkers would explicitly acknowledge how appeals to purpose can be strategically employed to motivate work in the absence of financial compensation:

“Yeah they’re all volunteers and that’s one of the big difficulties because working with volunteers has a...different type of challenge from working with paid staff. One of which is...whatever you’re asking them is rarely prioritised. Turnover is enormous. And what you don’t give to them in money you need to give to them in purpose, charm, rhetoric, alignment...”

More frequently however, discovering and communicating one’s purpose was framed in general terms to have a causal link with motivation and action. Consider the following invitation to attend a series of ‘Ted style’ talks¹⁰⁵ in which workers would learn to craft, rehearse and share their statements of purpose:

¹⁰⁵ TED talks (TED is an acronym Technology Entertainment and Design) although part of a conference that was first founded in 1984 have become a global phenomenon in recent years. Speakers present for 15 minutes highly scripted and entertaining talks for general consumption. Video is recorded and can be accessed freely over the internet.



Need some 'Inspiration'? Then join us at the Talk on Purpose Speaker Graduation Night coming up Friday 12 February

Inspiration [noun]: An emotionally and/or spiritually inspired idea that compels one to take action without delay. Otherwise known as 'inspired action'.

Figure 27: Speaking your purpose

Privately crafting and publicly sharing these 'declarations of purpose' can function as a heuristic device to sustain autonomous motivation, a kind of disciplining technique employed to manage the '*entrepreneurial self*' (Kelly 2016; Gershon 2016). This is particular pertinent in situations where the results of work tasks may not be financially compensated, at least not in the short term, as is the case with much entrepreneurial activity. Indeed questions of how to sustain intrinsic motivation and techniques for self-management were themes explicitly discussed by Coworkers. The following excerpts are from a conversation thread posted to a social media site. It features 'Steven's' requests for advice on techniques to 'strengthen and restore' 'intrinsic motivation to keep pushing the boulder up the mountain' amid the challenges of 'startuple'. The request generated over fifty responses in a telling display of how entrepreneurial work is frequently imagined within Coworking culture. I have reproduced a number¹⁰⁶ of these responses below to demonstrate how the

¹⁰⁶ I believe the content and range of these responses merit their inclusion here, but the reader is invited to skip them if reviewing the raw data is unappealing.

relationship between motivation, work, self-care and meaning were commonly framed:

Steven: *“For the past while, I’ve been deprived or lacking a healthy dose of intrinsic motivation to keep pushing the boulder up the mountain #startuplife. Has anyone got some advice or resources to help restore and strengthen my intrinsic motivation? Thank you.”*

Anne: *Meditation and kidney qi tonics/restoration. That’s the first one. No matter how many good stories you’re running on it won’t act as fuel when they’re depleted. Next, yes, hundreds of hack for keeping focus during different cycles, hourly, daily, weekly, monthly. Remind me about this when we catch up soon. :) x #youvegotthis*

Jennifer: *I reckon you need solid time not touching work (at least a week) to get your mojo back - don’t try to push through or you may risk burnout.*

Samantha: *Gorgeous man. I find that regular gym and exercise is key to giving your body strength. I also listen to a lot of podcasts which is motivating. Accepting the journey is always longer than you hope means you can find joy in the process without as much pressure to get to the end - where ever that is! Of course there’s also all the ingestible energy fuels as well. Keep going xxxx*

Skye: *Morning three pages. Stream of consciousness writing (don’t think, just write - seriously, NO editing allowed). Might help shift (or shed light) on what is draining the mojo and where the flow wants to go. Xx.*

Sarah: *At Loomio I am always totally re inspired talking with other ‘loomions’ and Loomio users about what they are seeing, learning and doing with collaborative decision making - I re fall in love every time.*

Zubof: *Know what your prize is. Then keep your eyes on it.*

Andrew: *Yep, go and spend a week working in local government. You'll be back embracing #startuptime and pushing that boulder up the mountain with a renewed energy and verve.*

Andrea: *Rest and rejuvenation. We think we can keep working but it's unsustainable.*

Hilda: *Revisit your big why on a daily basis. Tweak it if needed.*

Zak: *Think of it as: you've gone this far, you wanna change and start all over again now? You're on the brink of success and it's your cowardice that's taking you backward...at least that's what I tell myself.*

Jason: *Read that Joseph Campbell book I gave you. ;) I also like Dan Pink's Drive: the key to intrinsic motivation is mastery, autonomy and purpose.*

Andrew: *did a bit more research for you, and best additional advice I can give is Harden the Fuck Up! And if you disagree with me, take it up with the person who forced you to choose #startuptime!!!!*

Shelley: *Reconnect with your values - that's what drives us forward.*

Hilda: *I can see there are story/mind solutions and body solutions. I reckon it's like diet and exercise: you have to do both together.*

Harriet: *'Marathon not a sprint' - make sure you're doing all the things that make life enjoyable, which might mean you have to go a bit slower, but more chance of enjoying the ride! Also I go into forests and reconnect with the deep 'why' of what I'm doing and that helps :)*

Kelly: *Find your values...Better yet...strengthen your heart...you're in luck...Open Heart workshops this Thursday and Friday :) :)*

Bethy: *Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat.*

Maria: *Take some time to be in nature, reflect, let the answer come, receive. Never give up xxx.*

Paul: *Do one thing each day that delivers a sense of accomplishment just for you. Also ask yourself what impact you want to have from others and what you do when you are at your best. Do more of those things.*

Michael: *Here's what brain research says will make you happy: ask 'what am I grateful for? No answers? Doesn't matter. Just searching helps. Label those negative emotions. Give it a name and your brain isn't so bothered by it. Decide. Go for 'good enough' instead of 'best decision ever made on Earth'. Hugs, hugs, hugs. Don't text - touch.*

Chris: *There's a lot of fantastic advice here, but I've identified a wedge of unmentioned perspective, so I'll ask you to consider...maybe you're pushing the wrong thing, with the wrong technique, on the wrong pathway. Any or all. Maybe you're not collaborating with the right partners. Maybe you're doing the wrong project for you right now. Maybe the project isn't meant to win at all. Maybe you should be acquired. Maybe you should pivot one or more aspects of the business. Deep within I hope you'll find the roots of this.*

Wendy: *This too will pass. Hugs.*

Gary: *My biggest one is a gratitude journal - whatever form that may take. If you can make 5 minutes a day, at the same time (for healthy ritual purposes), and write down one or two things you're grateful for, I find it just reopened the eyes to everything which is great. For slightly more time intensive suggestions - there's nothing like hanging with good humans.*

John: *Burnout would be a major blow out on keeping things afloat. Self care doesn't mean stopping. You'll do more good in this world if you're in good nick yourself, even if not bubbling without action.*

Benjamin: *Diet, sleep, exercise, socialise, meditate.*

Timothy: *Press the Pause button bro. Some self care and replenishment. Dance, food, play, then keep going with the small steps. Long haul. Keep your tribe close. Dinner?*

Hannah: *I think for many of us types we are really good at pushing through rather than being receptive to early signs that our bodies are giving us to*

take a break or respect the limitations of our bodies...Passino can be a dangerous thing if it drives too hard...I'd strongly suggest you listen to these early warning signs and prioritise self care above all realise right now - take an afternoon off, lie in the park, stare at the sky, get a massage, seriously much better to take a short break now than burn out...take it from the doctor - burn out i very real. Be well and wise. Xx.

Yasmine: *Lots of great self care advice here! Perhaps it has already passed. If not, connect to your why. What does the world look like when you've solved the problem you're here to solve? My experience coaching people, especially entrepreneurs is that the 'how' shows up when we're connected to our vision. My GSD energy comes from imagining my goals attaining and my vision realised.*

Simon: *Sounds to me like in the past you have had so much motivation that you now feel lost/unlike your usual self without it. Been there myself. If there's no pain then you may have less contentment for the hard work you've done so far? You've succeeded then! Enjoy the moment! Wait for the next signal to move forward. Find the pain. An annoyance at something in the world that you want to fix. The pain always comes before the dream and before the motivation. Get back out there in amongst the world and find people's problems again. :)*

Steven: *Wow everyone. I'm overwhelmed by the stream of comments and suggestions. Clearly I'm not alone! Your wisdom has touched and lit me up. Now to put your advice into action...Unwinding is going to be hard. The demands for keeping things afloat mean you need to keep moving fast. It's all so contradictory...I think the pressure I put on myself to perform can be crippling.*

Pippa: *I know what you mean. However it's our own pressures that we feel from society that makes us feel we have to keep moving fast. The unfortunate world of startups is that we have to be moving faster and faster without taking the time out to take care of yourself and your mind. Build what you want for you and your lifestyle not what the startup world says its right. A lot of the time I think we need to surround ourselves with a wider*

network so we don't live in a bubble that is only caught up with building the next big thing or making change happen faster than one can make happen.

Nick: *I like the 'don't let unwinding become a task' words. I found in self employment (35 years of it) that stepping back can be scary, and crucial - try to trust the energy you've put in and it's associated momentum, which will be inherent. Resist 'perfectionism' as a life philosophy/lifestyle?*

Steven: *Nice. That's a dance with trust I'm still learning the steps to.*

The common refrain that 'purpose', or one's 'why', is important helps to explain the demand for public events and techniques to 'discover', and just as pertinently, disseminate, one's 'higher purpose' in self-directed work. Here is an example of a conference that became popular with members of the Coworking community promoting the '*kind of purpose that's baked into the business model*':


<p><u>ABOUT:</u> <u>PURPOSE</u> <u>SYDNEY</u></p> <p>It's 2016 and the future belongs to businesses with purpose.</p> <p>The kind of purpose that's baked into the business model, the kind of companies that solve problems, rather than create them.</p> <p>After the sheer goodness that was Purpose 2015, we got together for round two in December 2016. To read a wrap of Purpose 2016 visit our blog and check out a full set of photos here.</p> <p>Soon, we'll be announcing what's next for the exciting Purpose community and conference – as we continue to work toward reinventing business models, shifting corporate cultures and rewriting the role of brands and organisations to be purpose driven. This is *the* event for connecting, meeting and learning from like minded people to create a better world. If you haven't already, join us.</p>	 <p>7 & 8 December 2016 Sydney</p> <p>Motivation Strategy & Design Kyra Maya Phillips is a reader and a storyteller. She is the co-author of <i>The Misfit Economy</i>, a book which chronicles stories of creativity from informal and dark markets around the globe.</p>
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Figure 28: Baking your purpose in

This combination of encouragement and pressure to 'find your purpose' was a persistent feature of a Coworking culture and advice on how to do this was frequently shared. Here is one such example promoted by the Freelancers Union:



**Clarify your purpose
with this simple exercise**

"Finding your purpose, as a freelancer is the greatest thing you can do for your career. *It will drive everything you do, every client you work with, every goal you work towards...* Once you know your purpose, you're better prepared to succeed in your career...*it gives you a focus...*

It allows you to create your brand *around yourself*. Suddenly, who you are becomes not only important, but a unique, marketable skill. Your passion, your interests, your personality and background...That's your brand story. Take me for example. I'm a freelance journalist, travel writer, photographer and videographer. But if I add that I grew up on three continents, am an accent chameleon, a Bollywood dancer and Korean drama fan, I have the beginnings of a unique brand story. My purpose is to *CHALLENGE* others to *SEE THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY* through *MULTIMEDIA JOURNALISM!* And that is my key to becoming a good freelancer, a good business owner, and a great journalist. How about you freelancer? What's *your purpose?*"

Figure 29: Exercising purpose

This extract highlights a number of features germane to the discursive practice of 'declaring purpose'. First, it proposes that discovering 'your purpose' will advance one's career goals, and lead to improved commercial outcomes. Figuring out one's purpose is claimed to bring coherence and direction for the 'self' to better function as an 'enterprise', for personhood to be framed as a 'brand'. Second, that an entrepreneurial statement of purpose should be bound up with the features of a 'unique' personal story. Third, that it should be formulated as a concise statement, presumably available to be recited at any moment. Finally, visible in the concluding challenge: 'what's *your* purpose', the implication that the ability to declare your purpose in a precise statement is a signal of maturation for the non-standard worker, a mark that distinguishes the 'newcomer', from 'journeyman' or old-timer within an entrepreneurial community of practice.

Purpose as profession

Self-determination theory provides a plausible account of the functional reasons for the practice of declaring purpose over profit given the context of Coworkers, but it does not in itself explain why paid work is looked to as the primary vehicle for expressing life purpose, albeit through these entrepreneurial and non-standard configurations. Here a better explanation can be found in sociological research that

maps the decline of other traditional containers in which these needs were served in the past.

Social researchers have long noted the declining hold of religious belief systems on modern life (Taylor 2007; Bruce 2011)¹⁰⁷. This retreat has not merely been confined to the metaphysical narratives of religion, but also the belief in the secular, 'grand narratives' of terrestrial concerns - the search for ultimate truth through science, emancipation of the worker through communism or the citizen through liberalism. Both traditional religious accounts and these various offspring projects of the enlightenment have been claimed to have frayed in recent decades. Discussed at length variously as 'post' (Lyotard 1979), 'late' (Beck 1992), 'reflexive' (Giddens 1991) or 'liquid' (Bauman 2000) modernity¹⁰⁸, members of affluent societies have become less directed by the received 'wisdom' of the past, and more inclined, or rather, *required*, to search for their own frames of meaning that rationalise and order life routines¹⁰⁹ (Giddens 1991). In a 'post-traditional' world, the past loses its authoritative hold on human affairs, and the future, or more specifically, a range of possible scenarios take centre stage in the imagination of the individual. This responsibility for determining a life course can be accompanied by a particular anxiety, a crisis of meaning, an existential vacuum that must be filled with an alternative source of significance (Frankl 1985).

Beliefs do not drift unmoored in the imagination, but are cultivated and reinforced through practices, especially occasions where practices are visibly enacted, social events where the relationship between belief and performance are mutually reinforcing (Nicolini 2012). Traditional forms of voluntary association such as church

¹⁰⁷ The 'secularisation thesis' is slightly more complicated upon closer examination with some smaller pockets of apparent reversal. The overall numbers however do show a steady decline in religious belief and customs in advanced societies.

¹⁰⁸ This is not to claim that these various theories are all the same, merely that they argue a qualitative difference between the earlier and more recent phase of of modernity.

¹⁰⁹ Such a skepticism was part of the original definition of postmodernism advanced by Lyotard, '*I define postmodernism as incredulity towards grand narratives*'.

attendance, public meetings, membership of civil society organisations and participation in local sporting and social clubs have been found to be in decline over past decades (Putnam 1995). This claim has been cited as a source of alarm, as such forms of physical propinquity are argued to underpin social capital (Reagans 2011), and strong social capital in turn has been associated with a range of indicators of social health, from increased economic productivity, organisational effectiveness, to reduced crime and more transparent governance (Kwon and Adler 2014). Changes in the locus of association however do not necessarily indicate that human desire for light hearted sociality, solidarity enriching bonds and even a sense of shared moral import has fundamentally declined. In fact there is some evidence of a revival, or at least new configurations, of voluntary associational through online social networks (Parks 2011) and in new forms of social clubs such as 'meetups' (Shen and Cage 2015). The sociality of Coworking can clearly be classified as one such recent innovation in physical propinquity that might strengthen social capital amongst non-standard workers.

Voluntary human organisation, capturing hearts and minds and mobilising bodies, requires more than the mere availability of physical or digital space, it needs an animating social narrative (Harari 2015). Religious congregations organise around divine narratives that legitimate moral codes and social action; voluntary secular organisations have their own adaptations of such founding myths, of which many in fact trace their early origins to religious thought (Defourny and Develtere 2009). In the social world of Coworkers, where traditional forms of association appeared to speak more to the past than the future, we might ask what vessel of human activity can plausibly sustain an investment of meaning when looking ahead? One feature of contemporary life that has not been weakening in capitalist societies is the importance of paid work as an organising locus of human affairs. In a shallow sense this claim can be evaluated quantitatively, the trend in reduced working hours since the industrial revolution that led Keynes to imagine his grandchildren inhabiting a leisure society (Keynes 1930), began to reverse around 1980 and has been

gradually climbing since (Johnson and Lipscomb 2006)¹¹⁰. But in a deeper sense, stories about work as a frame of social identity, as the primary vehicle for social contribution, become progressively salient as societies become less captured by tradition and more 'entrepreneurial' (Audretsch 2007; Falck et al. 2012).

With the retreat of these older forms of association, working life becomes a solid pathway to advance a sense of purpose and search for meaning (Gregg 2013), but for this to be possible it can not simply be *any* form of paid work. It is easier with work that inspires a vision of an alternative future from the present. Work that purports to disrupt rather than perpetuate the myriad problems Coworkers decry in the status quo. In many ways the word 'work' itself is too limited to capture how these actors view the centrality of the project as a focal point of organisation for their social identity. *Vocation*, replete with the religious overtones of its early meaning, more adequately captures the sense of a 'life-calling' venerated within Coworking culture. Consider, for example, the following responses from Coworkers to the question '*what drives your work?*':

Jules: "*What drives your work?*"

Sally: *Creating a more just and sustainable world. A world where everyone feels connected and empowered to make change.*

Jennifer: *Changing the world - making it a better place. In a whole variety of ways.*

Andrew: *Belief in the hope of the human spirit.*

¹¹⁰ Like most general claims about macro social trends this is a simplification. There are some conflicting patterns in the data on working hours, for example average working hours for better paid salary jobs have increased, but decreased for lesser paid hourly wage jobs. Furthermore, this has been most pronounced in the USA, whereas working hours have continued to reduce in some parts of Europe and in Japan. What is clear is that working hours on average are no longer decreasing at the rate they were after the industrial revolution.

James: *A sense of freedom, a different way of thinking and doing business, supporting and working together to strengthen each others missions or purpose for being*

Zak: *Where am I best placed to create the biggest impact in the world and in communities?*

This is why notions of 'purpose' and 'impact', in part because of their very ambiguity, become such important rallying points for the Coworking community. They approach the space typically reserved for 'sacred values'. In his work on the sociology of religion Durkheim argued that religious symbols and practices provide a deep scaffolding for the organisation of broader social relations. In religious contexts, particular rituals and objects - what Durkheim discussed as '*totems*' - provide important demarcators between the sacred, or what is deemed most important for a group, and profane, the other aspects of life. Totems become powerful boundary objects that help distinguish insiders from outsiders. Rites or '*totemic practices*' help foment solidarity through arousing particular mental and affective states within a group (Durkheim 1912). Other sociologists have advanced Durkheim's proposition to argue that many non-religious contexts adapt this deep symbolic architecture to pursue their secular causes (Goffman 1959; Rawls 2005). Nationalists, for example, adopt flags as totems and enact collective performances such as singing anthems and declaring allegiance as rituals (Cerulo 1993). Police organisations employ objects such as badges and uniforms and practices such as 'swearing in' that position themselves beyond the rules of normal societies (Manning 2015).

We have already seen how many Coworkers view the social and environmental pathologies they are most concerned about as products of the very system of techno-economic relations in which they are ensconced. Past grand ideological narratives that proposed alternatives to capitalism - socialist revolutions or theocratic utopias - have little legitimacy for these actors. Consequently the challenge they face is to reconcile their immediate need for paid work with the belief in the possibility of a system that can be transformed. This is where declaring that one is motivated by

'purpose' or driven by 'impact' is a rite that can serve to sanctify entrepreneurial forms of work. A mode of signalling virtue - that one's life efforts are not directed towards the profane (or even the mundane). In this sense declaring purpose over profit is not only a method of cultivating the intrinsic motivation necessary to tackle entrepreneurial tasks, but a technique to re-enchant a life project in the current era. To construct an image of an alternative future distinct from the current default trajectory. By way of illustration consider these two requests, reproduced from a Coworking space internal social media site:

Anne: *"Doing a series of #awesome interviews in preparation for the crowd-funding campaign for Impactful Footprint Foundation...Another GREAT Impactful Footprints Foundation interview today, this time with the wonderfully talented systems thinking Alex Laszlo! Alex is the current President of the ISSS (International Society for Systems Sciences), and a cofounder of the Giordano Bruno Global Shifter University that is currently under construction (and man, it's going to be GOOD!)...Can't wait to share this stuff with you all :)"*

If anyone wants to suggest other great people to interview on the subjects of #thrivability, #systems, #people, #planet, #profit, #purpose, #passion."

Mark: *"I am working to validate an assessment of #purposefulladership. If you have 10 minutes and are interested in filling in a short survey asking you about how you lead I'd really appreciate your help.*

Here's the link...

#Assessment, #Purpose, #Leadership, #Purposefullleaders..."

Both these posts have an entrepreneurial functional goal. The first is effectively content marketing designed to motivate people to donate to a new venture. The second is a request to contribute to research for a leadership assessment tool in the process of being commercialised. Yet by invoking the sacred value 'purpose' they position responses to these requests as a contribution towards the construction of a preferable future.

The vocational village

Wendy: *"I am an authentic, compassionate, provocative, bold, purposeful, connecting, conscious thought leader. I help create conscious business owners, that are purpose driven and who practice conscious marketing principles."*

Steven: *'The thing is...I'm just so driven by purpose...that I find working in the current system...hard sometimes'*

A Coworker's ability to declare their own personal sense of purpose functioned as a 'boundary practice' that helped distinguish outsiders from insiders within the community (Wenger 1999). This is why only 'discovering' or 'knowing' one's purpose did not remain a private affair. In fact the ability to both declare a cogent sense of non-pecuniary purpose *and* be commercially successful were key variables in the constitution of a 'prestige gradient' (Geertz 1973) within the Coworking world. There were already groups in which participants declared they were motivated by social and environmental purpose but were not able to create or manage successful enterprises. There were other groups in which members managed profitable businesses but did not declare their actions motivated by a 'higher-order purpose'. The ability to manage both of these activities afforded significant status within the Coworking community.

Declaring a statement of purpose crafted from the unique past experiences of one's life facilitated a 'paradoxical communalism', a sense of mutual recognition in the sharing of one's particular circumstances. The plausibility and details of precisely *how* to realise this purpose through strategic actions appeared less important than the affective register of recognising that another, perhaps a whole new 'tribe', was similarly driven by 'passion' and 'purpose'. The unstated implication was that such beliefs stood in contrast to conventional motivations, or the concerns with efficiency and profit maximisation that consume so much attention within standard organisational life. At the Hub, corporate logos of major banks and accounting firms were visible on offices through the windows, and some Coworkers would literally refer to the 'the world out there' whilst gesturing towards the corporate branded office blocks visible through the Coworking space windows. In their most buoyant moments, Coworkers described the construction of this space of purpose-centred work as a counter-site to conventional business, a nascent heterotopia¹¹¹ growing at the seat of orthodox power (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986; Hjorth 2005).

This section has described variations on a Coworking practice I coded as 'declaring purpose over profit'. I have offered two theoretical areas of explanation for the prominence of this practice. First, following 'self-determination theory', these declarations can be understood as a heuristic device to fortify intrinsic motivation by internalising the perceived locus of causality for work. Autonomous motivation has been shown to be beneficial for creative and entrepreneurial activities, the forms of work in which most Coworkers are engaged. Second, whereas many other traditional forms of voluntary association and the narratives of meaning that animated their congregation have eroded, the importance of paid work has only increased in late modern societies. As work expands to occupy a larger component of the lifeworld, it

¹¹¹ 'Heterotopia' was Foucault's term for spaces of 'otherness' that operated outside of hegemonic conditions: "*the creation of heterotopias could thus be described as an event that creates and expands the cracks in the official version (a discursive formation, e.g., an administrative pattern and style of a company's management thinking and practice) through actualizing subversive-transformative ideas for how to make use of the strategic*" (Hjorth 2005: 393).

becomes a logical domain in which actors seek greater purpose. Consequently, declaring 'purpose over profit' functions as a boundary practice that distinguishes outsiders and newcomers from insiders and old-timers within the social world of Coworking. But the dry recitation of a purpose statement was not sufficient to achieve this effect, the perceived 'authenticity' of an espoused purpose was also important in the Coworking world. Outward declarations that did not appear to correspond to inner experiences were viewed with considerable suspicion. The next section explores a complementary practice that achieves this goal, which involved 'blending the personal and professional'.

6.4 Blending the personal and professional

Gaby: *In the spirit of getting to know each other better, (cue soundtrack from The Sound of Music), how about...we share our lists of 'A Few of my Favourite Things'? #Favouritethings*

A few of my favourite things:

- *Living in the country*
- *Fresh herbs in food*
- *Things from the home country (NZ!)*
- *Deep dinner conversations*
- *Songwriting performing musicians (the creative trifecta)*
- *Messages from nieces and nephews*

Norbert: *Flow as proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The music of Thomas Konner. Paul Culmee's book The Heretic's Guide to Best Practices.*

Liz: *The smell of baking bread on a cold wet rainy day.*

Matt: *That first sip of coffee on a day where you miss your usual morning coffee and end up having it 2 or 3 hours later.*

Kathy: *Katy loves whiskers on kittens.*

Sally-Anne: *Baking cakes with nieces and nephews, licking beaters and bowls, smell of my house after I've been baking, sound of surf as I lie in bed, Music, absolutely Music, Dancing, unwrapping a parcel of Fish'n'Chips on the beach, Salt: tears, 'laughtears', sea, Lighthouses, small of old books, calligraphy, fonts, doodling, freshly brewed tea, the delight when a loved one slips their hand into yours...*

I think reading lists of favourite things must be one my favourite things! Others - liminality, walking barefoot on the Mother (grass, earth, sand), Sand between my toes, Accessing that 'other me' when I'm in an Auslan environment and shift to sign, The chrysalis moments in the wings before stepping onto the sacred space of the stage.

Nora: *Dancing...and that place when I'm no longer dancing but am being danced. Ecstasy!*

Martha: *Singing harmonies around a campfire.*

Sharon: *REALLY good bread with slatherings of butter, music and I've ALWAYS got time for stationary...Officeworks is heaven to me :)*

Stephanie: *Listening to rain on the roof lying in bed, going bush, campfires, festivals, live music with good lyrics, good books, old furniture, summer, holidays, christmas trees, wrapping presents, chilli, cold beer in the sun, glass of red by fire, family (most of them most of the time) my mates, my dogs, my man...and coffee!*

Brett: *Playing the piano in the dark, sleeping under the stars, writing poetry in coffee shops, kissing, tickling my nine year old nephew, chickens, hot tubs in the morning, San Francisco, coffee so smooth it doesn't need any sugar, archery, climbing trees, walking naked in the forest, weeping with over-fullness, fixing broken household things for friends, sitting quietly and watching the mind dance, laughing until i can no longer breathe, summer rain, falling in love with strangers...*

In one of the more prolific posts in my data set, the above excerpt continues with comments in this vein. Indeed to walk into the early Coworking environments at this time was to encounter a room of people clad in jeans and runners, atmospheric music playing over the public address system, regular flows of people moving between the workspace and the public, social enterprise cafe located below. Laughter frequently wafting across the room from the couches in which people met; many furrowed brows under headphones as Coworkers were busy coding or writing; others talking animatedly on phone calls, many of these international calls over the internet; alongside remnants of notes, diagrams and sometimes even cartoons left over on mobile whiteboards in the corners. The chatter over the shared lunches would cycle fluidly between emerging technology and the prospects of new startups; new business ideas that 'someone' should pursue; experiences on meditation retreats; attending the festival 'Burning Man' or reflections on latest episode of 'Game of Thrones'.

Naturally all workplaces have moments of light social discussion not immediately work related. But I had never encountered an environment that so wilfully blended these aspects of life. The word *blend* is significant here. It was not that conversations alternated between 'business' and 'leisure', it was that for many Coworkers, the topics were difficult to distinguish. The same themes animated their discussions and energised the imagination during working hours or at the pub. This sense of concordance between work and play, far from being seen as a problem was actually an explicit goal for many.

Coworkers frequently spoke of a desire to feel like their 'authentic self' at and in their work, and this search for a 'sense of wholeness' or the instinct that life could be lived 'undivided' found support in books that were popular in Coworking circles (for example Palmer 2004; Laloux 2014). This orientation frequently underpinned the representation Coworkers' crafted of their lives and presented online. For example it was not uncommon for some to list their interests in travel and adventure sports alongside their paid work:

I am a

- **refiner of business ideas** into valuable business models, action plans, and clear communications (business documents that convert, website content, imagery, social media).
- organiser and **delight creator** who builds ideas into reality.
- **surfer, s,** and **adventurer**

I like to

- explore the future, discover opportunities and communicate them via a fortnightly email **[example]**:

This wilful ‘blending of the personal and professional’, of integrating work and play, has been associated with the social worlds of creative work for some time (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013). This notion likely finds its origins in the ideal that an artist’s work is different to most other forms, that it is consensual and personal. The adage that ‘suits’ and ‘creatives’ inhabit different worlds of work has found its way even into scholarly literature (Earl and Potts 2013). But even this distinction between the casual attire and informal habits of creative workers and the formal dress and conduct of ‘business’ people has been destabilised in recent years. The evident commercial success of company founders like Mark Zuckerberg, has helped solidify t-shirts and ‘hoodies’ as the legitimate apparel of ambitious startups¹¹². In the early days Coworking spaces were described in the USA media as ‘frat houses for geeks’ (Frommer 2009), and in some cases when journalists encountered the kegs of beer, ping pong tables, guitars and gaming consoles on display alongside desks with programmers this characterisation seemed reasonable. Yet such characterisations, often wrapped in thinly veiled condescension, can obscure a deeper response to many of the perceived expectations of corporate culture and standard employment.

¹¹² Although it should be noted Zuckerberg reportedly wore a tie everyday in 2009 to signal that this was a ‘serious’ year for Facebook.

The images classically invoked by phrases such as ‘professional conduct’ or being ‘business like’ were usually explicitly rejected by Coworkers. Indeed a cornerstone of bureaucratic practices has been the depersonalisation of social relations at work, a point Weber repeatedly emphasises in his historical analysis of the evolution of systems of administration from the origins in ‘patrimonial regimes’ (Weber 1978). But such ‘traditional’ notions of professionalism tended to be bound up with the large and established organisations and institutions whose moral and pragmatic legitimacy were held in low regard by Coworkers. As noted earlier in this thesis, many claimed that their experience working inside such organisations had left them alienated, and that they yearned to re-personalise social relations in and at work, or as some in the community put it, to ‘re-humanise’ work.

Boundary work and play

Whatever the reasons for the origins of bureaucratic cultures, researchers have pointed to the negative consequences of self-estrangement at work (Seeman 1972). Such experiences of alienation tend to be more acute where large distances are felt between the roles inhabited inside and outside of work (Goffman 1961). Previous chapters have reviewed the various dimensions underpinning meaningfulness at work, from perceived competence and self-efficacy, to a sense of deeper purpose and impact, to feelings of connection and solidarity with colleagues. One critical factor here is a sense of ‘authenticity’, or a sense of coherence between behaviour at work and one’s ‘true’, or at least preferred, self (Kahn, 1990; Rosso et al. 2010)¹¹³. Following this view, working cultures can either facilitate or inhibit a sense of consistency between the values, interests and identity of an individual across working and non-working life (Shamir 1991).

‘Boundary work’ consists of practices that delineate the border between home and work, or the ‘personal and professional’. In a series of influential texts on this theme,

¹¹³ I consider essentialist notions of a ‘true self’ problematic, but recognise its common use as a heuristic signal to distinguish ‘feigned’ or ‘cynical’ performances from ‘transparent’ or ‘authentic’ performances (Goffman 1959).

Nippert-Eng (1996; 2003; 2005; 2008) examines everyday practices that different workers employ to manage the boundaries between work and home life. Her work posits a spectrum of possible stances in relation to work and home. One end she labels 'integration', where work and home (or at least non-work) life are entwined; the other end she calls 'segmentation', where they are maintained as distinct 'territories of the self' (Nippert-Eng 1996: 569). Nippert-Eng looked to everyday artefacts and routine practices - key rings, calendars, wallets, what people do in their lunch breaks or vacations, what they read - as markers of how people integrate or separate their work and non-working lives. Not everyone aspires towards full integration between work and home, and Nippert-Eng introduces two characters from her research, John and Ed, that epitomise the different ends of this spectrum. John is an experimental scientist that believes the time and space of work and home are interchangeable, or as she puts colourfully, that 'one could work from bed and bed people at work' (Nippert-Eng 1996: 566). Ed is a machinist that believes in strict separation between his working and home life, clocks on and off at precisely the times stipulated in his contract, believes that the interests of himself and his employer are in direct conflict. The early Coworking world however overwhelmingly attracted people of John's persuasion, people looking to 'integrate' rather than even 'balance' their working and non-working lives.

This orientation was clear in exchanges between Coworkers, both in digital and face to face conversations. It was also visible in the range of 'clubs' organised around the Hub. Here are two examples focused on integrating exercise into the work space, the 'hub run' club and the 'push up' club.

Run club

The run club was one of the earliest and most active groups in the Hub, principally led by the energy and enthusiasm of a single member, Sarawut. Each week Sarawut would post invitations for a run, suggested routes with an accompanying digital map, and frequently post photos after the events. Runs usually terminated with an invitation to have a few drinks. Sarawut actually bought a collection of beer and set

up a coin box where Coworkers could pay for them after a run¹¹⁴. There were casual dinners organised for the run club, open to any other Coworkers that wanted to attend, and several runs organised on the weekends. Some members began the practice of sharing photos from their own runs in locations while they were traveling abroad. On several occasions members ran in costumes - dressed as zombies during Halloween, or wearing fake beards to farewell a (bearded) member. I participated regularly in the run club in the early years of field research and found it to be one of the most open subcultures in the Coworking world, largely because there was little in the way of ulterior motives, the club wasn't attempting to organise a 'community' for the purposes of marketing a new product or launching a running business. Sarawut did not work for the Coworking space, was an older member who 'didn't really need to work much', and largely just loved to run and organise events around food. In this sense the confusion inspired by competing institutional logics rarely arose.

¹¹⁴ In the early days of Coworking there were a number of informal systems like this that declined as the membership body grew. The Coworking space sometimes wrestled with the question of whether to formalise the service or continue to allow members to self-organise. This form ceased after the coin box, filled with money, went 'missing' one day. The story will be expanded upon in 6.6: Shaping institutional logic.



Figure 30: The run club

Push up club

The 'push up club' was another example of integrating personal fitness goals and social activity literally into the workplace. Members would undertake a challenge to do as many pushups as possible within the workspace. The practice began and was led by a Coworking member, but ceased once he left.



Figure 31: Push up club

Children and families

Another conspicuous boundary blending practice principally led by one of the space hosts was to announce when Hub members became parents. This was a practice often volunteered by Coworkers too, frequently accompanied by introductory photos of newborns. Some members with older children brought them into the space to 'work' or play after school. Others promoted their children's explorations and nascent entrepreneurial ventures through the network. One member invited her thirteen year old daughter and friend in to discuss their business idea of hand painting and selling shoes. Another shared his ten year old son's *'icecream day'*, a fundraising project that raised \$500 for a charitable foundation, and wanted to discuss strategies to scale the idea with other Coworkers. There were also some explicit digital discussions around the role of children and family in the workplace, with some members advocating for a more radical blending of the learning and working environment.

These small gestures of recognition for significant life events such as when Coworking members became parents may seem simple, innocuous even, but in my observations they helped bind the sociality and meaning of the Coworking project to the personal and relational rather than merely the commercial and transactional. Notably, this was a practice chiefly led by one female space host and declined after she left this role and the membership body expanded.

A space of work and play

Finally, the practices of 'blending the personal and professional',, whilst modelled and encouraged by the Coworking staff or pioneering members, became coded into some member's experience of the space itself. Here is an example of Daniela reflecting on the spatiality of Coworking, or how she perceives the integrating orientation of the Coworking environment in contrast to the segmenting orientation of her current standard employment in a conventional office:

Daniela: *[Now] I sometimes feel that I'm marching to someone else's rhythm rather than my own. Like even though technically I could come in later and finish later, or I could eat my lunch whenever I want, I can actually work from home if I want to, and I have started to do that sometimes but...I feel like I should be there. Whereas at Hub, I felt like could...I could do what I wanted on my own schedule. So if I wanted to spend two hours in the afternoon sitting in the window reading a book, which I often did [giggles], I could do that.*

Jules: *And so what was the difference there?*

Daniela: *I don't know. Now that I work in this space, I feel like if I'm going to do that. I would finish my work for the day, and then I would go home and do it. And it's not the kind of space where I would feel*

comfortable enough to relax and do something of my own in my own time. Even though technically those two hours I would then make up by staying later in the evening or on another day. Whereas at Hub I felt quite comfortable spending time doing something that was for me, doing something personal. Some nights when I had late night phone calls to a person in Switzerland I would play computer games. I had my laptop and would be sitting on one of the couches in the corner and I would play computer games for an hour and a half at a time until I had a late night phone call. And that was fine, it was my own time, but I would never dream of doing that now at the office. And I can't exactly put my finger on what it is that makes those two things feel so different...

This section has sought to demonstrate how the practice of 'blending the personal and professional' functioned in the field. The regular, affectively pleasant interactions between Coworkers that brought together the working and non-working territories of the self helped to cultivate a sense of belonging in the Coworking community, a sense that is a widely recognised and fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Many Coworkers claimed to want to bring together their working and non-working lives in order to feel more authentic, and find greater self-congruence between their personal and professional identities. And yet I also observed some interesting questions raised around whose interest was most served by blurring these boundaries. The tension between organic, self-organising community and the interests of formalised, goal directed organisations has been discussed in terms of an 'ethical-political' tension (Parker 1998). On the one hand, beyond the context of Coworking, organisational scholars have noted a growing culture of 'playfulness' or 'happiness seeking' through work and, alongside the growing valorisation of creativity, even a 'Dionysian turn' in managerial philosophy in the post-Fordist era (Costea et al. 2005). But this blurring of the boundaries between working and non-working life - especially when coupled with other features of the current economic context like stagnant wage growth, uncertain income forecasts, and rising

costs of living - can amount to some perverse consequences for subjectivities in relation to work.

As work and play become entangled, some observers note an unsettling contemporary desire to be working even in putatively 'spare time': 'whereas industrial workers could leave the factory and immediately enter into a different institution - the pub, the home; knowledge workers are 'never finished with anything'...They can work from home, check Facebook at work and (should) continuously improve their competencies' (Kristensen and Pedersen 2017:68). When reflecting on these changes, one might ask who benefits most from such a cultural turn. This question of ultimate benefit will be carried into the next section, which examines the practice underpinning almost all of the examples offered so far - the 'sharing' practices so central to the Coworking project.

6.5 Sharing and working out loud

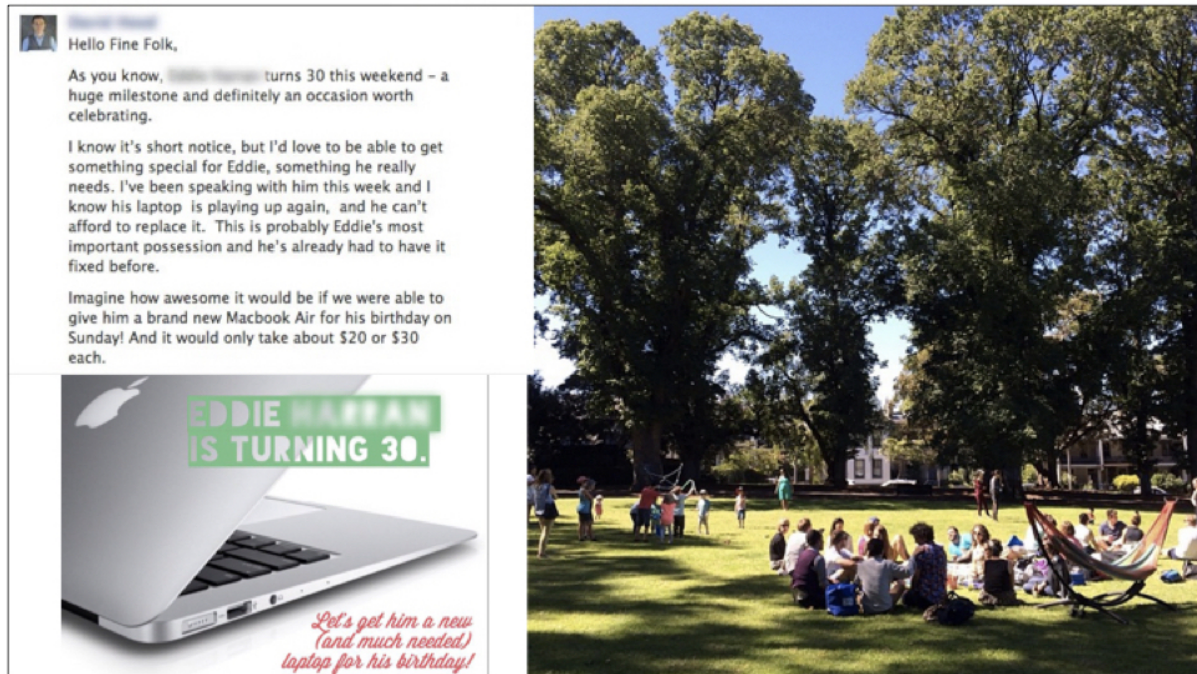


Figure 32: The crowdsourced gift

It is early 2014 and I am attending a small gathering to celebrate the 30th birthday of a Coworker in the Carlton Gardens. The gathering, spread across picnic blankets and a makeshift hammock, likely looks indistinguishable from any other group enjoying the golden light of the public park on a summer afternoon. Yet every face I knew there I had met through the Melbourne Coworking scene, and in fact there was a mix of representatives from the three main spaces that appear in this study Hub, Inspire 9 and Electron Workshop. Despite this, I had not yet met Robert in person as he had been living in Brisbane until recently, but shared many acquaintances, had interacted on twitter and had a few long conversations on the phone about mutual interests and perspectives on the world. He gave me a welcoming hug when he saw me. The occasion was marked by the unveiling of the surprise present, a crowdfunded laptop organised via Facebook by Nick, another Coworker. I, along with 51 other people from

around the world, had contributed amounts of \$20 or more to make this possible.

The organisation of the \$1000 gift, proposed on Facebook and confirmed within a few days, struck me as extraordinary. People filmed the spectacle on their phones as Robert ceremoniously unwrapped the laptop and playfully hugged it like he had won a prize in some contest.

This display of a collective ability to rapidly materialise a useful resource appeared in strange contrast to the individual conversations I had with other attendees. These ranged from reflections on income uncertainty and questions about what to do next after leaving another failed startup, booking a holiday in Bali but spending most of it working due to client demands, and the ubiquitous concerns about housing - weighing the frustrations at forced transience of renting against the inaccessibility of home ownership. Whilst some Coworkers were materially well off (and a few quite affluent), many earned average or below incomes. And yet there was a curious commitment towards an attitude of abundance that marked Coworking culture. Sharing practices, whether simply of information or, in cases such as the above, of material goods as collective gifts, constituted a binding property of Coworking sociality. It is these 'sharing practices' that will be examined in closer detail in this section.

This thesis has proposed *social learning*, understood through the communities of practice framework, as the coordinating principle that helps explain the *immaterial value* of the Coworking project. In this instance learning was largely informally structured, involving both explicit information exchanges and implicit observation. Social learning was enabled by bridging distance across various forms of proximity

between Coworkers, most of whom did not work for the same organisation or have prior relationships. In the most literal sense, physical proximity was bridged by working from the same office environment and frequenting the same cafes. Equally importantly (but less visibly), were various forms of cognitive, social, cultural and technological proximity (Knoben and Oerlemans 2006) that were bridged through the various practices outlined in this chapter. The emphasis on ‘welcoming and introducing’, ‘fostering shared heuristics’, ‘declaring purpose’ and ‘blending the personal and professional’ facilitated such prosocial interactions and exchanges. This section will examine various forms of sharing practices, initially through the lens of ‘gifting’, an ancient human practice that has been the object of considerable study in anthropology, and still understood as foundational in engendering trust and fostering solidarity.

This incidence in the park described at the beginning of this section is an example of ‘receiving’ an unsolicited gift from a Coworking group. But how did Robert come to accumulate the social status that motivated contributions toward such a gift? As Ralph explained to me early in my field research, ‘*Coworking is a physical embodiment of the dynamics of social media*’, his meaning was that these platforms only produce (immaterial) value if participants ‘share’ content. My field observations were consistent with this proposition - that sharing practices were the engine that drove interactions between erstwhile strangers. This positions the Coworking project as a kind of cooperation game where individuals can gain more in value from a common pool than they donate, but their contributions need to be coordinated and the ‘free-rider problem’ - the problem of taking without giving - is always a possibility that needs to be managed. As something of a social media pioneer and self described ‘explorer of the edge’, Robert had accumulated significant cultural and social capital within the community from years of sharing practices, usually via the form of useful information or social introductions via social media. The following section will briefly review the theory of ‘the gift’ to help anchor the subsequent empirical observations of sharing practices in within the Coworking spaces.

Gifts, reciprocity and solidarity

The notion that inclinations towards social reciprocity or 'mutual aid' are a widespread human practice, even underpinned by biological instincts, found an early exposition in the writings of Kropotkin (1902). The Russian's observations of tribal and peasant groups during geographical expeditions of eastern Siberia inspired him to challenge the assumptions of individuated competition reflecting the state of nature that was expounded in the social darwinism of his day, and fuelled the anarcho-communitarianism of his later political philosophy.

However it was Mauss' publication of 'The Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies' (Mauss 1925) that underlined the significance of 'gifts' as complex sets of reciprocal favours and obligations that have animated social relations across time in many non-market societies. The detailed references to ethnographic studies in Polynesian, Melanesian and Native American social systems highlight that the power of 'gifts' were less about the value of objects themselves, and more about the social ties they drew together through gifting practices. In fact many gifts were immaterial and performative, they took the form of dances, banquets and rituals. Mauss' thesis argued against earlier anthropological interpretations (principally Malinowski 1922) that he claimed had erroneously imported dualistic Western notions of a separation between the domains of commerce and charity when interpreting the practices of these non-market societies. Earlier anthropologists had imagined each domain animated by discrete rationales - the commercial logic based on calculation and exchange and the gifting logic based on spontaneity or altruism. By contrast Mauss argued that gifting cycles were intimately bound to social reciprocity, and thus powered a complex ledger distributed across the social memory of a community. Furthermore for Mauss, whose thinking was strongly influenced by (his uncle) Durkheim, *'the theory of the gift was a theory of human solidarity'* (Douglas quoted in the introduction to Mauss 2000:8). Mauss concluded the work by offering the theory of the gift as part analytical framework and part normative ideal. He suggested the theory of the gift can be employed to gain clarity on existing social

norms in modern society that defy a narrower transactional logic. But he also implored his readers to revive the ‘morality of former times’ and embrace a spirit of mutualism rather than surrender social relations entirely to the hegemonic institutional logics of market or state¹¹⁵

Relational model theory

The ‘relational model theory’ developed by the anthropologist Alan Fiske (Fiske 1991; 1992) offers a further distinction in this regard that helpfully frames both the immediate empirical analysis and the argument advanced in the following chapters. First emerging out of his ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso, Fiske proposed ‘four elementary relational’ models as universally grounded in human cognition and thus fundamentally govern interactions. He called the four ‘communal sharing’, ‘authority ranking’, ‘equality matching’, and ‘market pricing’. After many years of laboratory based testing, Fiske and Haslam (2005) maintain that these four relational logics universally shape all social interactions and institutions, although they are quick to point out the widely divergent contexts in which they are applied across different cultures. Moreover, the authors clarify that these models are frequently combined, and even a single relationship can employ multiple models across different contexts or times.

Whilst the basic concepts of ‘authority ranking’ and ‘market pricing’ are relatively self-explanatory and this thesis has substantially discussed both bureaucratic hierarchies and market transactions elsewhere¹¹⁶, relational model theory makes a significant distinction between ‘communal sharing’ and ‘equality matching’ that provides an important frame to the present analysis of Coworking. ‘Equality matching’ oriented relationships neatly fit informal dyads, where two parties can

¹¹⁵ Curiously this notion is echoed today in critiques of the failure of both the welfare state and capitalism. See for example the [recent speech by Evan Thornley](#) (Thornley 2017) and other current advocates of neo-cooperativism (Scholz and Schneider 2016).

¹¹⁶ See for example [Chapter 2.1](#) Globalisation, technological disruption and work or [Chapter 5.3](#) Searching for meaning through work.

exchange and keep track of 'favours'. But the 'communal sharing' orientation is different, organised around sharing common resources with little regard for 'keeping track' of who adds or subtracts from the common pool. In order for this model to function however it requires strong boundaries between 'insiders and outsiders' (Fiske 1992). Whilst in traditional contexts these boundaries frequently involved shared kinship, tribal customs, or mytho-religious affiliation, in modern contexts this communal logic can be evoked through shared 'ceremonies of solidarity', which involve coordinating bodies through synchronous actions such as eating, drinking, singing or dancing (Fiske 1991). This chapter demonstrates how many Coworking practices can be understood in terms of evoking the 'communal sharing' logic within Fiske's relational model. This point will become especially important for the argument advanced around the '*immaterial commons*' in [Chapter 8](#).

Converting capital

This notion of solidarity, of an affective identification with a group of other people, has been obscured at times through the 'rational-actor' assumptions of micro-economic and game-theoretic interpretations of 'social exchange theory' in economics and sociology (Emerson 1976). Indeed, the concept of solidarity, inherently collectivist, sits uneasily within disciplines that are dominated by methodological individualism (Arnsperger and Varoufakis 1999). In studies of organisations and entrepreneurship, observations that 'social capital' is often constructed through exchanging 'favours' brings us closer to this fusion of the interest of 'self' and 'other' that manifests in reciprocity based social relations (Adler and Kwon 2002).

In the field research for this thesis, I initially coded a broad class of interactions as 'sharing practices', primarily because such activities appeared spontaneous and voluntarily enacted. Like most Coworking interactions, the institutional logic animating these performances was not corporatist or hierarchical - they were not directives of management within the expectations of an employment contract (aside

from the Coworking staff); but neither were they market exchanges - they were not mediated by an explicit price or clear moment of transaction.

The theories of 'gifts' and 'relational models' do not conflate the foregrounding of 'community' and 'trust' and backgrounding of hierarchical or market logics, with charity or altruism. They do not present these modes of coordinating action as unprompted by notions of strategic gain, but rather that occasions are often composed of a complex mixture of motivations and social logics, but that dominant mode provides a gravity of coordination. These assumptions are consistent with what I observed in the field, that many Coworkers were motivated by a mix of curiosity and exploration, a genuine desire for recognition and belonging, coupled with the strategic objectives of building status and converting cultural and social capital into economic capital.

The theoretical relationship between cultural, social and economic capital has long been advanced by Bourdieu¹¹⁷ (1986) and subsequently influenced scholarly analyses of many social practices (Smart 1993; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). Indeed Bourdieu's conceptual repertoire, in particular the use of these various forms of capital, integrated both 'economic' and 'social' explanations for the motivations and resources strategically employed by actors in a social field¹¹⁸. A simplified view of Coworking behaviour through the 'converting capital' lens might view sharing practices that display knowledge or skill as opportunities to demonstrate cultural capital, which in turn help establish new or strengthen existing relationships, which builds social capital, these relationships can then facilitate access to new opportunities for paid work, or the pursuit of economic capital. Yet such a calculating, transactional account would misrepresent both the nuances of Bourdieu's work, and

¹¹⁷ In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu also used the term symbolic capital to refer to prestige, renown and legitimacy. Although his employment of the term changed over time and often overlapped with cultural capital (Smart 1993). Accordingly I have simply used the term cultural capital here to refer to the accumulation of knowledge, status and reputation.

¹¹⁸ This division between 'the economic' and 'the social' itself has been challenged by many, notably Polanyi (1957) and the ensuing debates between 'formalism' and 'substantivism'.

the multidimensionality of social encounters and exchanges between Coworkers I observed in the field. I rarely detected the affective commitment to the collective expressed by some Coworkers as a cynical deception designed to curry favour, indeed the aversion to such inauthentic emotional displays is what led many to reject previous employment circumstances in large organisations in the first place. Appreciating the intersection of this apparent spontaneity or generosity alongside implicit expectations of reciprocity that accompany strategic ‘relationship building’, is central to comprehending contemporary gifting and sharing practices. Indeed the puzzle of the gift, was of paradigmatic importance to Bourdieu’s own work, and a subject of ongoing theorising over the course of his intellectual career (Silber 2009)¹¹⁹. Maintaining some ambiguity around expectations are crucial in enacting successful ‘gifting performances’, otherwise they encroach upon the boundaries of other forms of exchange, such as ‘sales’, ‘barter’ or even ‘bribes’ (Smart 1993).

In the following section I highlight four distinct forms of sharing: ‘offering’, ‘asking’, ‘receiving’ and ‘working out loud’ practices. These examples exhibit the curious form of organic reciprocity that emerged as members participated in these social exchanges. Most significantly for the argument in this thesis, these were *not exclusively dyadic*. Exchanges did not only take place between pre-identified sets of individuals. The shared ‘digital-material’ environment in particular facilitated a form of ‘gifting to the commons’ to which all members had access. Accordingly, towards the end of this section I draw attention to the affordances of the Coworking environments through a brief discussion of theories of ‘stigmergy’.

¹¹⁹ Bourdieu was particularly taken with the ‘sincere fiction’ and ‘collective denial’ necessary for gifting practices to adequately fulfill their social function:

‘Bourdieu underscores the lapse of time between gift and counter-gift as what allows this denial, or camouflage of reality to take place. This labor of collective denial tends to dissolve with the advent of market economy, where self-interest becomes openly exposed and legitimate rather than a hidden reality.’

(Silber 2009:175)

Asking

Some of the most common instances of 'sharing' were in response to requests for information or social contacts regarding a particular problem. These could be highly valuable, as social networks and personal introductions from trusted parties have long been recognised as important in entrepreneurial work (Dubini and Aldrich 1991; Welter and Smallbone 2006). Here are some examples of how Coworkers asked for assistance on the internal 'public' social network sites:

Ash: *Working out the details of an exclusive distribution contract with a Chinese company - if anybody has ever done the same with their products in China I'd love to pick your brain on the peculiarities of their legal system.*

Simon: *Hi Ash, I've started supplying a non-exclusive distributor for the Bubbla wash bag in China. One thing to keep an eye out for is that you would probably need a license to sell your product within China as a foreign company if it is Chinese made. I've overcome this by shipping the goods from the factory in China to a warehouse in Hong Kong. The Chinese distributor then imports that goods back into China and pays the appropriate duties and import taxes.*

The other thing to bear in mind is the power of an exclusive distribution contract. This isn't really my area but ensure that if you go for an exclusive contract you specify a contract duration, exit clauses and minimum quarterly or monthly payments to ensure they have an incentive to sell enough product to justify the exclusivity. Unless I find a huge distributor in a difficult country to market to, I won't be giving exclusivity to anyone.

Let me know how you get on. It's interesting stuff and China is fast becoming a major market.

James: *I have never done so into China. Many other countries though. I also know a guy who worked for NZ foreign affairs in China for years who might be able to assist.*

Sandor: *Is anyone experienced in designing MailChimp template?*

Carolina: *If you find one, please let me know*

Whyla: *I know someone based near Block Arcade who might be able to do it. I'm about to brief him on creating a Campaign Monitor template which is similar. Also, @Sheela may have a contact.*

Sheela: *Thanks Whyla. Hi Sandor, Raph has done some of our templates in mailchimp and it was easy to do. More than happy to share what we know. Regards, Whyla.*

Asha: *Hello, does anyone is or could recommend a corporate lawyer? :)*

Tyson: *@James*

James: *Hi Asha, happy to chat give me call on...or mail me at...*

Whilst these examples have been partly selected for their brevity (there were many other cases with much longer lists of responses), these Coworkers' questions were answered partly due to the 'status' they had accrued within the community. The subtle rules of this game became most apparent when a newcomer would directly ask for something - especially a transactional kind of request - without having established the appropriate social connections, or built trust through appropriate 'introducing' and 'offering' practices. Their requests were much less frequently answered. In my own field experience, when I was highly engaged in 'offering' through liking, commenting on answering questions, I would frequently receive multiple responses to my own questions or requests. As my engagement dropped off towards the end of my field work and I became less known in the community, I noted such responses declined, although as we will see in [Chapter 7](#), the prosocial character of Coworking culture itself also changed.

Offering

As outlined above many 'offering' practices took the form of simply responding to members questions with helpful information or introductions. Perhaps the more striking examples however included unsolicited offers to the general Coworking community. These sometimes took the form of invitations to free events or food. Here is an early example:



Figure 33: Cooking lunch for everybody.

Moreover such offerings went beyond sharing information or even invitations to attend experiences. Some Coworking members used the kitchen space as a site to share food or produce from their gardens:

Thank you to the generous
and kind orange giver. :)



We've boundless lemons to share



Thank you Sally for the Big Bake cookies today, Anne for
the lemons and mystery member for the parsley!



Figure 34: Gifting to the commons

Here are two examples were particularly representative of the presence of an alternative institutional logic. In the first case, two members used the cumquat fruit growing on the indoor plants in the space to make jam, which was then offered to the Coworkers. The distinct role of ‘the plants’ in the Coworking space will be further explored in the next section.



Figure 35: The cooking adventure

Many Coworkers sampled the jam and commented appreciatively. In the second instance, a Coworker offered the experience of a 'mindful bushwalk' (on a donation basis) for up to 10 Coworkers which received 56 responses:

I'm #offering a mindful bushwalk on Wednesday for up to 10 Hubbers, on a donation basis.

Come and experience a beautiful landscape and connect with yourself, other Hubbers and nature with fresh eyes. I will offer simple and accessible awareness practices along the way, that I hope will deepen the experience. All you need is a spirit of adventures, an open mind, water and something wholesome to share for lunch.

All levels of fitness welcome - it's not a pack march :) Venue likely to be either around Point Addis or Dandenongs. Car pool can be arranged. All welcome, who's interested?

#Offering, #Unify

Whilst the examples above illustrate singular or spontaneous forms of sharing there were other sharing experiences that became routinised. I have previously discussed how the 'Run Club' was established and managed by Sarawut, a particularly active older Coworking member who would send out invitations, suggest routes and often organise informal gatherings over drinks or food afterwards. Although the process was relatively simple - interested members would meet at the bottom of the Coworking space, on Wednesdays at 5.05pm to run together. I regularly attended during the height of my field research. There was a kind of sharing of experience, mutual physical exertion and synchronised motion of bodies that helped construct its own subtle kind of trust amongst this group.

Perhaps the most emblematic example of sharing practice was 'mixed bag lunch', organised every Thursday by the Hub at lunchtime. Shared lunches - often with special names like 'sexy salads' were a common feature of many Coworking spaces. Although the Hub oversaw the process, members were encouraged to bring in food, coordinate on preparation and presentation and freely share the collective produce around the central kitchen table. Incidentally, allusions to the native American

traditions of 'potlatch' feasts were sometimes even explicitly drawn. These occasions were strategically timed to coincide with 'open house' where prospective members were invited to take a tour of the space and attend the lunch. During this time new attendees were asked to introduce themselves and their interests, and existing members could make announcements or requests. Sometimes other members would make suggestions of information or introductions based on the requests. These moments became face to face microcosms of the asking, offering and receiving sets of practices and helped model and socialise new members into expectations of Coworking culture.



Figure 36: Mixed bag lunches

Receiving

As some members accrued status within the Coworking community, occasionally they received unsolicited 'gifts' organised by other members. Robert's example cited at the beginning of this chapter was one case. In another case a well known member's laptop was stolen, and a similar process of crowdfunding a replacement was organised in which fifty five people contributed for a replacement. I was struck by these instances of simple crowdfunded support. I later helped organise a similar process when one member was knocked unconscious from a fall and taken to hospital in an ambulance without insurance, and subsequently presented with a \$1200 bill. A number of Coworkers financially contributed to help pay the expense. As a gesture of gratitude the Coworker later hosted a dinner party for all contributors.

Working out loud

One noticeable subset of the general sharing practices previously outlined I categorised as 'working out loud'. These practices involve communicating what one is working on, often in a spontaneous and incomplete form that invites input from others. This behaviour was closely tied to the (then still novel) integration of 'social' media technology into working life. I have already discussed how Yammer, one of the pioneering 'enterprise social' software applications was used by the Hub as a central digital platform for Coworkers to communicate. Although I first observed this behaviour of 'sharing what one is working on' as early as 2012, the concept of 'working out loud' was subsequently championed by a number of practitioners and consultants, most notably John Stepper (2015) and has become something of a recognised practice within certain social circles¹²⁰. For example, there is currently a 'working out loud week' where participants are encouraged to 'share work in

¹²⁰ Here I am not claiming to have invented the term, merely that I first encountered it anecdotally when used by some Coworkers to describe this form of sharing using digital media. This use did however predate Stepper's book and the later formal 'work out loud' week on twitter. More information on this topic is available at www.workingoutloud.com.

progress with a relevant community to enable learning and collaboration' via a hashtag (#WOL) on twitter.

This form of information sharing via digital media did not differ markedly from the tone of the empirical material presented throughout this thesis. Most Coworking participants were aware of, and sometimes even explicitly acknowledged, the strategic objectives accompanying such 'sharing practices'. And yet, sharing performances that rendered this link too transparent, were often seen as clumsy, distasteful and were generally less effective in eliciting responses. The general pattern was to temper anything too transparently self-aggrandising or 'sales-like' with some potentially useful information, humour or a question that invited others to demonstrate their own cultural capital. Here is one example of this that elicited twenty seven responses:

I'm currently at a collaboratory to recreate management and leadership education.

These are the 3 questions today:

- 1. How does the future leader look like?*
- 2. What is a globally responsible leader?*
- 3. Can we teach how to become a globally responsible leader?*

Diverse inputs are very much appreciated. Please share and spread it amongst the HUB community. I would like to show them how our HUB community collaborates and learns...

This 'working out loud' theme briefly become incorporated into the organisational socialisation process and Coworking staff began to encourage members to adopt this practice. A standard format in which new members would be 'welcomed to yammer' would be to ask 'what one is working on'. Here is an example where a response to this question invites new social connections:



Figure 37: What are you working on?

So far this section has offered an account of the undergirding logic of sharing practices and some examples of their common forms. However these practices themselves were enabled by particular qualities of the digital-physical Coworking environment. Sharing information through leaving signals in the environment enabled the social exchanges at the heart of the Coworking project. There were at least three important consequences of this indirect form of communication through the environment. First, they could easily scale beyond synchronised dyadic interactions such as paired conversations to the asynchronised, multi-participant 'conversation threads' typical of most social media formats. Second, such communication was

publicly visible to other Coworking members, and thus rendered the various interactive and exchange practices legible for newcomers and others to observe. Third, it offered a shared space in which Coworkers who previously did not know each other to interact - ask questions or offer responses. Thus these indirect sharing practices could help forge new or strengthen existing social ties. It was this quality that afforded the (often fleeting) occasions of spontaneous 'self-organisation' in the absence of hierarchical directives or market transactions that were a significant object of veneration in Coworking culture.



Figure 38: Working out loud, silently

These interactive affordances of the environment were not confined to the shared digital setting. The significant feature that facilitated spontaneous organisation lay in (relatively) 'permissionless editability', whether of the digital or physical environment. The defining character of this indirect communication was that actors coordinate via signals encoded in a shared environment. The digital environments of social media applications have been designed for interactions. Few contemporary built environments are designed for such purposes, and the terms for most 'permissionless edits' of the built environment is 'graffiti' or 'vandalism'. Accordingly,

some of the early spaces arranged artefacts in the office environment in ways that encouraged Coworkers to read and write in designated areas of the space. Mobile whiteboards were a key feature here but also the display of profiles of members and other information about courses and events. Here are some examples:



Figure 39: Whiteboards in common



Figure 40: The early member wall

A newcomer could spend some time ‘reading’ the physical Coworking environment to learn about what other Coworkers were working on or discussing. Often I would observe the remains of late night ‘whiteboarding sessions’ where Coworkers would sketch and debate ideas and models over food and alcohol. These sessions were instrumental in ‘fostering shared heuristics’ and bridging cognitive distance previously discussed in section 7.2. But the signals that communicated the ethos of the space could take a variety of forms. Many Coworking spaces for example had member sourced ‘libraries’, collections of books that members could take home by ‘tweeting’ that they had borrowed a book, and tweeting again once they had returned it. As creative as this honour system was, I never encountered much evidence of its use, although much like personal collections in the home, the books themselves always offered an indication of the interests and values of the community. In other

instances artefacts such as incomplete puzzles were left for passing Coworkers to contribute to. Here are some examples:



Figure 41: Stigmergic curation

Most Coworking spaces also had more conventional forms of information sharing such as the noticeboards represented above. The Hub for some time even integrated these digital and physical dimensions by projecting the digital conversation thread on the physical wall:



Figure 42: The digital-physical wall

In one (admittedly unusual) case, a prototype of an adjustable desk was left in a Coworking space with an explicit invitation to leave written feedback on the artefact itself:



Figure 43: Editable artefacts

Stigmergic environments

The organisational significance of creating the technical affordances and social permission of an editable environment can be better understood by examining the theory of ‘stigmergy’. The phenomenon of stigmergy was first discovered by the French Zoologist Pierre-Paul Grassé when attempting to understand how eusocial¹²¹ insects like ants and termites engage in complex forms of coordinated activity such as building nests without a visible means direct communication. This behaviour had appeared so inexplicable that it had become known as the ‘cooperation paradox’ (Theraulaz and Bonabeau 1999). Grassé resolved this paradox by discovering that ants and termites were leaving pheromones as trace signals in the environment for their companions to read and modify. It turned out that eusocial insects were using the physical environments they inhabit as a kind of canvas, reading and modifying sets of directions about what an insect should do next. He coined the term

¹²¹ The term ‘eusocial’, from the Greek ‘eu’, or ‘good’ was introduced in the 1960s to describe animals that engage in cooperative brood care and highly specialised divisions of labour to the extent that some ‘castes’ within a colony lose the ability to perform some behaviours such as reproduction. The best known examples are ants, termites, bees and wasps but there are also some species of crustaceans and even mammals that have eusocial characteristics.

'stigmergy' to describe this process, combining the greek *stigma* (sign) and *ergon* (action), to denote how such signs encoded in the environment can direct the actions of other agents.

A 'stigmergic system', therefore requires an encodable environment, a multitude of agents, a set of protocols that facilitate communicative interactions between them, and, at least in the animal world, some form of collective endeavour from which all members derive benefits. The discovery of stigmergy unlocked the mystery underpinning complex cooperation between eusocial insects. Not only is stigmergy simply an indirect form of communication, mediated by the environment, it effectively enables a system to develop a collective form of memory, where individual agents can add, edit, or delete existing signals that guide subsequent actions.

Given their remarkable outcomes, the stigmergic systems of eusocial insects have attracted the interest of researchers grappling with cooperation problems in other disciplines. Notable instances here include the fields of artificial intelligence and swarm robotics (Broecker et al. 2015). To take the latter example, the fundamental insight drawn from the study of insect behaviour is that rather than attempting to construct a single large, complex robot, say that could explore a planetary surface, forage for food, or excavate a pit; it might be more feasible and effective to build a multitude of small robots that individually follow simple rules, but collectively orchestrate complex and adaptive behaviour (Zedadra et al. 2015). The capacity of particular interest here is *emergence*, or the ability of a system to produce high level structures that are greater than the sum of their parts, and improvise adaptations in response to environmental changes that are not encoded in the original programming (Doyle and Marsh 2004).

It was these 'stigmergic properties' of the hybrid digital-physical Coworking environments that enabled these distributed, spontaneous forms of emergent organisation. The saturation of the 'digital environment' into the practices of everyday life in particular provided a new canvas for participants to read and modify. This expanded the capacity of communication, and in a sense 'social memory' of the

collective, beyond the need for direct contact between actors by encoding signals in the environment. Whilst the environment enabled (and later disabled as we will explore in the final chapter) the ability to indirectly communicate, the Coworking 'sharing' practices modelled the repertoire of content, underpinned by the narrative or 'teleoaffective structure' of the Coworking project. Humans are more complex creatures than ants however, and their rational and emotional responses to signals are less predictable than the simple biological algorithms of social insects. In order to sustain voluntary cooperative endeavours they require a shared system of meaning, an 'institutional logic' that supports ongoing collective activity. The following section will illustrate cases where tensions emerged between competing visions as Coworkers attempted to 'shape the institutional logic'.

6.6 Shaping the institutional logic

Shona: *So as a mum, I've learned the importance of focused attention & the necessity to say: "I am not available". This has been the only way to get things done without being pulled to & thro in scatteredness resulting in frustration that I didn't fulfil my intentions.*

So I was wondering if it would be of use in an environment like Hub. We might do a hand gesture & say I'm not available or a sign that we put up on our desk to let others know etc.

This is also about creating space. I love interruptions they can be great and much needed sometimes. But there are certain moments that we may need some space. As innovators we can shuffle so much simultaneously, so as we get used to creating in magnitude which requires spaciousness we also need to develop new ways of relating to accommodate.

Marion: *How about we design/develop some physical symbol, like cafes do with numbers to put on tables. You could take one when you came in, if you knew you'd be wanting to have uninterrupted time. Then, when you wanted the time, you'd place it by your side. We'd need to socialise the behaviour of a potential "interrupter" looking to see if the "flag" was up as they were approaching someone. What do people think.*

Dylan: *As a co-working space I always feel that the default position is that we are open to interruptions. Of course there are times when you're really nutting through something heavy/difficult/requires your focus in which a do-not-disturb sign would be handy.*

I'm thinking something like the US style letterbox flags, (the red ones that indicate whether or not the mail has arrived). Considering everyone works on a laptop it should be easy enough to make a flag that clips onto a monitor.

Shona: *I created a page on the site called 'am/am not available' but can't figure out how to upload a photo on it so here it is red hat for not available, blue for available but working and yet to come Pom Pom for am here to socialise. Reflections please everyone.*



Figure 44: The unavailable hats

In the example above, Shona suggests that Coworkers decide upon and adopt a nonverbal sign to indicate when they prefer not to be interrupted. The post received thirty-nine enthusiastic responses, with suggestions ranging from the creation of 'do not disturb signs', to 'letterbox style flags' that could clip on to a laptop. Eventually, after integrating various suggestions from other Coworkers, Shona constructed coloured hats to place on computers to indicate either 'busy/do not disturb'; 'available'; and 'come and talk to me'. In this case, the specific practice of wearing hats did not catch on, although, as previously discussed, a more organic development of spatial zones that signified different expectations of interactions did emerge. This is, to put it mildly, an unusual request in the context of habitual

business-customer relationships What might have led to such an enthusiastic discussion of playfully shaping the expectations of conduct within the space?

Competing institutional logics

The examples of participation, sharing and ‘cocreation’ provided in this thesis so far point to an alternative, if unstable, ‘institutional logic’ underpinning many Coworking interactions. Institutional logics refer to broad cultural beliefs that structure cognition, shape decision making and guide behaviour in an ‘institutional’ field (Thornton 2002; Lounsbury 2007). Commonly recognised institutional logics include the *transactional* logic of market exchanges, the *coercive* logic of authority hierarchies and the *relational, trust-based* logic of communities among others (Adler 2001; Schneiberg 2002; Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012)¹²². Mauss’ theory of the gift demonstrates how this relational logic, commonly instantiated through gifting and sharing practices, has historically been underpinned by expectations of reciprocity. Communities of practice draw upon ‘professional’ and ‘craft-based logics’ through the demonstration of skill and sharing of knowledge that enables social learning, coupled with the logics of ‘community belonging’ through the cultivation of affective identification and appreciation of the larger skill-based project (Wenger 1998; Lounsbury 2008). Institutional logics both shape actors’ conscious and unconscious behaviour, and are in turn shaped by actors actions and explanations¹²³. Institutional logics do not ‘emerge from organisational fields’ whole cloth, but rather are adapted

¹²² When Alford and Friedland (1985) first introduced the term ‘institutional logic’ they focused on macro social institutions such as ‘the family’, (Christian) ‘religion’, the ‘bureaucratic state’ and the ‘capitalist market’. The typology of macro institutional orders has more recently been updated by adding ‘hierarchically managed corporations’ and ‘professions as relational networks’ (Thornton 2004) and most recently ‘community’ (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012). Whilst these seven macro institutional logics are the most widely recognised, they have been applied by scholars to a wide variety of instances where more specific variants are postulated. For example, ‘editorial’ logics, ‘medical-care’ logics, ‘shareholder value’ logics and so forth (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012).

¹²³ And thus are subject to the same meta-theoretical structure-agency puzzle that applies to similar ‘meso-level’ sociological constructs prominent within the practice theory cannon.

from the 'vibrant ecology' of various orders of the 'inter-institutional system' (Thornton and Ocasio 2015).

The early years of Coworking were of particular interest here because the concept itself was unfamiliar to many, and thus the norms and expected behaviour within the organisational field were unusually unstable, malleable and open to cases where Coworkers themselves could engage in creative acts of 'entrepreneurial institutional bricolage' (Thornton and Ocasio 2015). Newcomers would arrive genuinely curious regarding how to behave and interact with others in the space, and in these moments observing such sharing practices from old-timers - whether offers of fruit on the table or useful information via yammer - could establish influential precedents that shaped how Coworking practices were understood and the quality of sociality they might expect within the Coworking world. If, by contrast, new members encountered transactional orientated practices - perhaps impersonal marketing or sales oriented activities for a Coworker's product or service - this would similarly shape how they understood the institution and the character of the social exchanges they might expect. Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) in their recent overview of institutional logics present seven updated 'interinstitutional system ideal types':

Y-Axis:	X-Axis: Institutional Orders						
Categories	Family 1	Community 2	Religion 3	State 4	Market 5	Profession 6	Corporation 7
Root Metaphor 1	Family as firm	Common boundary	Temple as bank	State as redistribution mechanism	Transaction	Profession as relational network	Corporation as hierarchy
Sources of Legitimacy 2	Unconditional loyalty	Unity of will Belief in trust & reciprocity	Importance of faith & sacredness in economy & society	Democratic participation	Share price	Personal expertise	Market position of firm
Sources of Authority 3	Patriarchal domination	Commitment to community values & ideology	Priesthood charisma	Bureaucratic domination	Shareholder activism	Professional association	Board of directors Top management
Sources of Identity 4	Family reputation	Emotional connection Ego-satisfaction & reputation	Association with deities	Social & economic class	Faceless	Association with quality of craft Personal reputation	Bureaucratic roles
Basis of Norms 5	Membership in household	Group membership	Membership in congregation	Citizenship in nation	Self-interest	Membership in guild & association	Employment in firm
Basis of Attention 6	Status in household	Personal investment in group	Relation to supernatural	Status of interest group	Status in market	Status in profession	Status in hierarchy
Basis of Strategy 7	Increase family honor	Increase status & honor of members & practices	Increase religious symbolism of natural events	Increase community good	Increase efficiency profit	Increase personal reputation	Increase size & diversification of firm
Informal Control Mechanisms 8	Family politics	Visibility of actions	Worship of calling	Backroom politics	Industry analysts	Celebrity professionals	Organization culture
Economic System 9	Family capitalism	Cooperative capitalism	Occidental capitalism	Welfare capitalism	Market capitalism	Personal capitalism	Managerial capitalism

Table 6: Interinstitutional system ideal types¹²⁴

To follow this arrangement, it was the frequently dance between the competing institutional logics of the ‘community’, the ‘market’ and the ‘profession’ that gave Coworking culture much of its distinct, if sometimes confusing, character. On the one hand, most Coworkers were engaged in entrepreneurial knowledge work and consequently had to market and sell their services to survive. Many thus engaged in forms of ‘content marketing’ that had some superficial similarities to the ‘sharing’ practices previously described, but the primary goal was to convince recipients to make purchasing decisions. On the other hand, many Coworkers appeared genuinely interested in cultivating less transactional forms of exchange, participating in decision making processes regarding the Coworking space and building relations of social reciprocity that would mature over time, often rooted in a mutual appreciation of entrepreneurial craft, and sometimes develop into friendships. Some events in Coworking spaces even explicitly drew on the symbolic repertoire of other institutional logics. One space, for example, continues to host a ‘weekly service’¹²⁵,

¹²⁴ This table is reproduced from Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012).

¹²⁵ More information on this can be found here: www.theweeklyservice.org.

described as a 'secular gathering' on Saturday mornings that drew heavily on features of religious rituals.

Sites of competing institutional logics have been identified as generative of new social practices (Lounsbury and Crumley 2007; Lounsbury 2008). However bursts of novel activities generally require the emergence of a relatively stable, supportive institutional logic, or undergirding myth, to become enduring social practices (Bourdieu 1977; Harari 2015). Within the Hub and some other early Coworking spaces, one 'community' orientated rationale championed by many actors took the form of collective contributions towards a common pool of resources. In some cases this logic was enacted through choreographed performances of sharing material objects, such as placing contributions of food on to a shared table in preparation for collective consumption. At other times, this logic was evoked symbolically by employing particular 'vocabularies of practice' (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012), by describing a Coworking space as a 'village' or a 'home', by welcoming newcomers to the 'Coworking family' and so forth. But sustaining this logic through the sharing practices previously outlined required energy and resources, and these various activities, from responding to questions on yammer to sharing in food preparation, required routine bursts of 'immaterial labour' (Gill and Pratt 2008). The 'community' and 'professional' orientated logics coordinating this multitude of micro-practices was held together through a shared belief in the purpose of the Coworking project, and perceived experiences of reciprocity that demonstrated how such efforts could be rewarded. Yet the alternative logics were fragile, existing rather tenuously within the wider, less personal logic of market exchanges, entrepreneurial exploitation and commodification of knowledge. As the Coworking spaces grew in size and old timers who modelled such sharing practices exited the membership body, these practices of 'gifting to a commons', and the underlying logics that supported it, began to dilute. A fuller explanation of the nature of this immaterial commons and the challenges of cultivating and managing it will be taken up in the final chapter of this thesis. This section will offer empirical examples of how Coworkers attempted to shape decisions relating to the Coworking space and the

social practices therein through employing repertoire drawn from alternative institutional logics to transactional, market orientated exchanges.

The trouble with participation

'Participation', although frequently proposed as an unambiguous good, can often be troubling in practice. What begins with seemingly benign experiments in greater engagement, can slide into perceptions of co-optation, bureaucratic formalism or other problems of 'too much democracy in all the wrong places' (Kelty 2017). For many early Coworkers however, the prospect of 'participating' rather than merely 'purchasing' services was attractive. Challenges arose when it wasn't precisely clear just what they were participating in. Nevertheless, the various experimental forms of collectively shaping decisions about the environment did appear to hold an *intrinsic* value to many Coworkers beyond the mere resolution of practical problems.

A vision of reciprocal cooperative exchanges held together by a notion of community is what initially attracted many pioneering members towards Coworking. Consider this suggestions that as '*Coworking and community is what this place is all about...I want to propose a monthly working-bee day*' where members would work on community orientated or other Coworker's projects:

Anne: *OK... So I've got this idea, and I want to run it past the Hub community... Co-working and community is what this place is all about, and there's some AMAZING projects based here... What I want to propose is a MONTHLY WORKING-BEE day... each month, a project is nominated, and we all do our best to rally supporters and volunteers to come and build something, pull out some weeds, and plant some new seeds for that project... We can offer it to the public (esp students - business schools, sustainability studies, multimedia, etc) as a Hub learning experience... and a way to attract many hands to make light work. ... and hopefully, ideally, the day will sporn working groups that will continue to develop and support the project of the day.*

Let me know what you think..? Ideas as to how it would best be run, times/days people might be available, etc... It will be a great way to learn from each other, support each other, and to learn all about the great projects happening at Hub, so that we can better facilitate connections and opportunities for each other. :-)

Elizabeth: *Do you want to nominate our first project? :)*

Anne: *Hehe. YEP! :) ... Happy for it to be Impactful Footprints Foundation... lol Actually, happier for that to be perhaps the second project... I think it would be really useful to nominate a project that is already running, and has some degree of flow and action occurring, already something of a team... especially one that has an idea of new campaigns, or a new stage of growth that it would like to launch into... A few possible candidates come to mind that I would need to speak to...Ideally, it would be great if the Hub community could make some nominations here... :)*

Graham: *This sounds amazing. Couple of things that come to mind - nirvana's lighting/ desk project, making the entrance to donkey wheel house much more welcoming - eg plants, art, signage (there would be funding that we could drum up for this from hub and other tenants), could also be measuring our environmental impact project where we looked at our elec, water and waste etc... Another one would be sustainability street where we take it out of dwh and to making the end of bourke street amazing in conjunction with the others businesses and residents. Greenfleet up the road is launching this initiative.*

Anne: *I second the vote for sustainability street! Sounds like something a lot of people could find lots of ways to get involved and help make it awesome. :)*

Frank: *How to get to Sustainability Street! I'll let Snuffleupagus know woohoo radical idea let's jump on board! Awesome ideas Kathryn, stoke those fires, this is exactly the collaborative approach to problem solving Hub facilitates :)*

James: *i love this idea as a concept. anyone know any people with good skills rounding up people?*

Later on, the Hub encouraged proposals from members on ideas to improve the Coworking experience. These were organised and collated through a project (and social media channel) called '*101 awesome acts to make hub more epic*'.

101 Awesome Acts to Make Hub More Epic

The place to register your awesome ideas to make OUR Hub more epic!

Info:

I know what you're thinking, 'how can Hub get anymore epic?!', but we have a very credible source that told us 101 acts of awesome before 31 December 2012 is guaranteed to make Hub more epic.

So what is an awesome act?

Anything that has the potential to inspire or show awe; no act is too small or too big to be awesome - Hub wants them all!

Some of the member proposals were simple, practical suggestions, such as '*restock the stationary area*', or '*new stools for the green room*'. Others were more playful and fanciful, such as '*fish foot spa*', or '*rock climbing wall*'. But on several occasions a particular topic became a rich site of contested opinions. It was in these occasions that the 'competing institutional logics' drawn from conflicting assumptions underpinning the Coworking project came to the surface. Usually these issues were resolved by forgoing the community oriented, participatory logics and clarifying ambiguities by adopting either a market or corporate orientated logic. The following examples offer three accounts where participatory tensions provoked such a transition. They trace developments over time in a proposal for a coffee machine in the kitchen; changes to the organisation of plant care and protests at business decisions in a 'town hall' meeting.

The coffee machine

As noted earlier in this thesis, kitchens often become focal points for spontaneous interactions in office environments, and Coworking spaces tend to follow this social script. In this case however, the object of 'the coffee machine' took on a peculiar social life of its own, and became something of a contested symbol within the community. This process began with a proposal from one member for a 'Nespresso machine' as part of the *101 awesome acts*. But the subsequent discussion illustrates how this simple proposition teased out conflicting sets of values that extended far beyond the merits of accessible coffee. I have reproduced some key exchanges of this discussion and included the images Coworkers uploaded to support their points:

Sarawut: *We crave our espresso! What about a Nespresso machine in the kitchen! Hub Runner Enterprises will supply coffee capsules through coinbox purchase just like beer, or heavy consumers can buy their own capsules.*



Coworkers offered a number of responses. Some raised ethically minded concerns about the social and environmental consequences of supporting Nestle, and the impact on the local social enterprise cafe:

Sharon: *Do they make the pod thingys biodegradable?*

Whyla: *Personally I'm much more comfortable supporting Kinfolk than supporting Nestlé. My limited research (based mostly on my Shop Ethical App) leads me to believe that Nestlé USA (which owns Nestle Aust) is not a company with standards that Hub would be proud to support. They get a big red strike against them on many fronts. Is this something that is important to other members too?*

Garry: *My biggest worry is how this would affect Kinfolk - they are our member and one that is generating a lot of values for developing countries and other development projects.*

Others asked practical questions about trade-offs between price, convenience and quality:

Martin: *Why not just a conventional espresso machine? Makes better coffee...*

Sebastian: *Alfonso Bialetti's simple yet elegant Moka Express coffee maker, designed in 1933, remains a part of almost every cucina italiana today!*



Sarawut offered enthusiastic responses to all of the queries followed by a promise to research and return with a formal proposal:

Sarawut: *Great point! Even though the capsule container is aluminium, it cannot be recycled through the standard recycling bins because of the coffee grounds inside. So Nespresso has set up 3 collection points for used pods in the Melbourne metro area, including one in their shop on Collins St. Their recycling process extracts coffee grounds and manufactures compost from it, and recycles the aluminium which is 100% recoverable.*

The Moka is an ingenious device indeed! I own one which is great for camping trips because you can use it over a portable gas stove. No need to forego good coffee just because you're in the wilderness.

However, it is not the optimal solution for the office environment where there are many users and you need high dispensing capacity. It is a bit fiddly, takes a bit of experience to use properly and takes maybe 10 minutes to brew a cup, more if you want to froth milk for your lattes and cappuccinos. Also, it relies on natural steam buildup so can only achieve a pressure of about 10 bars, which isn't quite enough to produce a good crema.

The Nespresso uses a pump that produces 19 bar pressure which produces a rich crema. It includes the Aeroccino frother that froths milk on demand. All up, including frothed milk, in less than 60 seconds. It is designed to be idiot-proof - just pop in the capsule and press a button for consistently great coffee.

A conventional espresso machine requires a bit of skill and technique to make a reasonable coffee. Probably not a problem for you and me, but I suspect many people just want a good coffee and have no interest in becoming a barista.

I will do some research and report back to everyone with a concrete facts and figures proposal. Looking forward to the "research" :-)

Most revealing was his discussion of the merits of avoiding purchasing a coffee machine (sourced from a multinational company) in order to support the efforts of a

local social enterprise cafe. Despite engaging in a process more akin to politics or community resource management, he invoked market principles - *'choice in an open market benefits all consumers and strengthens all providers'* - and then raised questions about the role of Hub - *'we are defined by who we serve and I have always assumed that the answer to be something like 'the collective benefit of all members' about all else. Does Hub have an 'exclusion principle' to ensure that it protects particular members from competition?'*:

Sarawut: *What Kinfolk is doing is commendable and deserves support. A good cause will always succeed on the strength of their message and, if they operate in the commercial world, also on the quality of their product. Kinfolk ticks the boxes on both counts.*

Social Enterprises should not rely on prohibition of alternative options to succeed. People should be able to support any enterprise of their choice, social or commercial or personal, and not feel coerced in particular directions through deprivation of alternatives. Choice in an open market benefits all consumers and strengthens all providers. Protectionism favours the few at the expense of the many.

The other question we need to ask is: what is the primary role of Hub in all this? We are defined by who we serve and I have always assumed that the answer to be something like "the collective benefit of all its members" above all else. Is that the case or do we need to revisit this question? Does Hub have an "exclusion principle" to ensure that it protects particular members from competition? For example, if a company wants to join who competes with the interests of an existing member, would Hub disallow it in order to support the existing member? I think it's important we ask these questions now before we allow ourselves to slide down the slippery slope of anti competitive behaviour.

Anyway, let's have a bit of perspective and not make this into a Kinfolk vs Nespresso battle - they are not mutually exclusive options. People will use both at different times and for different reasons. Personally I love Kinfolk to

sit down with someone for a chat, or if I want to take a break and change of scene, or for something to eat, and oh, only if it's before 3pm. But if I want a quick fix and continue at my desk without wasting time, or need a late afternoon caffeine transfusion, it's hard to beat getting top quality coffee in-house in 60 seconds.

Also we have to be mindful of the cost factor and be sensitive to the financial means of members. Not a big deal if you only consume one coffee a day, but for folks who need a few coffees to get through the day it can be a substantial drain on the budget at \$3.50 a shot (vs less than \$1.00 with the Nespresso).

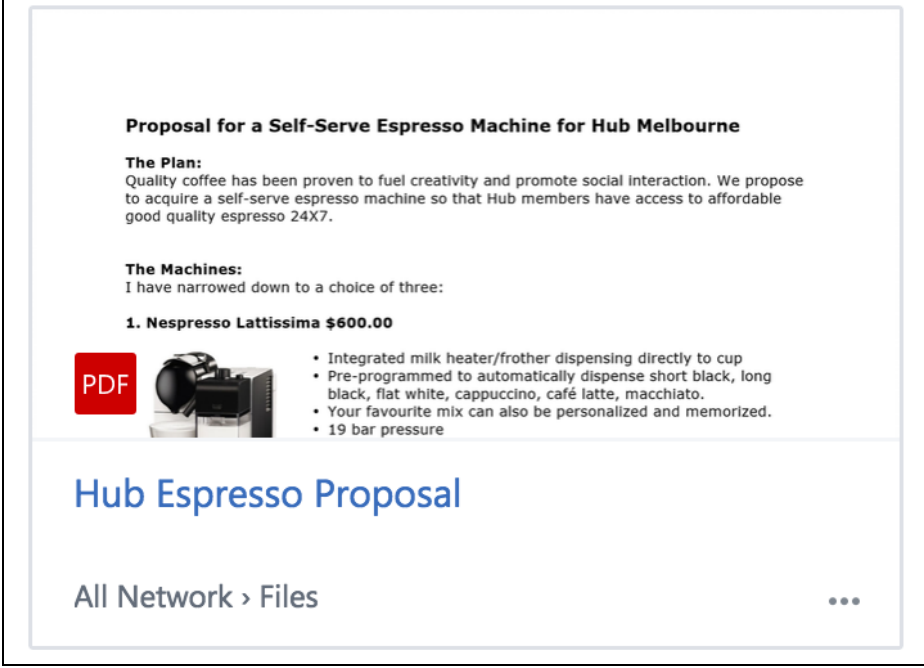
In the end, I suspect that if we get a Nespresso, it will just expand the market and the net result will be just a higher overall consumption of coffee rather than one option gaining at the expense of the other.



Ten days later Sarawut came back with a four page proposal detailing three options for a coffee machine distinguished by price and quality. The proposal generated thirty-nine responses from members, many echoed the prior concerns around the ethical impact of purchasing from Nestle and practical questions of price and performance.

Sarawut: *All espresso lovers, after extensive research I am pleased to submit this proposal for getting in-house espresso in the Hub. Your*

feedback please! If you would like to participate in taking this forward, please like this post.





Proposal for a Self-Serve Espresso Machine for Hub Melbourne

The Plan:
Quality coffee has been proven to fuel creativity and promote social interaction. We propose to acquire a self-serve espresso machine so that Hub members have access to affordable good quality espresso 24X7.

The Machines:
I have narrowed down to a choice of three:

1. Nespresso Lattissima \$600.00

- Integrated milk heater/frother dispensing directly to cup
- Pre-programmed to automatically dispense short black, long black, flat white, cappuccino, café latte, macchiato.
- Your favourite mix can also be personalized and memorized.
- 19 bar pressure

Hub Espresso Proposal

All Network > Files ...

Figure 45: The espresso machine proposal

As an alternative, a few members offered to loan coffee machines to the Hub that they or an acquaintance owned. Sarawut provided a comprehensive summary and substantive response to all of the main questions raised by other Coworkers.

Sarawut: *Thanks to everyone for alternative coffee machine suggestions. Here's a quick recap about espresso coffee vs just any coffee. Sorry it's rather long and may seem a bit anal to some, so if you have no interest in coffee just skip.*

There are many ways to produce the brew from the coffee grind, but only the espresso method can fully extract the aromatic oils intact from the coffee. This is what produces the divine crema layer on your espresso (see picture) and imparts its distinctive flavour and slightly oily (vs watery) consistency.

The key to this is PRESSURE. A good espresso machine uses an electric pump to achieve 15 bar or more (atmospheric pressures). Why is pressure important? Very high pressure can force the oils out of the coffee at a moderate water temperature (85-90°C), and do it all within a few seconds. This is crucial because boiling water/steam scorches the coffee and evaporates the volatile aromatics, while a prolonged extraction dissolves out unwanted residues and produces a bitter taste.

The Moka and Atomic Coffee Maker models are stovetop espresso machines which rely on natural steam pressure. They are ideal for taking on your camping trip where you don't have electric power, but they cannot match the pump driven espresso machines. They can only achieve about 1.5 bar pressure. Still much better than drip coffee or instant coffee when you're out in the wilderness, but I would not use it in my kitchen.

Spencer's Aeropress suggestion looks interesting but there's just no way a hand press can extract the full flavours from coffee, even if you are a bodybuilder. If you look at the video, the brew looks distinctly un-espresso (watery, no crema). Also, no way to froth milk. I think inventions like this are great and they have their place, possibly as portable or backup units when it's not possible to have a real espresso otherwise.

Why not a "proper" espresso machine (as suggested by Tim)? This will produce coffee as good as any cafe, but there are practical considerations, namely: cost, benchtop footprint and "user-friendliness". The commercial units are big beasts with a price tag to match. Hard to justify unless it's generating a constant revenue stream for you. There are home espresso machines which do a reasonable job at a lower cost (but still not cheap) and a smaller footprint and may be worth considering. This is what I use at home.

Then there's the user-friendliness factor. Any "proper" espresso machine, whether commercial or home, requires some basic training to use and maintain. Also, remember the machine can shoot out high pressure steam which has the potential to cause scald injuries if you're not careful. There's

other basic stuff like tamping the grind, ensuring the seal is free of debris, milk frothing techniques, constant flushing of the steam nozzle and other maintenance practices. None of it is rocket science, but how many people can be bothered if all they want is a quick espresso? It kind of defeats the whole purpose of the exercise.

However, Phil's offer of a compact espresso machine at no charge makes this a viable alternative. The only question left is whether users will take to it. We can try it out at the Hub at no cost and find out! If we make this happen, both Phil and I have volunteered to do Barista 101 lessons for everyone interested. So yes, I think this alternative is definitely worth pursuing, although it can happen only after November.

In the meantime I will see if it's possible to beg, borrow or steal a capsule machine for Hub members to try out. If there's demand, we can explore ways of user funding rather than asking Hub to fund. That way we avoid the controversy of communal funding for something not universally endorsed.



Towards the end of the thread the owner of the Coworking space responded:

Graham: *“I would just like to do a quick acknowledgement and PRAISE of Sarawut and his openness to feedback and input and sharing of proposals in this conversation. Also acknowledging that many people who have engaged on this one and shared your thoughts in the manner that you have. Also, the core team is quietly but attentively following this stream albeit holding back and seeing how the community decides. We are having a chat about it at our core team tomorrow to see how we could contribute/support.”*

A number of events transpired regarding the coffee machine from here. Sarawut's original proposal was put forward in October 2012. By November another member had loaned a machine and Sarawut had set up a donation box to raise funds for a permanent machine:

Sarawut: *To everyone who's enjoying the DIY espresso coffee in the kitchen, thank you for your patronage and for helping to take care of the loan machine. So far we have sold 123 pods, but only collected \$99 - a shortfall of \$24 :-)*

If you may have forgotten to put in your gold coin when making your coffee, it would be appreciated if you could make good the contribution in the blue coin box, thanks. If we make up the shortfall, we are well on the way to purchasing our own machine very soon!



Figure 46: The DIY espresso money box

Sarawut: *Bad news! Our coffee collection shortfall has worsened to \$40.00. Everyone who's enjoying the convenience of in-house DIY espresso, please think back whether you may have forgotten to pay for it. If so, please make good in the coin box. This coffee is not free and if you don't pay for it someone else is subsidising you. If the shortfall continues to rise, sadly the scheme will no longer be sustainable.*

Just in case we were too subtle before, I've put up a big poster on the kitchen wall above the machine.



Figure 47: This coffee is not free

By January this method had raised enough funds to purchase a small machine:

Sarawut: *Hey all you espresso lovers, we have a brand new 2013 model coffee machine in the kitchen. Funded from the \$1 coffees you enjoyed - thank you for your patronage. It now belongs to all the Hub coffee drinkers. The loan machine has been playing up and has now been packed away to lodge a warranty claim.*

Everything is the same as before. Please continue to contribute \$1 per coffee and the surplus will go towards a fund to upgrade to a more upmarket machine some time down the track.



The 'voluntary funding' system was then maintained and Sarawut continued to play a managerial role in communicating with the membership body:

Sarawut: *Coffee machine update: It appears the whisk for the milk frother is lost. Anyone know anything about that? I suspect it's fallen into the sink outlet! Anyway I've ordered spares that should come in a week. Unfortunately quite costly as spares usually are - that's one of the things the coin collection pays for. So please be careful when washing the milk jug. Until then, it's flat white for everyone :-)*

The coffee collection shortfall is getting worse! As of yesterday's audit, we are \$59.40 short. After a burst of conscience bringing down the deficit in December, it climbed alarmingly in the last month. Your colleagues should not have to subsidise your coffees - bad karma. If you've forgotten to pay, please make good.

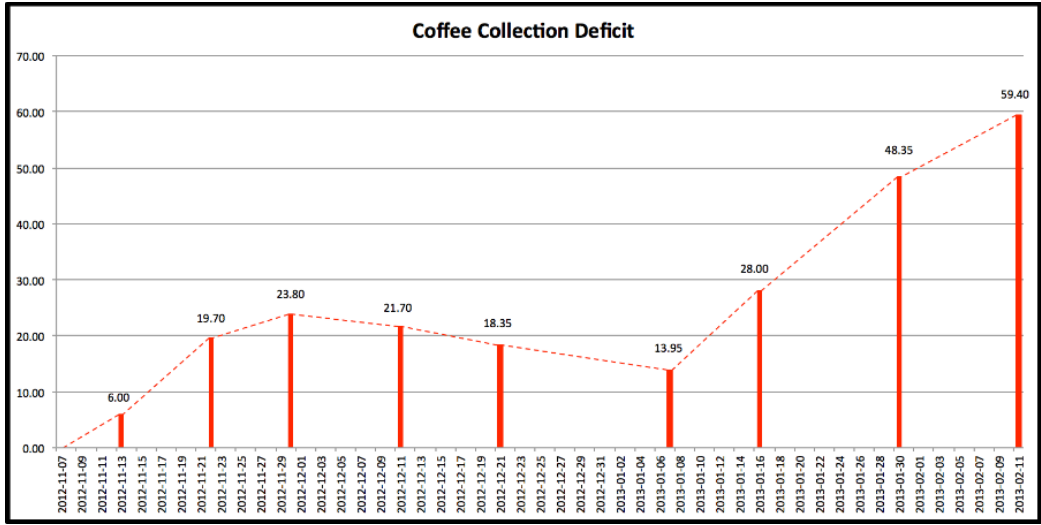


Figure 48: The collection deficit

For some months the new coffee machine became a focal object that provoked social interaction and some degree of community pride. Members would ask for assistance in using it on Yammer and Sarawut would often be copied in to help them. In other instances members would post photos of them demonstrating how to use it. By May however the coin box ‘disappeared’ (it was likely stolen) which dampened the enthusiasm for the voluntary, member managed system. By August the enterprise had taken over the management of the coffee machine:

Shimelle: *PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT - A LAVAZZA COFFEE MACHINE JUST ENTERED THE BUILDING!!!!*

Sarawut: *Woo hoo, fantastico! Just made my first espresso from the new Lavazza machine - it's excellent! Anyone want personal barista lessons? Buy me a \$1 coffee and I'll oblige :-)*



Figure 49: The corporate coffee machine

Nicole: Who's responsible for the coffee machine in the kitchen? Sarawut is it you? If it is, did you rent it or buy it? Thanks

Sarawut: I'm no longer responsible for the coffee machine. I believe it's a deal done between Hub and Red Pod Coffee where they provide the machine free and charge for the pods, subject to minimum consumption per month.

The saga of the coffee machine illustrates the considerable effort exercised by some members in creating proposals, responding to queries and in this case managing the subsequent project. Almost a year transpired between the original proposal and

administrative adoption of the coffee machine by the enterprise in which the machine was 'managed' by the community. The reader might be reminded that such work was performed by members who pay a monthly fee to access the physical space and community. Furthermore, the idea of the 'collective purchase' of the machine evoked one of the more protracted discussions on the purpose and ethical expectations of the Coworking enterprise. To revise the institutional ideal types cited earlier, clearly logic that animated this discussion was less rooted in 'faceless', 'self-interested', 'transactions' of market logic; and more deeply sourced in the community minded rationale that includes 'committed values', 'common boundaries', 'group membership', 'emotional connection', 'visibility of actions' and 'member status'¹²⁶.

The plants

'The plants' were another set of (living) material objects that revealed competing assumptions about the purpose of the enterprise, shared values of members and the appropriate forms of organising. Like the story of the coffee machine, this principally became visible upon reviewing how discussion about them changed over time. The plants in the Hub were an experiment as part of a project by an early member who was looking to create a business that offered 'unusual plants' in corporate offices.

Valorie: *Bob just installed beautiful kangaroo paw and leucadendron in our planter boxes! If you want to find out more about the the plants and how to care for them, Bob will be running a mini workshop next Tuesday 8 February from 1pm!*

¹²⁶ To follow the model of Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012), we can also observe traces of the 'democratic participation' of 'state logic' and some of the categories of the 'professional logic', such as 'personal expertise', 'personal reputation' and 'professional status'.



Figure 50: The kangaroo paws

One old timer recalls the early days of their installation:

'By that time the green room was done and beautiful and there was a lot of great energy. And this guy who loved plants, Graham had got him in to more or less try out his business idea to put more...unusual plants into office spaces in unusual ways. So he'd come around checking out his plants.'

The plants and the responsibility for their care became another focal point for the celebration of voluntary cooperation outside either market exchanges or corporatist directives. Members were encouraged to care for the plants:

Ralph: *Saw a great short film from Urban Reforestation at Hub tonight - look out for the Hub plants. Hot tip from Frank, if the white stick in the turbe isn't visible they're starving!*

Paul: *Yes - although the extra bonus pro tip to give you a level up: check to see that stick hasn't gotten itself stuck on the corrugated pipe before watering :)*

Frank: *Thanks Ralph and Paul! We all need to love the plants and thank Graham and Elizabeth for their awesome weekend session reinvigorating the space :)*

Some were even encouraged to 'adopt' certain plants and look after them:

Elizabeth: *Hub Melbourne is GREEN. And we'd love to keep it that way. We would love the support of members to help us keep our greenery thriving and make it as creative and vibrant space from which to work. The awesome International Human Rights Coalition team have put their hands up to keep an eye on the plants in the kitchen area, including the beautiful Lemon Lime. If you would love to adopt a few plants and give them some TLC when you visit the Hub, let the host know next time you are in. Have an awesome night!*

Graham: *I would love to adopt the basil that sits on the ledge, gazza's basil is what we will call it and I will make sure there is always lots of it for toasted sandwiches and mixed bag lunches!!!!*

Elizabeth: *Basil it is...anyone like to put up their hands for the feature plants when you walk in?*

Veronica: *I will take care of the feature plants and anything that appears to be ailing.*

Frank: *Veronica is our wonderful resident plant carer...thanks for all the attention bestowed upon the plants!*

Another member created a 'herb garden for the Hub' in which members could donate plants or gold coins towards plant care. Many responded with donations:

Gaby: *I'm supporting (and loving) Patty's member initiative 'fresh herbs in the kitchen'. In addition to my gold coin donation (for good potting mix and planters), I'm contributing cuttings of herbs from my garden (sage, thyme and mint) for her to cultivate into plants.*

Patty: *Herb garden for the Hub - FINAL CALL - ok people of culinary nature (or not), today is the last day to make a gold coin donation and vote for which potted herbs you'd like to see in the kitchen. I'll be passing the box around at lunch today - so please bring a coin if you'd like to support this project. Progress to date: at home I am nurturing cuttings kindly provided by Gaby - Sage, Mint (summer cocktails perhaps?), thyme and rosemary. Only need parsley and we could whip up a folk tune :)*

Paul: *I can get you parsley, how much do you want. I have quite a lot of plants. Come by my desk and I can make arrangements. Have you thought a wall or hanging garden?*

Tony: *I have parsley rainforest habitat in my back court!*

Patty: *Does anyone have any spare smallish plastic pots lying around at home. Need to transplant the cutting so far. Around 10cm diameter would be great. Also will need plant saucers - any donations greatly appreciated.*

Andrew: *Hi patty. I have heaps of pots and I'm pretty sure some of them are square - how many do you need?*

Veronica: *Also have heaps! I'll bring them in.*

Paul: *Parsley is near window, please put in potting mix.*

Patty: *Thanks Paul for the parsley and thank you to whoever potted it up. It looks a bit wilted at the minute but I think it'll be ok.*

In another instance, a member suggested Coworkers grow '*heirloom melons from seeds*' as part of a '*fun little community-building exercise*' which received enthusiastic responses.

Jennifer: Are you keen to join #thegreatmelonchallenge?? This was a fun little community-building exercise that I kicked off with my local community garden and I thought i'd extend the fun to the wonderful Hub community.

I bought a collection of very unusual heirloom melon seeds that I am raising right now - 23 varieties in total. I am proposing that those who are keen join this challenge to grow between us a beautiful range of melons of all shapes and sizes, melons that we will have never tasted before!

To enter the challenge costs \$10 & with that you'll get your melon seedlings, which I am lovingly raising for you, & a 30l bag of the best manure to get you off to a flying start. When all of the melons are ready we will meet up at the Craigieburn Community Garden, pool all of the melons & divide them between us. I think it would also make a great community event afterwards to invite our friends/family to taste some of the melons that we have grown.

We currently have 16 people involved and are in need of at least 7 more champions.

So... Who's in?

As these examples illustrate, plants became objects that circulated in the informal 'gifting economy' that developed within the Coworking community. In addition to these examples of donations, there were other instances where Coworkers made requests such as '*wanted: FREE unloved plant plots to transfer seedlings*'. [Chapter 5.4](#) proposed that Coworking spaces became 'boundary objects' around which the Coworking community of practice interacted and organised. Within the space

however, the coffee machine and the plants became their own boundary objects (or at least focal artefacts) around which smaller groups of interest organised. An emblematic example was offered earlier when two Coworkers made jam from the cumquat plants. The hub even formalised a 'contra' arrangement with some members to exchange plant care services for access the space.

However these 'community sourced arrangements' proved difficult to sustain over time. After a few years of experimenting with different voluntary care arrangements the Hub organised a plant care company, called (of all things) '*Corporate Plants*'.

Jason: We love our plants! However we haven't taken quite as good care of them as we'd like to. So we're getting in the professionals. Corporate Plants, to make sure the greenery at Hub is treated right. Many of the plants currently in the Melbourne space have been labelled with a green circle sticker. These plants are looking a new home. If you'd like to share take on home with you let the front desk know and mark your name on it.

This announcement incurred a frustrated response from some members, one hoping that '*non-monetary exchanges for services will become part of the future of work*'.

Francis: I have to say I was quite surprised to read that Hub are going to be buying in the services of a corporate plant supplier...this seems to relate to the no more contra deals decision, as I'm pretty sure the plants were looked after very well by plant loving members with green thumbs under contra deals in the past. Along with 9-5 not being the future of work, I would hope that nonmonetary exchanges for services will become part of the future of work...and I wonder how many casual days of access to the Hub the corporate plant service will be costing?

In a remarkably revealing comment, another member pointed to this decision as indicative of a movement away from *'caring for the seeds and the seedlings in an organisation, literally and metaphorically, is often sacrificed in the name of financial considerations as the organisation grows'*:



"Who cares?" - seems to be a relevant question here regarding the plants and the future of Hub Melbourne.

This was posted on Hub Adelaide:

--"Seedlings! Its time to plant the grow boxes on the balcony, maybe we could bring in seeds or seedlings and then we can nurture them so we have a productive display come summer! Happy to take care of them."---

Caring for the seeds and the seedlings in an organisation, literally and metaphorically, is often sacrificed in the name of financial considerations as the organisation grows. We can observe this all around us and it's important to stay away from the blame game. I would however like to bring to your awareness that the more caring services we outsource the less we will be connected with what's alive in and around us and on the long run it will have a negative impact on our relationships and health. Don't many people come to Hub because they left either a "disconnected and meaningless work harder - work more - world" or because they don't want to work in isolation. How can we bring caring back into the equation?
Caring for plants, caring for each other and caring for the planet are directly interrelated.

More on this will come from Vandana Shiva on Friday, 15th at 11.30 am when she speaks about the link between economy and ecology and how to rebuild culture and community.

<http://www.pachamama.org/vandana-shiva>

If anyone is interested we could organise a co-learn session on (y)our environmental health



Join Vandana Shiva in a Live Conversation on The Link Between

www.pachamama.org

...

Figure 51: Who cares?

The Hub management did respond to these concerns but with an evident change in tone from the enthusiasm for collective care of earlier years:

As a quick aside, in response to Pia's post on the plants,

The contras of plant care were not working out at Hub Melbourne. Despite the love and attention provided by our community through contra deals, Clubhouse team members spent a lot of time caring for plant on top of their duties, often leading to 12 hour (or more) days! This is especially true having reopened the Melbourne Room and added Level 2. This is not sustainable for our team.

In terms of plants and ongoing care, this is far from our core business and we are not experts. Increasingly, we were seeing plants develop diseases from being inside over an extended period, dying, and needing to be replaced. This means more \$, more work for our team, and a not very nice aesthetic for our space (no one wants sick and dying plants).

These factors lead us to get quotes from a number of professions plant service providers, where we could buy having beautiful looking plants as a service, and take out some of the ongoing work. These suppliers provide the plants, ensure the plants are best suited to being indoors, take care of them, ensure any that beginning to experience problems are cycled out of the building to be restored and replace them with new ones.

In summary: The building provides a particularly challenging environment for plants to survive in. Add to this the amount of traffic at Hub meant that looking after the plants required more than love and care - no matter whether it was provided by Hub staff, contras or lots of plants and the only way for us to do this was to engage

professional plant help. We have also engaged a professional plants service in Hub Sydney.

Re: Larissa's post the Hub Adelaide seedlings - this isn't in relation to in-space plants, but a garden bed that sits on the balcony. Hub Adelaide has a much smaller space nad footprint, and currently the care of the small number of plants that are in space is going ok. The edible garden on the balcony is an ongoing project owned by some of our members.

For many Coworkers the plants had become more than simply decorative ornaments, they functioned as a symbol of voluntary care or cooperation outside the logic of market exchange. In an interview, Veronica, a long term member who was involved in making the jam from the cumquat plants, discusses how their role in the life of the community changed since the early days.

"I remember one of the girls who volunteered with the plants...and I decided to make jam from the cumquat trees in Hub. And she was so excited about it....I suppose it had a thread because those cumquat trees wouldn't have been there if that guy who was experimenting with how to put those plants in the buildings, hadn't put them in there with the tag, with the botanical name, you know, the detail and care of those early days was bearing fruit on those trees. This woman who had a future with Hub was keen to harvest that fruit and make jam and share it with people you know...so yeah that was a very important moment I thought...

...And yeah I think I've said to you before, the email that came around just the other day that said we're not caring for our plants as well as we could, and we're getting corporate garden services to come and do that plants. You know seeing that email was like...[sighs] oh you know, we have become a generic...they're

‘plants’, they’re not this type of cumquat, requiring this amount of sun, listed on the label that people would take any interest in.”

The plants were material objects which provoked a gradual shift in the dominant institutional logic employed and rationalised to provide their ongoing care. As Veronica’s comments above indicate, the unusual character of the plants was one of the more visible symbols that positioned the physical space as ‘different’ in the early days. The plants were often commented upon by newcomers, and an entry point for volunteers and contra (non-paying) members to access the community. Incidentally, most of the care work for the plants were led by women. One female member once confided to me that, although she could afford to pay for a Coworking membership, she chose to exchange plant care for her membership because she believed the space needed a *‘feminine, nurturing quality to balance out all that entrepreneurial macho bravado’*.

These changes in the rationale offered for the plant care and other features of the Coworking community did not go unnoticed by many Coworkers. Many of these concerns were raised in one of the more boisterous ‘town hall’ meetings organised by the Hub.

The town hall

A vivid example of the application of an alternative logic to market transactions was visible in the regular ‘town hall meetings’ organised by the Hub enterprise. Town hall meeting that involve minimally scripted, face to face interaction between politicians, administrators and constituents, has long been a staple of democratic politics (Bryan 2010). More recently, some corporates have adapted the practice as a method of sharing results between executives, managers and employees, often with space allocated for questions and discussion.

The Hub drew upon this tradition and convened three town hall meetings a year to share information, discuss changes and seek feedback from members. Members were invited using language such as *'let's co-create the next phase of hub together'*. Despite this intention the details of governance arrangements and decision-making processes were never quite clear to many members. For example some members questioned whether these forums were chiefly about sharing information or if members had a 'legitimate' stake in shaping prospective decisions. The first town hall was co-facilitated by a member, and in subsequent ones members presented the progress of projects they had worked on for the hub. Over time however, a more conventional format evolved where the founder presented recent developments and future plans followed by questions and informal conversation between members.



Figure 52: The town halls

During the period of my field research I attended all of the town hall meetings. There was one in particular that stood out as an incident that signaled the brewing crisis in competing institutional logics which I will recount here.

It is 4.30pm on a Wednesday in July 2014 and I join a growing group on one of the chairs arranged theatre style in event space. It's one of the larger turnouts, and I count about thirty other people in the room.

A new staff member opens the meeting and rather awkwardly 'explains' the history and values of the community to the group,

some of which have been members for several years. Next the general manager takes over, and speaks about *'the expansion strategy'* that would involve opening more Coworking spaces in other Australian cities. He envisions *'a million experiences a year by 2020, in which you'll be part of a truly national community'*. As part of this strategy, they are proposing changes to the model of casual membership¹²⁷. Finally, the floor is passed to the founder Graham, who talks excitedly of the challenges in creating both a *'vibrant business and vibrant community'*.

The floor is then opened for questions.

Sarawut, the member who led the run club and coffee machine proposal, immediately raises his hand and asks forcefully:

'I want to ask why we have eliminated an entire membership category without any explanation?'

Graham responds that this category *'didn't make sense business wise. That membership category has about 10% churn per month and over a year that's not a sustainable position for us.'*

This evokes some strong reactions from several members. Michael, another active old time member, responds with some agitation:

¹²⁷ At this time the Hub offered four tiers of membership. 'Connect' members paid \$20 a month for access to the digital site yammer and attendance of events such as the shared lunches and town hall meetings, but were not supposed to 'work' from the space. 'Casual' members paid \$200 a month in exchange for one day a week of access to work in the space, but in practice many members divided their 8 hours over the course of a week. 'Frequent' members paid \$400 for three days a week and *Local* members paid \$600 for full time access to a permanent desk. The proposal was to raise the price of the 'Connect' membership to \$30 a month, and abolish the 'Casual' membership in place of paid 'day passes' to access the workspace.

'I think you've missed an opportunity here. This isn't the future of work and not the way to deal with membership churn. There's lots of other models if you look around - cable television has been dealing with this for years. The way I use my casual membership is a few hours here and there, in between meetings and appointments in the city, I would never come in for an 8 hour block...I'd go nuts.'

Another member says she lives in Canberra and doesn't *'have in my mind a model of what I am in any of the new membership categories'*.

When she is assured that these changes will only apply to new members, and that 'legacy members' can maintain their previous arrangements, Sarawut reacts with some exasperation:

'As legacy members, we don't want to be treated any differently as members of the community. We want to be like everyone else. I think you've missed that point about the casual membership. You're reducing a sense of belonging to a transactional relationship'.

The general manager responds that they didn't want to *'lose the edge'* of having people drop in, and they had only recently been wondering if they'd one the right thing. Graham agrees that perhaps they need to *'keep thinking'* about these changes.

The atmosphere of the meeting is slightly unsettled. Some other matters are discussed but this issue doesn't appear resolved. Towards the end of the meeting, Hilda, who works for a professional services firm specialising in collaboration design for the public sector, offers a synthesising reflection:

“So what I hear is a lot of members feel they have relevant business knowledge and they could help with some of these decisions. So my question is how do you get people-members-customers involved in the problem definition and solution space?”

This query, which in many ways reflects the ongoing and unresolved dilemma of the membership governance process, is left unanswered. Time is running short. A newer member raises his hand and says:

‘I haven’t been here very long...but I want to say I just love this place’

There’s some laughter as some of the tension is momentarily relieved. A few others say *‘I do too’* before the meeting is formally closed.

Food and drinks are provided and members mill around for another hour to chat. I notice Andrew, another socially active old timer, discussing the changes with one of the community managers in front of a whiteboard pointedly emphasising *‘we are very vocal about the decisions because we care - if we didn’t care, we would just leave’*.

This was the most heated town hall I had witnessed. It was followed up with an online discussion with thirty responses and some further face to face meetings between management and some more active members. In the short term many of the tensions raised by members were resolved, one member on the discussion thread even commented that *‘personally I have been inspired by the transparency, democracy, and evolution of this process. Ultimately it is a Hub management decision but to be engaged is empowering.’* Nevertheless in retrospect it appeared to mark a significant transition point regarding member participation in decisions. From

this point forward, members were less encouraged to ‘co-create’ the community norms or arrangement of the physical space, were less inclined to make formal proposals regarding new developments, contra deals in exchange for plant care or other forms of labour ceased, and even the character of the town halls changed, moved more towards information sessions. As these attempts to ‘shape the institutional logic’ waned, the ambiguity around the membership relationship gave way to a ‘cleaner’, customer to service-provider relationship, less muddled by communitarian symbols, cooperative vocabulary that provoked such troubling expectations of participation.

This empirical material presented in this section has sought to demonstrate how many Coworkers attempted to consciously shape the social practices and physical environment by engaging in participatory practices rooted in non-market oriented institutional logics. In fact in doing this visibly, many were attempting to shape the dominant institutional logic of the Coworking project itself. The three incidents recounted in detail, the story of ‘the coffee machine’, ‘the plants’ and ‘the town hall’, also point to how the experiences and expectations of Coworkers ‘changed over time’. It is this subject that will be examined more closely in the final chapter of this thesis.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has been guided by the question *how* people Cowork, and has closely examined the ethnographic material through the lens of practice theory. It has presented an analytical description of six social practices that gave early Coworking culture much of its distinct character. These include:

- welcoming, introducing and curating;
- connecting and establishing shared heuristics;
- declaring purpose over profit;
- blending the personal and professional;

- sharing and working out loud;
- shaping the institutional logic.

Collectively these practices cultivated a form of sociality that was conducive to forming new social ties and strengthening nascent bonds. This dense network of prosocial practices cultivated a favourable learning environment for many non-standard workers, especially those in earlier stages of maturity. As previously described, once many Coworkers' practices or enterprises matured, or they transitioned from 'exploring' new knowledge towards 'exploiting' existing knowledge (March 1991), their appetite for spontaneous interactions with unknown others tended to diminish, and they became more selective in their attention.

But there is another, more subtle consequence of the argument presented in this chapter. The routine performance of these Coworking activities resulted in the production of a *common pool of resources*, positioned across the 'digital-socio-material' Coworking arena. This common pool of resources was constituted by both *knowledge* and *affect*, participants found value in Coworking partly because it brought them into contact with useful information, but also partly because of the way it made them *feel*. The empirical question of how Coworking experiences changed over time will be explored in [Chapter 7](#) and the nature of the '*immaterial commons*' and its' significance for entrepreneurial communities and working futures will be explored in [Chapter 8](#).

Chapter 7: Changes

How Coworking experiences change over time

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand changing experiences of work through a rigorous ethnographic analysis of an entrepreneurial Coworking community. In responding to this challenge, it has attempted to weave together two components. The first is to offer a detailed ethnographic account that sheds light on the particular social world of a small group of Coworkers in Melbourne. The second has been to construct a tentative ‘theory’ of Coworking, to consider the benefits it can afford its participants, and the role Coworking practices can play in the *construction and organisation of entrepreneurial communities* in the new economy. This is why a wide variety of social theory has been considered alongside the descriptive accounts of the phenomena. This chapter will finalise the first component of this project by briefly recounting how the research participant’s relationship and experience with Coworking changed over time. As a large amount of empirical material has already been marshalled in the previous chapters, it will only briefly cover ‘what happened’ with a small sample of examples for each case. Chapter 8 will then address the conceptual discussion of this tentative theory of Coworking. It will focus on the collaborative construction of value that Coworking can entail, instantiated through distributed forms of ‘immaterial labour’ enacted through Coworking practices. It will argue that this value can be conceptualised as an ‘immaterial commons’ in the form of useful knowledge and positive affect. Finally it will consider the challenges in sustaining the community orientated institutional logic that underpinned the creation and maintenance of this peer-produced, commons-based resource.

7.1 Leaving

Why did people renounce their Coworking membership and leave the space? There were a number of patterns that stood out and will be briefly outlined here. These included some Coworkers whose enterprises grew too large for the space; some that left to join another Coworking space; some that resumed organisational employment; some that attempted to integrate work and travel as 'digital nomads'; some who left because they didn't like the changing culture of Coworking; and even some that went on to create their own informal working communities.

Outgrowing Coworking

A small number of entrepreneurs created successful enterprises that effectively 'outgrew' the space. In one sense this explanation can be taken literally, they began as solo entrepreneurs or founding teams of two and took on employees. As previously mentioned, during the early phase of Coworking the majority of spaces were 'open plan' environments with multiple desks, rather than businesses that accommodated private offices. Even in the early days, Coworking staff noted that once the team of a single team grew to about five members, their preferences appeared to change. The value they had initially placed on flexibility and spontaneous encounters of the open office declined relative to the perceived benefits of a private office space which they could spatially control and focus on their own organisational culture and practices independently from the wider 'Coworking culture'. Indeed, for 'innovative', 'ambitious' or 'high growth' entrepreneurs (Acs 2008), success would be conventionally imagined as founding a firm that becomes large and lucrative enough to no longer require shared office space. An ongoing subscription-based business in which 'successful' customers no longer desire the product creates some sustainability challenges, and this observation no doubt prompted the widespread adoption of more private offices within the inventory of

many Coworking enterprises from around 2013¹²⁸. Many larger Coworking enterprises now offer a suite of 'office access products', beginning with an individual hot desk option, then small private offices and scaling all the way up to accommodate larger teams.

Incidentally, of the two enterprises that followed this trajectory in this study, both appeared to adopt something from their early experience Coworking. The first, a crowdfunding platform enterprise, moved into a warehouse space almost as large as the former Coworking space. In a cooperative spirit they offered some members free access to Cowork from their new space, and subsidised rent to one of the non-profit organisations that permanently moved in with them. The second, a professional services firm focusing on innovation, included a workshop space in their new office environment that they sublet out to other firms.

This sense of 'growing up' can also be applied in another, less literal sense. As previously noted, research on entrepreneurial learning has indicated that as enterprises and their founders mature, different kinds of social networks became useful (Martinez and Aldrich 2011; Scarborough et al. 2013). Many Coworkers in the early stages of an entrepreneurial journey found inspiration simply in the discovering of other entrepreneurs, in 'learning about what they do'. But as enterprises grow, founders face new challenges. The challenges of exploration and exploitation, of 'starting-up' and 'scaling-up', are quite different, and thus the kinds of social relationships that are useful change over the course of this transition. The initial puzzle on how to 'get started' gives way towards more specific concerns on how to access capital from investors, how to deal with hiring and managing staff, and how to systematise the business in preparation for larger production. This changing

¹²⁸ This move was also no doubt also influenced by the meteoric rise of 'We Work', the largest Coworking enterprise in size and valuation by orders of magnitude. As one Coworking founder once confided to me, 'they were the first one to really work out that the most effective business model is to largely offer private offices'. In theories of industry cycles this point of discovery and diffusion is often called either the emergence of a 'dominant category' or 'dominant design'.

relationship with the Coworking community was visible not only in members who decided to leave, but also in many that remained, a point that will be addressed towards the end of this chapter. The key observation shared here is that in several cases enterprises grew to the point where Coworking became less feasible or less desirable.

Moving spaces

“The Coworking community in Melbourne as all having different communities you have the Richmond Inspire9 technology community and you kind have the Hub social entrepreneur and then maybe is to get more towards York Butter or even Electron right out in North Melbourne, you kind of get more techy and start up - it's really dependent; but they all kind of bring their own...style.”

—

“Hub was a good start but we needed something a bit more ‘techy and startuppy’...if you know what I mean...”

—

“We moved from Hub to Inspire 9 - they seem to have worked the community element out much better. It's like a big family.”

As the above quotes demonstrate, some participants chose to move to a different Coworking space. In life-cycle theories of industries, a key feature of the early ‘growth phase’ is the development of more market niches. During the ‘introduction phase’ when this research project commenced there were four Coworking spaces in Melbourne, differentiated by location and, as the comments above indicate, a subtle sense of their own ‘style’. At the present time of writing however there are closer to 150 spaces, and the market includes not only a much wider variety of price points and locations but also more specific interest niches - ‘female only’, ‘blockchain focused’, ‘augmented-reality focussed’ and so forth. As these developments

unfolded, some participants decided that their interests would be better met in a different space. Sometimes this was 'pull-based', led by a greater sense of opportunity in an alternative space. Other times, it was 'push-based', motivated by a disappointment in the character of the existing 'community' offered.

Getting a job

"The last two months has been very interesting. About two months ago I was approached by someone in a large consultancy here in Melbourne to hire me...The person that got in touch with me was one of the judges in one of the events I organised [which was held in a Coworking space]. So she approached me and the first thing that happened was I got really attracted by the roll. But I felt obviously torn because of [my own business]"

In a few cases Coworkers ended up being offered and accepting standard employment roles. This was usually a decision to 'return' to the world of conventional employment, and was sometimes accompanied by a sense of confusion, of giving up, or a loss of the image of an '*entrepreneurial self*'. As we have seen, for many Coworkers the decision to pursue an entrepreneurial venture (or non-standard work) was motivated by a project of self-actualisation, of attempting to align a working life with a vision of the person they wished to become, coupled with a frustration with their prior experiences of organisational employment. Coworking offered an opportunity to explore this project whilst working alongside and learning from other people in similar circumstances. The sociality of Coworking enabled a sense of solidarity amid a frequently uncertain and risky set of choices. And yet making 'things work' in the new context is rarely easy:

'It almost feels like now people jump from corporate to a startup - and I'd put myself in this category - because they're not satisfied at the corporate and they want something different...But it's so much tougher in the entrepreneurial world than a corporate...'

Despite the challenges of the 'entrepreneurial world', the research participants I followed closely who returned to organisational employment didn't apply for roles through standard application processes, rather they were offered employment through informal social networks. In fact it was often their entrepreneurial activities that captured the attention of the prospective employers. As Asha points out in the quotes above, her future employer was one of the judges at a design-jam event she organised which was held in a Coworking space. For corporate managers looking to hire 'innovative talent' the evidence of intrinsic motivation and entrepreneurial enthusiasm visible in such events sent a 'costly signal' of the skills they desired, a commitment to innovation and community building (Connelly et al. 2011). In a further twist, some then used the new networks, resources and legitimacy afforded by the new employment position to advance (or pivot) the strategy of their nascent enterprises. This iterative model of 'hybrid entrepreneurship' (Folta et al. 2010), where the benefits of both self-employment and organisational employment were sought in an ongoing negotiation of legitimacy, may in fact indicate a new norm in balancing the challenges of organisational and self-employment, and will be set aside for more detailed exploration in subsequent research.

Digital nomadism

“So what’s been happening with me in the last four to six months is ‘how do I get my business to be 100% virtual’ so that I am the best at what I am personally good at...”

—

“Anne and I realised it's kinda fun that we both work remotely for companies that are just up the road from each other, over in San Francisco. We have been working from Melbourne for the past few years, but why stay in one place? If we can work from Melbourne we can work from anywhere then the trip doesn't need an end date! So that is what we are going to do.”

A number of Coworkers left their membership to pursue work and life as 'digital nomads'. Whilst there are many depictions of adventure-seeking individuals who combine work and travel throughout the history of literature and film, the specific term *digital nomad* is usually traced to a book by that name (Makimoto and Manners 1997). In something of a prophetic text, the authors pointed to the then anticipated 'unwiring' technologies¹²⁹ and their potential effects on work, organisation and lifestyle choices. In subsequent years the term was popularised by numerous bloggers, some of whom built commercial enterprises around sharing their own stories of digital nomadism¹³⁰. In circumstances where work has become associated with conformity to spatial and temporal routines - the 'nine to five grind', the 'rat race' in the 'big city' and so on - the image of a laptop in a hammock framed by a tropical beach or jungle offers can capture the imagination. Accordingly, places like Ubud in Bali and Chiang Mai in Thailand have developed reputations as havens for expatriates engaged in remote work due to their low cost of living, high speed internet, density of other expatriate digital nomads and, more recently, Coworking spaces.

Most Coworkers, almost by definition, are 'location independent workers' in the sense that they generally have control over the time and location in which they open their laptops - at home, in a cafe or in a Coworking space. Yet most are still tethered to a set of ongoing social relationships in order to maintain work, and these are usually geographically clustered around a major city. Freelance contractors require the regular cultivation and maintenance of social networks in order to ensure ongoing

¹²⁹ These have been discussed in previous sections but include wireless internet enabled laptops, voice over internet enabled applications like Skype, financial services like PayPal, smart devices and social media applications that have made sharing of content easier.

¹³⁰ Here are three examples of digital nomad bloggers that turned their work into books:

- 'The 4-hour work week: Escape the 9-5, live anywhere and join the new rich'. (Ferriss 2011)
- 'Vagabonding: An uncommon guide to the art of long-term world travel.' (Potts 2003)
- 'The Art of Non-conformity: Set Your Own Rules, Live the Life You Want, and Change the World' (Guillebeau 2010)

work. Entrepreneurs of growing enterprises are often tied to a place by their own relationships with employees, investors or perceived requirements to be present in person in activities that grew awareness of their firms. The ability to organise and maintain forms of work (and a lifestyle) that don't require this tethering to place poses an additional level of challenge, or at least the conscious pursuit of an alternative business model. In the Coworking world I observed, these circumstances tended to favour those with established reputations for transactional skills in high-demand, like software engineering; or those whom constructed micro-enterprises that actually benefited from travelling, like travel bloggers or instagram lifestyle 'influencers'¹³¹. The additional difficulty of digital nomadism within the wider world of non-standard work positioned its achievement as a further symbol of status. Social media posts of Coworkers with photos laptops against backdrops of a tropical beaches, jungles or mountains with captions like '*better get to work now #digitalnomad #tryingnottorubitin*' were not uncommon. In similarity to other practices, such as *declaring purpose*, part of the value of the activity appeared to derive from the imagined social prestige of communicating its attainment. In economic theory, goods that derive their value from their social scarcity and desirability by others are called *positional goods* (Schneider 2007). As such goods chiefly confer status within a social field, their value is principally obtained through their 'conspicuous' rather than private consumption.

The social world of digital nomads naturally has its own distinct challenges, not least in the desire for the enduring social relations that 'communities' afford which has been the subject of much of this thesis. On this theme there is now a sub-genre of the digital nomad blogosphere with titles like the '*dark side of the digital nomad*' or '*why I quit being a digital nomad*' that communicate the challenges of the lifestyle¹³².

¹³¹ In very recent years there has been a new wave of 'crypto-investors' who have made significant returns on speculative investments in new ventures riding the novel technological wave. At the time of writing it is unclear how long this new form of investment at distance will remain viable.

¹³² ● [Dark side of the digital nomad](#)

A deeper investigation of the culture of digital nomadism and how such challenges are resolved would be another interesting area for future research. The key point noted here is that a small number of Coworkers arranged their work lives to pursue this goal, which removed them from regular contact with the Coworking community.

Coworking stopped making sense

“After a certain point, hub just stopped making sense to me. The gap between what was promised and what was delivered was just too great...”

—

“I don’t believe in all that collaborative innovation stuff anymore...”

Perhaps the most striking feature in observing the patterns of the Coworking community over the years of my field research was the decline in the spontaneous, prosocial and commons orientated culture within the formal Coworking enterprises¹³³. By late 2014, many of the community orientated gifting practices, at least the visible subset that focused on ‘communal sharing’ (Fiske 1992), had begun to fade. In my analysis, there were three clear features of this shift that I will briefly explain here. These are the size of the community, the stigmergic properties of the environment and the relational logic underpinning social interactions.

“The community feels...more and more transient these days...”

First, a simple explanation for this observation was that the size of the ‘community’ grew. This was, in fact, an attribute frequently commented on by early members. There is a long line of anthropological research that correlates group size to different

-
- [Why I quit being a digital nomad](#)

¹³³ This claim applies primarily to the Coworking community I was most closely following, Hub Melbourne.

forms of sociality, especially with regard to social practices like gifting and other apparently altruistic acts. Studies from a range of disciplines on 'close social relationships' find human social life arranged within hierarchically nested sub-groupings, which can be conceived as a series of expanding concentric 'circles of acquaintanceship' (Roberts et al. 2014). Human social life is usually configured such that individuals are immediately surrounded by their 'support clique' or most intimate relationships of family and friends (~5); a 'sympathy group' of close friends (~15); an 'affinity group' of friendly acquaintances (~50) and a wider 'active network' of known associates (~150) (Sutcliffe et al. 2012). Each expanding layer of these social circles is characterised by decreasing frequency of interaction and levels of intimacy¹³⁴. 'Dunbar's number', the notion that humans have an upper limit of approximately one hundred and fifty stable social relationships of which they can keep track due to cognitive limitations, has become something of a popular term in community management circles (Dunbar 1998; 2010)¹³⁵. Even though the social network of an individual in late-modern societies is often geographically dispersed and rarely maps cleanly to a physically proximate community, due to our evolutionary history of organising social life in small bands, encounters in smaller group sizes, coupled with a recognised boundary of in-group identity, still activate different social responses and moral intuitions than larger group sizes¹³⁶. This is because historically social groups have been organised and maintained by implicit social contracts in which individuals incur some individual costs of cooperation, in exchange for the protective benefits conferred by the group (Sutcliffe et al. 2012). In this light, theoretically, we would expect the prosocial Coworking practices such as greeting,

¹³⁴ And curiously each circle is characterised by an approximate multiple of 3 (5, 15, 50, 150).

¹³⁵ The anthropologist Robin Dunbar has lead much of this work on the evolution of cognition and sociality, which is now largely organised under the 'social brain hypothesis'.

¹³⁶ Some experimental evidence has demonstrated how this group boundary can be quite arbitrary established (Zimbardo 2007)

introducing and sharing resources to change as Coworking spaces and membership sizes expand beyond a certain limit. Empirically, this is largely what happened¹³⁷.

The second factor affecting commons-based sharing practices was that the stigmergic properties of the Coworking environment itself changed over time. In the early phase of the Hub, the digital sharing practices on Yammer had been skillfully managed, and the ability to observe interactions on the site played an important role in the organisational socialisation for newcomers. Coworkers were often encouraged to participate in these sharing practices, but the labour involved in digital 'hosting' practices became more demanding as numbers grew, and the requisite skill and attention to successfully manage it decreased with staff turnover. In an unusually revealing passage in late 2014, one old timer Coworker pointed out this demise on the platform itself:

“Unfortunately Yammer isn’t used very effectively anymore by Hubbers. In the past, an announcement like this would a strong response from the Hub Australia network in real time. The response is the first in over 24 hours - not great...the thrivability of Yammer has greatly diminished with its lack of use by hubbers. Maybe it’s down to a lack of community engagement and understanding amongst Hub members in using Yammer? Maybe new members don’t get enough of a chance to see its value and old Hubbers have given up on it? Maybe with the higher proportion of Hub team members in the mix, employees are not as engaged as casual members for instance? Maybe we need to properly recognise the 100s of hours J— invested in making Yammer thrive in her “Forum Admin” role over the first 3 years? There are probably less than 30 active (non-Hub staff) Yammer users currently these days - from the entire Hub Oz membership base this is hardly critical mass.

¹³⁷ Primates generally engage in more complex grooming patterns and form more complex niches as group sizes expand, but group sizes have an upper limit beyond which incidences of predation increases (Lehmann et al. 2007).

For example, last week on Tue on Yammer there were 2 conversations and 2 new messages that day - a very serious low point in Hub history, later in the week it averaged 10 conversations and 20 new messages a day. Looking back to 8-11 April 2-14 (6 months earlier), early in the week, a low day was 10 convos/over 40 new messages a day. A year ago, 8-12 Oct 2013 on the busier days we were up to 31 convos/53 messages.

If the Hub is still committed to ongoing Hub Health Indexes, the depth and breadth of membership engagement through Yammer or some other network in the future, gives a very strong metric of user engagement. Other businesses that rely on social media/community engagement take these types of metrics very seriously. Hub Australia don't seem to have dropped the ball on this one so much as given away a free kick.

Until Yammer is more heavily populated and more frequently used, it can't serve K—'s purpose of letting Hubbers know about the Thrivable Melbourne Conference, nor can it help Hub staff promote the many activities that they are involved in either."

These acts of explicitly calling out experiences of declining membership reiterate Hirschman's 'exit, loyalty or voice' framework outlined in [Chapter 5.2](#). Following Hirschman's logic, acts of 'voice', or communicating declining experience with the intent to change it, map to a political logic of membership. Acts of 'exit' - or 'voting with one's feet' - map to a market orientated logic of consumer choice. Although such public examples of voice offer revealing quotes for qualitative analysis, most Coworkers simply chose to exit or shared such experiences privately. The member activity on Yammer declined from around this point in late 2014, exacerbated by the adoption of a different digital tool by the enterprise that lacked features that enabled Coworkers to easily post content to a common 'wall' visible to all members.

The 'editability' of the physical environment also changed. The ratio of accessible and movable physical whiteboards to Coworkers declined as numbers grew. The physical space became more 'territorialised', as dedicated desks and private offices began to replace the shared open spaces of the early phase. The design of the internal environment became more 'professional', more uniform in colour schemes and appearance. The curation of artefacts that promoted an alternative institutional logic to the market, such as excerpts of poetry or diagrams representing natural ecosystems, alongside invitations from Coworkers to 'cocreate' the space were not part of the new designs.

The third factor was that the community orientated, more intimate relational logic of the early phase of Coworking shifted towards a more transactional, less intimate logic of later phase interactions. This theme is in many ways central to the larger analysis of the thesis. During interviews, Coworkers would explain their departures in terms such as:

"Currently I don't have time or capacity to work on 'Hub Melbourne' projects - I gave a lot of time initially and not sure enough of the vision to know how further contribute."

—

"I'm a bit over Coworking, I don't want to work to build up someone else's empire..."

—

"My experience of Hub was that initially it was a purpose driven culture. And over time I felt like it moved more into a traditional business of it's about making money and selling space and so on...I think at some point we turned from a community growing a community to a...space in which there had to be more hot desks..."

The changing sociality of Coworking was intertwined with the observations on growing membership size and reduced stigmergic properties of the environment. The final section of [Chapter 6.6](#) on 'competing institutional logics' illustrated several incidents in which these concerns were expressed. Most striking was how this transition in the dominant relational logic of the Coworking project was often accompanied by a vague sense of violation. Viewed through the theoretical lenses of relational models theory or institutional logics, this emotional response is comprehensible. Human sociality maps different relational categories to a loosely bound 'social contract' that guides appropriate practices. For example, bringing a bottle of wine to a dinner invitation from a friend might be appropriate, whereas handing over the equivalent value in a cash payment upon arriving would be considered crude. Cooking dinner for a close family member and then presenting them a bill for payment would be considered as strange as offering to 'return the favour' to a restaurateur by cooking rather than paying for a meal. In all these cases responding to one occasion with mismatched practices signals a poorly aligned relational model, and would result in embarrassment or offence. The final section of this thesis will theoretically unpack the source of confusion over these misaligned expectations within the social world of Coworking, and consider their consequences for more appropriate governing arrangements in the future.

Starting my own community

A small number of Coworkers that left their formal membership subsequently began to organise their own 'working communities' which adopted many Coworking social practices. In some cases this was instigated by a geographical move, Warrick for example moved interstate and formed a 'collective' that intended to 'create a new generation of changemakers' in his new location. Most of these participants had moved through the category just outlined, that formal membership with the Coworking enterprise no longer appeared the best way to pursue the participative and community oriented goals they had initially associated with the project of Coworking. The purpose here is simply to note that a subset of Coworkers 'voted

with their feet' by leaving, only to later renew their intent to organise gatherings and work in close proximity under the rubric of a cooperative sociality.

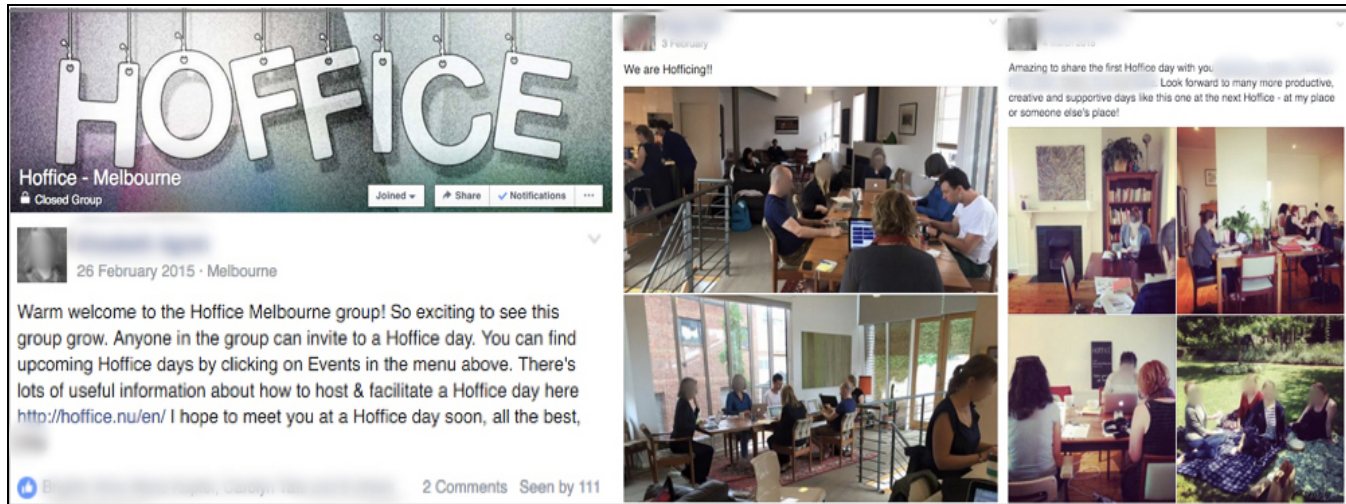


Figure 53: Hoffices

The images cited above illustrate this case. 'Hoffice'¹³⁸, is a term first coined in Sweden, where people open their private homes to host small Coworking-style gatherings. In similarity with the concept 'Jellies', where workers would organise to meet and Cowork from public cafes, the model is not proposed as a commercial enterprise, but a voluntary activity of community organisation, a kind of self-help movement for digital knowledge workers. The Hoffice website suggests organising office gatherings through Facebook and offers some guiding practices for 'hosting' events such as bringing food for a shared lunch and timing dedicated focused working periods interspersed with brief social breaks.

There are two points to make about these subsequent experiments in informal Coworking. First, the examples in Melbourne were organised partly around social networks that had been previously formed or strengthened through the early formal Coworking spaces in Melbourne. As proposed earlier, the early Coworking spaces were the initial focal points that enabled actors with shared interests and values to find each other. Second, they employed practices such as 'dedicated working times'

¹³⁸ www.hoffice.nu/en/

and 'deep dinners' that had become socialised and legitimised through the formal Coworking experiences.

I attended several of these home-based experiments towards the end of my field research. As they were populated largely by former members who no longer frequently saw each other, they had something of the air of a class reunion. Despite the expressed enthusiasm for the experience to continue, they do not appear to have endured. Unless they become integrated within a larger, legitimately recognised work-life project, organising and hosting these Hoffice events is an unlikely priority for most of the participants.

This tension illustrates the challenge of sustaining Coworking as a primarily *community driven* project, and thus highlights a central puzzle of this thesis. The previous chapter discussed how traditional frames of meaning and loci of community organisation have receded, and that entrepreneurial forms of work are consuming a larger portion of people's lives. For some, this appears to have evoked a wistful desire to participate in community orientated sociality, gatherings that *feel* different from more instrumental occasions like 'professional networking events'. And yet organising and maintaining such community gatherings require, somewhat ironically, *work*. In an increasingly competitive knowledge economy, with cultural pressures celebrating undistracted focus and disciplined productivity, the rewards for this nebulous form of work are unclear unless it becomes grafted to a more legitimate entrepreneurial project - like becoming a 'thought leader' or establishing an enterprise that 'organises community'. Too little visibility or acknowledgement of the labour required in fostering a sense of community can discourage the choice to undertake community work. Yet, ironically, too harsh a prosecution of instrumental aims may destroy the very 'good' being sought. This tension between aligning incentives such that the maintenance of community work is seen as a 'positive sum game' will be addressed in the following chapter.

7.2 Remaining

What about the Coworkers who retained their memberships through the years of field research? At the present time of writing, there are very few members that were present in the early days. Of those that stayed, there were two striking patterns worth presenting here. Some members who were highly engaged in the early social project of Coworking, altered their relationship over time, adopted a more transactional logic reminiscent of a 'serviced office'. A second, much smaller group maintained a community orientated sociality within a bounded commitment, like a 'weekly social club'.

The serviced office

"At a certain point, I just stopped attending events and even the shared lunches. I had had enough."

Members who remained, especially those whose enterprises or practices matured, often adopted a more transactional logic of a serviced office environment. The reasons they would give for Coworking moved from discussing factors like inspiration or the community to the location and office amenities:

"One of the reasons is that having a CBD address is unique amongst our competitors and very good for us. The big thing is, if I'm meeting with a big property developer and I've got a CBD address they think differently about you and your skill set than if you're in Collingwood, which many of our competitors are...Basically it works really well for us because of the location and the ability for some of our freelance

contractors to work from the open spaces. But we don't have much discretionary time to participate in the community activities."

In some cases this change was prompted by disappointments with earlier experiences of community participation or confusion over the blending of relational models. In other cases it was more closely connected to the challenges of growing an enterprise and prioritising clear work over social distractions. This shifting form of relationship also moved in tandem with wider changes to the physical layout of office designs in the Coworking industry. Many spaces began offering private offices and naturally this changed the culture, bringing it more in alignment with the older serviced office industry.

"I always saw myself as being someone who would have a membership of some substance, but gradually I suppose my membership's become one where it's more casual, and less invested. So whilst I haven't left, I haven't maintained the same degree of commitment that perhaps I had early on..."

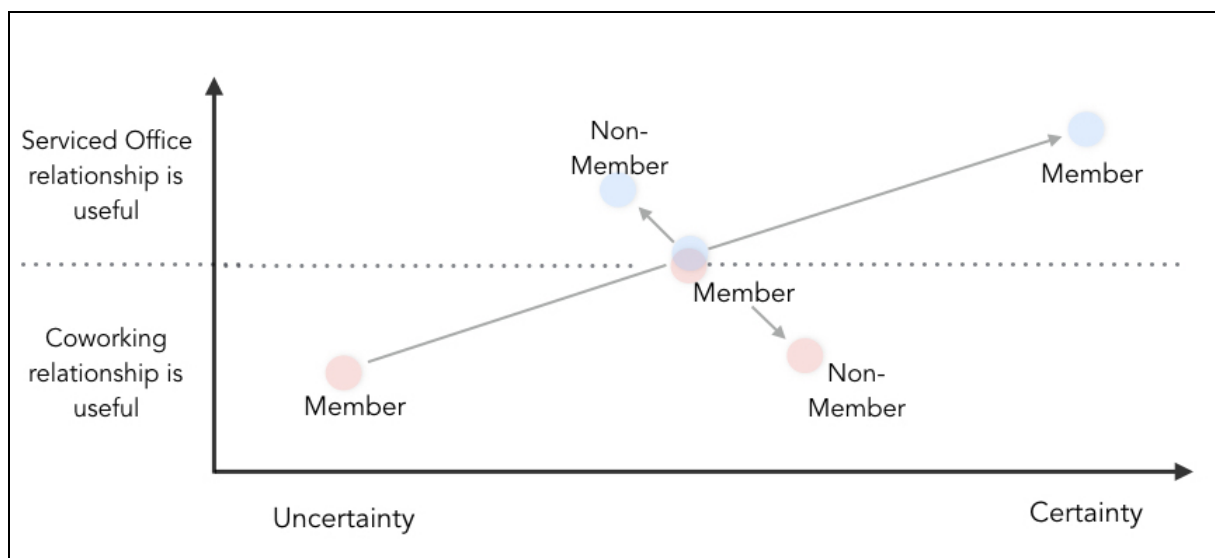


Figure 54: From Coworking to Serviced Office

The weekly social club

Of the research participants I was following closely, only two maintained a visibly stable social relationship with the Coworking space over the course of years. They were both older members and faced different circumstances to many of their younger Coworking peers. First, they were both partnered and had older children, neither were negotiating the uncertainty around marriages, mortgages and beginning families which have been found to transform perceptions of discretionary time and reduce participation in wider social networks (Johnson and Leslie 1982). Second, although they worked - managed affairs, one even attempted a few startup ideas - both were financially 'independent', their living expenses were adequately covered from prior investments. For these participants the Coworking environment functioned as a regular social club, a place to visit once or twice a week to maintain contact with other Coworkers. In fact they both structured weekly activities organised around physical activities in which to bound this form of social engagement.

7.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to document and analyse how Coworking experiences changed over time. It followed two trajectories of member journeys, leaving and remaining. The majority of Coworkers in the early phase left for, perhaps unsurprisingly, a combination of push and pull factors. Some enterprises outgrew the physical office environment; others selected an alternative Coworking space that better suited their needs; some returned to standard organisation employment; others combined travel and work as digital nomads. For some, the culture of Coworking no longer provided the social, participatory or community oriented goals they were seeking; and a few even attempted to form their own *working communities* without formal membership of a Coworking enterprise.

In the search for a parsimonious explanation, this thesis has argued that Coworking provides non-standard workers with a context for social learning that is useful under the less certain conditions of the new economy. This chapter completes the narrative arc grounded in the empirical material gathered during the years of ethnographic fieldwork. But the stories of leaving and remaining presented here also offer more nuanced insights into the experiences and value sought through Coworking and similar organisational arrangements. It is noteworthy that the relationship with Coworking sociality and the learning benefits stemming from participation in spontaneous interactions appeared to change as many Coworkers matured in their practices and enterprises. Equally notable, is that those most attracted to the participatory and community orientated practices largely became frustrated with the cultural shift, most left and some even pursued these participatory goals through other Coworking-like arrangements.

At a deeper level of analysis, the immaterial value generated by the Coworking project as a whole rest on a structural conundrum. Enterprises that design their business model around facilitating exchanges between parties are often called 'platform enterprises'. Their value derives from occupying a crucial hub of exchange that connects a network. Whilst this model is not new - marketplaces, auction houses and shopping centres all feature this property - the platform model has seen remarkable returns in the internet age. This is because the constraints on network agglomeration in the physical world fell away with the rise of the web. Amazon and eBay may have pioneered online marketplaces, but today the wealthiest and most powerful companies in the world all integrate platform businesses¹³⁹. This recognition has recast much entrepreneurial activity as a race to own the 'means of connection' rather than the 'means of production' (Moazed and Johnson 2016).

Yet models of open innovation that encourage actors from outside a firm to use a platform must manage the tensions between the value creation of outsiders and

¹³⁹ At the present time of writing in 2018 the five companies with the highest market capitalisation are Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook.

value capture by the platform. Digital platforms have been remarkably commercially successful when the core value transacted is commodified and priced, and where the social dynamics and design features prevent parties from interacting outside of the platform¹⁴⁰.

Some Coworking entrepreneurs appeared to imagine their enterprises in the platform pantheon - they would provide the space, and users would generate (immaterial) value through their social interactions. But as so much of the empirical material presented in this thesis has demonstrated, the arrangement of Coworkers as both *consumers* and *producers* led to some significant tensions among the membership. This is in part due to some distinct features of Coworking that sets it apart from purely internet based enterprises. First, although digital mediated communication is an integral part of the culture, the value proposition of Coworking is primarily organised around corporeal, and partly spontaneous, encounters. This places different limitations on the relationship between network size, customer price and firm revenue than purely digital platforms. Many social digital platforms are able to offer their services for 'free', because they are funded by a data extraction regime that records every interaction. Second, value exchanges are not clearly organised, commodified and mediated by price, but were often fused with a range of other relational logics and social expectations. Third, unlike purely digital platforms, once Coworkers had met and formed relationships there was little tethering their interactions to the Coworking site. But finally, and perhaps most significantly, the early phase of the Coworking project did more than simply facilitate dyadic exchanges, but encouraged an affective identification with a collective, and the creation of a 'common-pool' of immaterial resources. The following final chapter will seek to advance theoretical understanding of the nature of the resources created

¹⁴⁰ This point holds for platforms that connect producers and consumers of a good or service like eBay, Amazon, Airbnb and Uber. The case of 'free' social and media platforms like Facebook or Youtube is more complicated, because their business models are designed to encourage users to interact with the site as much as possible to extract data. This data is then used to drive revenue - largely in the form of targeting advertising. In these cases the 'users' and 'customers' are different. As their interactions with users not mediated by price, the moment of transaction is less clear.

through Coworking and the commons-based dilemma of maintaining and renewing it within the context of a private enterprise.

Chapter 8: Futures

Entrepreneurial communities, immaterial commons and working futures

This purpose of this thesis has been to explore the changing nature of work through a close examination of the social practices of a pioneering entrepreneurial Coworking community. The project set out to investigate what the emerging practices of Coworking might reveal about the future of work, and its central finding is that *entrepreneurial communities produce immaterial commons with distinct governance requirements*. The purpose of this chapter is to advance this argument and its significance towards future configurations of knowledge work. As a grounded theory ethnography, the attention of the prior four chapters has been focused on micro-level, empirical observations, and the primary goal of these sections has been to link each descriptive category with plausible underlying theoretical explanations. This chapter will begin the process of ‘zooming out’ once more, to consider the insights gained from the ethnography within a broader discussion of how work is changing, including offering some reflections on what we might expect to see more of in the future.

This structure of this chapter is in four parts. First, it will begin by reviewing the emerging knowledge work practices distributed amongst coworkers, and highlight how the various ‘cognitive’, ‘affective’ and ‘emotional’ dimensions of these activities can be organised under the rubric of ‘immaterial labour’. As demonstrated throughout the empirical chapters, this labour was not merely confined to dyadic exchanges, but the collective product of this labour constituted a pool of *shared immaterial resources* in which Coworkers were entangled as both producers and consumers. Second, in order to focus attention on the distinct ‘social dilemmas’ surrounding the collective orchestration of these resources, it will conceptualise the product of Coworking labour as an *immaterial commons*. There is a literature on the

governance arrangements required to manage different forms of common-based resources, and this will be reviewed to highlight the distinct features of *immaterial commons*, especially qualities such as ‘affective atmospheres’ that are resistant to the digital, asynchronous modularisation that characterises many celebrated projects in the digital commons (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006). Third, zooming out further and looking back, the chapter will frame the contemporary knowledge work context within theories of historical ‘techno-economic paradigm transitions’ and the concomitant emergence of new ‘value regimes’. Here I argue that the Coworking community described in this thesis displayed many features of a distinct value regime, expressed through nascent attempts to weave together forms of social and economic value within the community. And yet the project also had something of a stillborn quality, it was ultimately unable to bridge the interregnum between the novel experiments in ‘sharing’, ‘gifting’ and ‘commoning’ and the modes of ‘recording and accounting for value’ that dominate the wider market based system in which this project was embedded. Thus the final part of this chapter looks ahead to consider how similar configurations of entrepreneurial communities that produce immaterial commons might address such governance dilemmas in the future.

8.1 Entrepreneurial communities of practice

Early on in this thesis, I proposed that ‘social learning’ offered a parsimonious explanation for a significant portion of the immaterial value of Coworking¹⁴¹. Accordingly as outlined in the methodology chapter, the model of social learning advanced through the communities of practice framework was adopted amid early analysis of empirical material gathered in the field. Wenger (1998) locates the social theory of learning within CoP at the intersection of a number of theoretical traditions that appeared highly relevant to the empirical material gathered in the field¹⁴².

¹⁴¹ One might raise the objection that the concept of ‘social learning’ is hardly parsimonious, and is used in different ways by different scholars. To take just two examples of the diversity amid which this term is employed, consider the interpretations of Bandura (1971) and Emami (2012). Moreover, as pointed out in chapter two, in some sense all learning is a fundamentally social activity. There is however still a useful distinction between formal education and canonical forms of learning and the informal, loosely structured forms of learning by imitation, trial and error and ad-hoc advice that characterises the processes signified by the preface *social* when discussing learning. These are the characteristics referred to by Wenger and Lave’s adoption of the term.

¹⁴² These cues should not be a surprise to a reader at this point, but included the fixation with the word ‘community’; the relationship between the individual search for meaning through work and experiments in social identification with various groups; and the subtle games of status, favours and influence within the Coworking social field. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial nature of most Coworker’s work positioned uncertainty as a defining feature, leading to the need to regularly learn new things and acquire new social contacts.

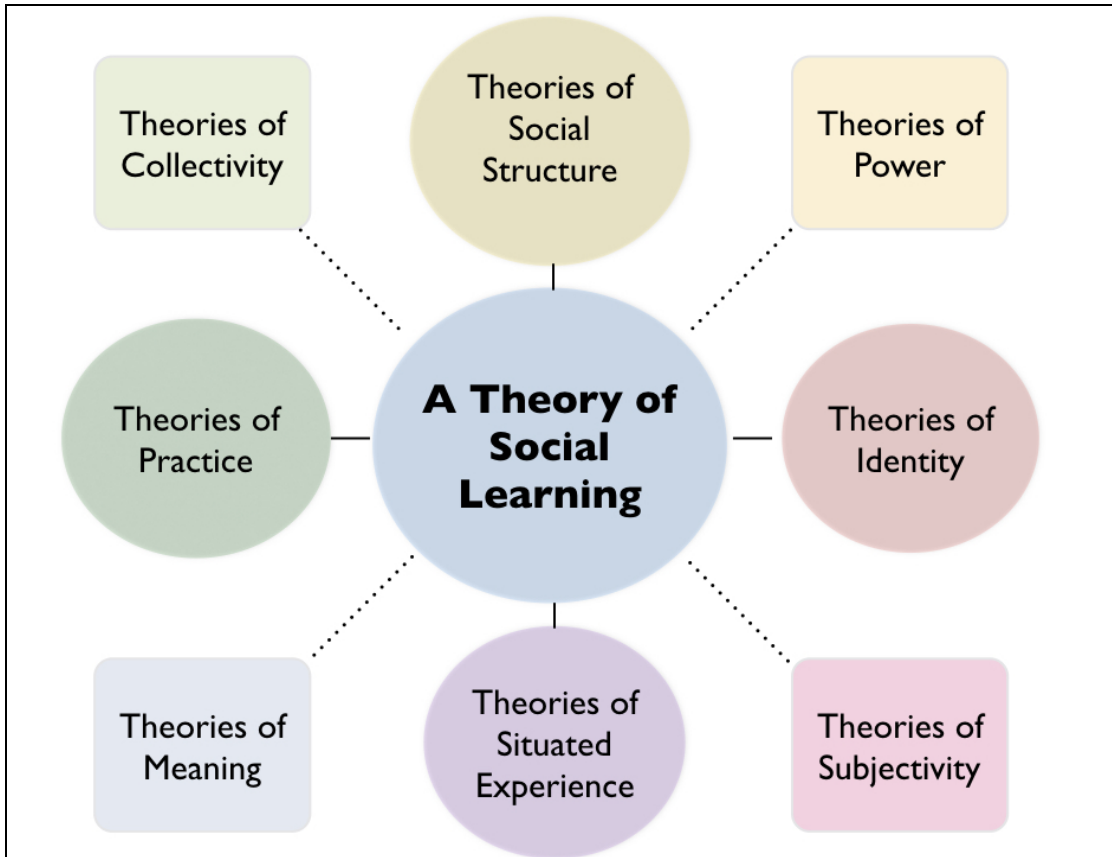


Figure 55: Revisiting the theoretical intersection of social learning

The model of social learning advanced through communities of practice theory has been a useful framework to organise relevant variables in conceptualising and interpreting many of the social features of Coworking. Theory however, by definition, offers a simplified representation of the world. Conceptual maps are useful precisely *because* they contain less detail than the territory of the world. This is why chapter six opened with a discussion *on practice theory*, which addressed some of the scholarly criticisms that have been levelled at CoP, and attended to some of the nuances in how it can be best employed¹⁴³. Most pertinently, I followed the advice of

¹⁴³ The criticisms raised included caution at reifying notions of ‘community’ as an object; instrumentalising the discourse of CoP to serve managerial interests; disregarding questions of power and the contested nature of social relations; and using CoP in place of more precise constructs that would offer greater insight to specific cases or questions. I have attempted to mitigate some of these concerns by drawing on an eclectic range of theoretical resources and conceptual repertoire in interpreting the various categories of empirical material from the field.

Lave (2008) by adopting CoP theory as a '*way of looking*' at the social world, not as an '*object*' to be found in the world (Lave 2008). The following review of the core findings of each chapter is presented to direct the reader's attention towards a reflection on the aggregation of these Coworking activities, to build a conceptual bridge between a distributed collection of social practices and the collective product of *immaterial labour*.

Chapter four introduced the context for the ethnography by describing 'who Coworks', which in these early days included predominantly self-employed knowledge workers, some ambitiously attempting to build high growth startups, others more concerned with blending lifestyle choices and independent work. It also illustrated 'where they Cowork', observing the relationship between the formal Coworking spaces and the inner urban, 'creative' contexts of their surroundings. Indeed the chapter noted how 'work' often 'spilled out' between various cafes, eateries and bars in close proximity to Coworking spaces. 'Work' here refers to both the individual performance of tasks on laptops, and the spectrum of work related social interactions with others, from formal meetings to informal conversations. For Coworkers, working and social life appeared wilfully entwined in both time and space.

Chapter five considered 'why they Cowork', and the findings were structured in four parts. First, it highlighted how many participants began their Coworking journey after 'problematism of the standard work paradigm'. Such concerns appeared salient in the wake of the global financial crisis, the consequent moral indignation at the conduct of major financial institutions, the burgeoning concern with the social impact of corporate malfeasance, and a withering of organisational loyalty after decades of declining employment security. Many Coworker's remarks during interviews pointed to a crisis in perceived 'legitimacy' of the standard organisational form to meet their life goals. Consequently, most Coworkers had a story of 'leaving standard employment' (and some younger Coworkers had elected to avoid organisational employment all together). Although some had years of experience in self-employment and entrepreneurship, many were newcomers to the world of

non-standard work and were eagerly attempting to learn how to adapt to these new circumstances. A common aspect of this learning involved a 'search for greater through work', seeking experiences of greater 'autonomy, purpose, authenticity and solidarity' through work and organisational relations. Some of these factors, such as autonomy, might be nominally achieved through the independence of self-employment. One crucial component of this matrix however, a sense of mutuality or solidarity, required regular social interaction with others, and Coworking was a project that appeared to hold promise in this regard. This is why Coworking became 'a portal to new worlds of work', for many of the pioneering Coworkers. Coworking spaces became 'focal points' for actors that shared these conditions and motivations. The office environments operated as 'boundary objects' that helped coordinate interactions amongst an emerging community of practice concerned with managing these challenging components of self-employed knowledge work in the new economy.

Chapter six zoomed further in on 'how they Cowork'. After beginning with a deeper discussion of relevant themes within theories of practice, its findings were structured in seven parts. First, it described 'welcoming, introducing and curating' practices, noting that oldtimer Coworkers themselves often enacted a form of 'organisational socialisation' for newcomers. Next it examined practices Coworkers employed in 'connecting and establishing shared heuristics', whilst noting theories of 'optimal cognitive distance' where complementary actors are likely to find exchanges most meaningful or useful. Coworkers were frequently observed 'declaring purpose over profit', interpreted both as a self-directed motivational device and an other-directed signal towards a perceived 'values-driven' community. Within Coworking culture, many appeared to intentionally 'blend the personal and professional', wilfully remixing the boundaries between working and non-working life. The sociality of Coworking depended on various forms of 'sharing' practices. In a minimal sense this involved sharing information, itself a necessary activity within most of the aforementioned interactions. But various species of sharing practices of the Coworking world were described in more detail, including 'asking, offering, receiving and working out loud'. This section also reflected on how the Coworking digital and

physical environment itself enabled 'stigmergic' forms of information sharing. Sharing practices were analysed through theories of 'gifting', 'relational reciprocity' and social and cultural capital'. Finally, the chapter closed with examples of Coworker's attempts at 'shaping the institutional logic' and the struggle between competing institutional logics in interpreting the Coworking project, often instantiated imperfectly through 'troubling forms of participation'.

Chapter seven closed off the empirical story by examining 'how Coworking experiences changed over time'. Most research participants within the sample ceased their formal memberships after a few years, exposing the challenges of building communities of enduring social relations among such mobile and transient populations. Whilst many left for circumstantial reasons - enterprises grew, other spaces appealed, jobs were found or digital nomadism beckoned - a noticeable subset exited because they were *disappointed with the participatory outcomes* they came to expect given their perceived contributions to the project. Some of these even attempted to recreate their own *entrepreneurial communities* through informal arrangements. Of those that remained, the relationship with the Coworking project tended to change, moving away from the 'participatory and community orientated logic' of earlier times towards a more measured, 'transactional logic' organised around geographic location and office amenities.

What becomes visible when we examine this array of findings in their entirety? Whilst I have separately analysed Coworking practices individually, collectively they portray a distinct group culture crafted around the interests and needs of contemporary entrepreneurial knowledge work. The Coworkers in this study had left or eschewed standard forms of organisational employment in search of ways to graft their entrepreneurial ambitions to more meaningful work and amiable social relations than they had found in the past. The social practices delineated in this ethnography can be framed as a distinct set of '*customs*' both emerging from and guiding future entrepreneurial work. These customs were organised around the *sharing* of informational and emotional resources which circulated as inputs and outputs through the constellation of work and life projects that sustained social interactions

within the Coworking community. Describing Coworking social practices as customs might evoke a curious response, after all customs are normally associated with the inherited practices of traditional-communities. But this framing draws attention to questions of ‘custodianship’, who ‘owns’ these customs and what rights and responsibilities should be attended to in their social reproduction¹⁴⁴? This was the tension that came to the surface in the attempts by Coworkers to ‘shape the institutional logics’ underpinning these practices, a tension which ultimately caused many of the more active members to leave. These Coworking practices, these customs of the entrepreneurial community, are the reproductive organs of the shared resources conceptualised in this chapter as an *immaterial commons*. In order to address the distinct qualities of immaterial commons, it is important to first clarify the nature of the labour involved in their production.

8.2 Immaterial labour

Throughout this thesis, I have used the term ‘immaterial value’ to broadly refer to a range of benefits sought through Coworking experiences that did not include the ‘material value’ of the office environment and its location¹⁴⁵. The term immaterial has been used in a general sense, to encapsulate the range of activities involving human interactions within Coworking spaces. Although this has been a useful high-level distinction, the concept now warrants a closer interrogation of its meaning and significance.

¹⁴⁴ The framing of ‘practices as customs’ also draws a direct link to Rose’s perspicacious account of how ‘inherent’ rights of ‘unorganised publics’ have been grounded in ‘traditional customs’ through the English legal tradition (Rose 1986).

¹⁴⁵ Whilst office amenities are clearly tangible goods, location is more vexing. Whilst some features of location are based on convenience, distance from the home or public transport, much of what makes location attractive in an entrepreneurial context is the proximity to others, both as physical meeting points to mutually coordinate and in the more diffuse sense of probabilistic access to useful social networks and positive spillover effects resulting from the social interactions of others.

As the following discussion will demonstrate, the term immaterial is used in different bodies of literature with different emphases. However it is worth stating upfront that using the adjective 'immaterial' in this context does not represent a claim about the ultimate ontological status of its associated phenomena. Information, knowledge, culture, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurialism, taste and emotion, are often categorised as immaterial to distinguish them from tangible artefacts or material goods, yet their origins are still grounded in material processes. These frequently involve biological processes in the body, from internal organs like the brain and limbic system to modifying external features such as the face and hands. Similarly many of the digital interactions described in discussions of immaterial labour are rooted in the technical infrastructure of the internet and computers, from cables and wires to data storage layers to the computing devices themselves. My position here is that one can meaningfully speak of intangible, phenomenological experiences orchestrated through immaterial labour and still entertain a fundamentally materialist ontology, a view that the entire arena of conscious experiences ultimately arises from biological processes, just as biological processes themselves are underwritten by the material world described by chemistry and physics. Indeed, many forms of affective and emotional labour often classed as 'immaterial' are notably embodied, instantiated through disciplined corporeal acts, from touching to smiling.

So what does 'immaterial' mean in this context? In a general sense, scholars have long observed a significant shift in the primary source of value within the economy from the material, of natural resources and physical capital, towards the immaterial, in various guises of information, symbols, knowledge, culture and affect (Drucker 1969; Bell 1974; Reich 1992; Castells 1996). What has been called a dematerialisation of the economy spans trends towards both immaterial inputs into firms such as knowledge, skills and innovation and immaterial outputs in the form of various services.

In the business world, terms such as 'intangible assets' and 'goodwill' are used to acknowledge both the importance of these inputs, and often how difficult they are to

define and measure (Hagel et al. 2011; Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013). To the extent that this is recognised as a problem, it is frequently seen as an accounting challenge. Standard measures provided a good account of the relationship between material inputs and outputs in the industrial era. The cost of tangible inputs in terms of machines, land and hours of manual labour could be measured and tracked against the number of tangible outputs produced through their combinations. This relatively straight forward aggregation of tangible assets underpins what is still called the 'book value' of a company. But this tight relationship between inputs and outputs tends to break down when considering the *immaterial*. The relationship between knowledge, innovation, culture and affect are much more difficult to quantify and measure, especially as they often feature as both inputs and outputs of a wide array of activities. Knowledge after all begets more knowledge. As a consequence there are literally hundreds of different methods of accounting for their value, most of which are inscrutable and incomparable as they are held as commercially sensitive intellectual property by private consultancies.

Despite its common usage, the term 'intangible assets' is in many ways a mere placeholder for a number of complex, overlapping and imprecisely defined concepts. These include allusions to generic terms like brand, culture and innovation alongside various forms of intangible capital, 'knowledge', 'social', 'creative', 'image' capital and so on (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013). Whilst there may be disagreement over clear definitions or the boundaries and scope of each term, and the relationships of dependence among these aspects¹⁴⁶, there is a widespread acceptance that the weight of business value resides within this territory, and the most 'successful' organisations have skilful means of managing these intangible flows¹⁴⁷. Furthermore, in the current era, material goods and digitised information can be copied with

¹⁴⁶ For instance which are independent and dependent variables, or which factors moderate or attenuate the others.

¹⁴⁷ Whilst this argument can easily find empirical support by referring to market valuations, where 'value' is assumed synonymous with market capitalisation, some scholars might contest the 'real' rather than phantasmagoric value of market capitalisation (Arvidson and Peitersen 2013).

(alarming) alacrity, but these more elusive intangible domains, and especially their role in binding relationships and teams together, are more difficult to immediately imitate. In entrepreneurship and innovation, once a novel solution has been discovered and can be digitised, the marginal cost of reproducing this solution approaches zero. The cost of reproducing a *team* that can figure out new solutions however remains high¹⁴⁸. This is why the broad economic shift towards the *immaterial* has opened a general problem space, tacitly acknowledged through these various ‘innovations’ in accounting methods.

There is however a more specific intellectual tradition in which the notion of immaterial value, and especially ‘immaterial labour’ is anchored. This arena includes a range of scholars influenced by the Italian autonomous (post) Marxist school, concerned with how cognitive and affective labour becomes commodified through the evolving conditions of capitalism. The early writings of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno discussed shifts in the dominant modes of production away from the material goods of Fordist industrialism towards the social, cultural flows of post-Fordism¹⁴⁹. However it was the paper by Lazzarato (1996) simply titled ‘immaterial labour’ that firmly established the concept by organising the prior earlier musing under this label. This work provided an analytical direction that has inspired many subsequent scholars, notably Hardt and Negri (2003) and Gill and Pratt (2008).

Like many arenas of thought whose genealogy can be traced back to Marx, there are a diverse range of perspectives and claims advanced under the rubric of immaterial

¹⁴⁸ And the precise arrangement of variables involved in the reproduction of creative teams are never completely certain.

¹⁴⁹ Sometimes the term ‘Toyotism’ is used in the literature to acknowledge the origins of this shifting mode of production after the introduction of computer numerically controlled (CNC) and computer assisted design (CAD) technology combined with ‘lean’ production methods. This assembly is generally seen as a turning point away from the direction of the vertically integrated mega firms towards the complex, dispersed global supply chains of today.

labour, not all of which are relevant to the argument in this thesis¹⁵⁰. There are however three relevant insights about the changing nature of work that find an articulate presentation by scholars working with these ideas.

The first is that immaterial labour consists of both 'cognitive' and 'emotional' work. It spans not only the high paid analysis and manipulation of symbols on computers but also the diverse forms of paid and unpaid 'care' work, grounded in the manipulation of affect and emotion in close corporeal proximity.

The second is that the character of immaterial work is *fundamentally social*. Much of it relies on complex, dynamic forms of cooperation and feedback loops, which often include an attentiveness to the emotional character or tone of interactions. Communicative action is involved not only in the production but also the 'consumption' of immaterial services, many of which, as we have seen through prior discussion on conspicuous forms of 'sharing', take on a social character. Indeed, some scholars point out the growing obsolescence of the categories of production and consumption in the immaterial domain¹⁵¹.

The third, which follows logically from the previous two points, is that many activities not traditionally conceptualised as 'work' provide vital components in the productive cycle of immaterial value. In a clear case, many feminist scholars have pointed out the long unacknowledged role of gendered work in childcare and other forms of emotional labour that has not been considered part of the productive economic sphere (Weeks 2007). But a variety of other human activities can be viewed as work through the immaterial lens, from the unpaid digital labour of social media activity to the creation and modification of cultural standards like tastes and fashion. By this

¹⁵⁰ Nor, for what it is worth, are some of the more ideological rooted claims accepted by me.

¹⁵¹ This point is perhaps most easily visible in fields like fashion and entertainment, where acts of 'consumption' actually plays a constituting role in the productive cycle through demand creating processes such as 'tastemaking'.

account, 'work', or at least the production of value, naturally spills out beyond the confines of laptops and office walls into various common pools of shared company.

These three features of immaterial labour - the entwining of cognition and affect; the inherently social character of work; and the dissolving boundary between working and non-working activities - are acutely visible in the analysis of Coworking culture presented in this thesis¹⁵². The following section will consider the nature of this immaterial value in greater detail. For the purposes of analysis, it will distinguish between *instrumentally valuable knowledge* and *intrinsically valuable affect*, although as previously noted, these processes are intimately tied together. Human encounters with information inevitably has an affective and emotional quality, just as affect and emotion can be understood as forms of 'information'¹⁵³. However, even if the neurological distinction between affect and cognition is more phenomenological than ontological, this conceptual difference becomes important when considering what kind of information can be digitally encoded in software and travel via the internet. The relationship between physically proximate human bodies and digitally encoded information, especially with regard to informational and affective commons, is part of the riddle that this analysis seeks to illuminate.

¹⁵² There is an important difference in my interpretation and significance of immaterial labour from many writers in the autonomous Marxist tradition. Many of these scholars focus on vestiges of 'false consciousness', and point out the ways current fashions of thought and practice amongst 'independent knowledge workers' might not serve their own ultimate interests, and rather those of 'capital'. Expressed desires by young workers to have 'autonomy' and 'flexibility' over their work or to choose freelancing are thus interpreted as evidence for the demise of labour protections and secure employment. Although this can be an interesting direction of inquiry, it should be balanced by the recognition that most Coworkers (at least those in this study) fall within the ranks of some of the most privileged workers in history. All lived in a relative safe society surround by material abundance and most had maximum autonomy over their working day. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that part of the puzzle of contemporary forms of non-standard knowledge work is the combination of relatively present prosperity and exciting opportunities alongside an unclear story about future security. This strange duality was in itself a commonly discussed feature within Coworking culture.

¹⁵³ This claim is evidenced in recent neurological discoveries that find affect and cognition are bound up in the same neural processes (Duncan and Barrett 2007).

Knowledge flows

A great deal of Chapter six demonstrated the various ways that Coworkers shared information through interactions that were organised around searching, requesting and discovering information that was ostensibly useful for their work (and sometimes life) projects. Entrepreneurial work is characterised by the pursuit of opportunity under conditions of uncertainty. In most entrepreneurial contexts, this pursuit occurs with limited resources, ambiguous procedures, and even the 'opportunities' themselves are elusive - the perception of an opportunity can grow, diminish or change shape as it is approached (Shane and Venkataraman 2000). Following this logic, this thesis has adopted a broad definition of 'entrepreneurial work', viewing these discovery oriented processes at play beyond the direct activities involved in creating and managing new firms. This is why I have argued most Coworkers were engaged in entrepreneurial forms of work, even though many were technically solo-self employed and not explicitly attempting to create high-growth firms. As the empirical material illustrated, in many instances the focus of effort was less on the creation of an external 'object' called a firm¹⁵⁴, and more on the 'object' of constructing a '*self-as-enterprise*' in relationship with others. The entrepreneurial work here involved iterative experiments in crafting a professional identity congruent with both the current pressures of economic life and the constellation of other personal motivations, spanning the ethico-political to the social and aesthetic.

Both the creation of entrepreneurial 'firms', and entrepreneurial 'selves', rests on a foundation of 'uncertainty'. Uncertainty permeates the entire spectrum of questions faced when pursuing these projects. What sort of work is important to me? Where should my time be best directed? Who should I form working and social relationships with? What value propositions or offerings are my skills best directed towards? Who

¹⁵⁴ Although we typically talk about firms as real objects, as Yuval Harari points out, the historical invention of 'the company limited by guarantee' was a pragmatically useful fictional form, of the order of consequence as religious deities and nation-states.

makes up the market for these offerings? How should I communicate this value to them? The normative, personal, pragmatic and instrumental dimensions of these questions are often bound together, and the consequences of undertaking decisions flow into both domains.

In one sense, maturation along these entrepreneurial journeys involves reducing uncertainty regarding some of these questions¹⁵⁵. The inquiry focus might move from the broad and open *what do I care about?* or *what products or services should I offer to whom?*; towards the more targeted *what is the most effective language to communicate the offering?*; or *who is the right person to hire to build this feature of the product?* This evolving collection of questions is why relevant information that helps reduce this uncertainty, or at least offers the appearance of doing so, becomes crucially valuable amid these entrepreneurial pursuits. Finding answers to these questions is not a single, linear, or even final process. Given the dynamism and turbulence of the technological, economic and social context in which Coworkers operate, most answers are provisional, best attempts under imperfect conditions of limited information. This is why continual access to knowledge *flows* usefully inform when and where adjustments need to be made.

A significant portion of the immaterial value Coworking provided lay in access to these useful flows of knowledge. This discovery enabling feature was clearly visible in many of the responses from Coworkers themselves. Here is a collection of revealing reminders from participants describing why they Cowork:

“Connecting with other professionals that offer a complementary service. Connecting with the younger, savvy online entrepreneurs – has made me more technology savvy.”

¹⁵⁵ This is not to say that some questions seemingly answered previously cannot reappear as troubling or in need of reconsideration at a later date.

“Its purpose is to bring people together that might otherwise not find each other, but have some common meta-patterns. Better world, making change, doing it outside the box, going it alone outside organizations.”

“It’s a place to connect, to share, to explore, and of course to work, but more importantly it’s a place that inspires me. It opens up doors and creates opportunities that I never knew existed before.”

“You really never know what’s going to happen until you walk in the door. Some people can’t deal with that very well but it always leads to awesome possibilities.”

“It’s where I can meet people—by design or by serendipity”

“The new ideas that are born in the synthesis between different people and them bumping into each other.”

Chapter five drew together theories of ‘focal points’ and ‘boundary objects’ to conceptualise Coworking spaces as ‘portals to new worlds of work’. As focal points, they enabled entrepreneurial actors to tacitly coordinate actions by frequenting a shared environment that encouraged unstructured interaction. This first step, colocation, helped Coworkers find ‘complementary others’, people with synergistic knowledge or skills with which they could cooperate. Proximity is however, a necessary but insufficient condition to resolve the discovery problem. To identify which ‘complementary others’ are worthy of cooperation, actors must *share* information. Moreover many important questions cannot be answered through a single information transaction. Consider the case of two potentially complementary entrepreneurial actors asking themselves *should I trust this person?* The two-sided process of reducing uncertainty around questions of trustworthiness, necessary for example to jointly create an enterprise or establish an otherwise enduring business

relationship, usually requires multiple interactions over a sustained period of mutual observation. Not only did Coworking spaces provide a spatial focal point within urban geography, but they operated as ‘boundary objects’ in the sense that their features provided avenues for Coworkers to share information and interact. As the empirically focused chapters detailed, Coworking sites wove together material, conceptual, social and digital components into the boundary object assembly. They offered a shared canvas upon which multiple actors could creatively improvise, and mutually observe each other’s acts.

There are two points to highlight from this discussion. The first is that a significant part of the immaterial value created and consumed through Coworking involved the sharing and discovery of *instrumentally useful information and knowledge*¹⁵⁶. The second is that although many opportunities were subsequently realised or pursued within the context of dyadic interactions, the initial discovery process frequently hinged upon the ‘common pooling’ of information. The sharing of information in the quasi-public arena was organised through through the social, digital and material components of the Coworking *commons*.

Affect and emotion

This propensity towards sharing information came bundled together with a significant emotional and affective dimension. In Coworking, affect and emotion played both an *instrumental* role in encouraging the sharing of particular kinds of information and modes of interaction, but also served as an *intrinsic* source of value through the *experience of community*. The following discussion will briefly outline how affect and emotion have been considered in recent organisational theory.

¹⁵⁶ For the purposes here information and knowledge are used interchangeably, although as many have pointed out distinctions between these concepts are non-trivial. Information can be easily shared through digital networks, for information to become ‘knowledge’ it likely needs to be internalised and ‘embodied’ (Gyuris 2014).

The importance of emotion in organisational life had been neglected as a significant area of inquiry until relatively recently, following a long tradition in western thought that conceived of rationality and emotionality as not only separate but often opposing processes¹⁵⁷. However, just as neurological research has dispelled this earlier myth, organisational scholars studying emotion have also pointed out how all organisational processes are ‘saturated with feeling’ and that emotion ‘interpenetrates and is an inseparable part of organisational life’ (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995; Ashkanasy et al. 2017). The terms ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ are sometimes used interchangeably, but a number of theorists have made significant distinctions between the two concepts. Although ‘affect theory’ is a heterogeneous and evolving collection of ideas, the general tenor is that affect is a set of biological, autonomic responses registered in the body prior to conscious awareness (Tomkins 1984; Nathanson 1994; Massumi 1995, 2002). Emotion, by contrast, describes a subjectively felt sense that is realised by an individual and identified as such. To follow both Tomkins and Massumi here, affect can be considered ‘biological and impersonal, emotion biographical and personal’. In other words, in contexts like Coworking both the conscious expression and manipulation of emotion and the unconscious emanation of affect will be registered and colour experiences.

Throughout the field research, participants also highlighted the importance of the emotional and affective dimensions of Coworking:

"I used to tell [him] you can't bring that emotional energy of stress in here, go out and walk around the block if you feel like that...mediate...do something...but you can't be around the Coworkers when you feel that way that's not what they come here for..."

¹⁵⁷ We can find seeds of this idea in the writings of Plato and Aristotle and expanded more formally within the rational actor assumptions of classical economic theory.

“I used to go in [to the Coworking space] for my lunch hour...just to feel that humming energy, to feel that another world of work was possible”

“I suppose I just have a sense for places where you can feel something new emerging...and I like to spend time in them, soaking it up...and contributing to it...”

I don't know [why I Cowork]...the only way I can think of to describe it is vibrancy. The lower the lows you get in that space, the higher the highs. And working for a non-profit - I can't say the same for corporate because I haven't worked there - it all feels very flat. Everyday is...the same.”

As noted earlier, the production and manipulation of affect and emotion has been conceived of as a species of immaterial labour alongside more ‘cognitive’ knowledge work (Hardt 1999). The manipulation of emotional displays in service work has been solidly recognised under the rubric of ‘emotional labour’ (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993), and often critically examined by sociologists of work (Hochschild 2003). Whilst some scholars have also pointed out the benefits of positive affect on *creativity* (Fredrickson 2001), and ‘team experiences’ (Cardon et al. 2017) a recent evaluation of these efforts concluded that the *‘positive aspects of emotional labour have largely been overlooked and under investigated’* (Ashkanasy et al. 2017:185). One important further distinction in this discussion is between ‘emotional experiences’, or the registering of affect as a felt sense; and ‘emotional displays’, or the controlled intervention directing the presentation of these experiences as embodied performances (Jarvis 2017). ‘Authentic performances’ generally refer to situations where the gap between experience and display is small, ‘feigned performances’ where such a gap is large (Grandey et al. 2005).

Like the discussion of information exchange between complementary actors, emotional labour is frequently imagined as existing in the nexus between customer

and service staff dyads, as an intentional process on the part of the 'sender' and an interpretive process on the part of the 'receiver'¹⁵⁸. Emotions however, are also understood to have '*contagious qualities*', whether positive, negative or neutral, they 'spill over' within teams and across groups (Barsade and Gibson 1998; Barsade 2002). Whilst the emotions of human bodies certainly affect each other, and the moods of groups tends to converge, physical (and perhaps digital) environments themselves can take on an affective quality that can be 'palpably sensed' (Rivera 1992:2). Here the model first presented by Rivera (1992) is useful, which distinguishes affective *atmospheres*, *climates* and *cultures* by their degrees of permanence and stability. 'Affective atmospheres', say of a party or a funeral, are the most fleeting and tend to be structured around rituals and occasions. 'Climates' are more stable, held together by a network of social practices and material objects at the group or organisational level. 'Culture', whilst constituted by various climates, resides at a multigenerational scale, generally responding over time as the supporting institutions change (although occasionally marked by punctuated incidences, or swift phase changes).

Scholars have more recently observed that cultivating a particular quality of affective climate may form an important part of realising organisational strategy (Parke and Seo 2017). These findings build on the aforementioned research into how emotion (and affect) are 'contagious' and that experiences have a 'ripple effect' across groups (Barsade 2002) that can result in a kind of collectively experienced 'body' among co-habitants. More pointedly, scholars note that particular kinds of affective states are more conducive to particular strategic goals. For example 'authentic displays of positive affect' are understood to be correlated with 'creative knowledge work' (Park and Seo 2017). Thus the construction and management of 'affect' not only plays a vivid role in the formation of social identities and the 'felt sense' of community, but can shape the instrumental efficacy of entrepreneurial work. Whilst organisational scholars have only begun to explore the work of emotion within standard

¹⁵⁸ As exemplified in the notorious case of the 'Pan Am' or 'fake' smile that first inspired Hochschild to consider the problem of emotional labour and inauthentic performances.

organisations, where employees are bound together by conventional employment relationships, these findings may have greater relevance to configurations of entrepreneurial communities exemplified here through Coworking. As we have seen, the motivations driving interaction within these community arrangements are different, less mediated by managerial hierarchies, or bolstered by financial incentives. In communities organised around entrepreneurial work, atmospheres cultivated through regular, authentic displays of positive affect not only encourage the sharing of useful information but are a salient quality that helps bind the groups themselves together.

8.3 The immaterial commons

It is this entanglement of ‘positive affective atmospheres’ and ‘distributed knowledge resources’ that I propose bringing together under the notion of an *immaterial commons*. For Coworkers, access to such an immaterial commons is both intrinsically attractive, being surrounded by an encouraging entrepreneurial community *feels good*; and it is also *instrumentally useful*, by providing access to knowledge flows that advance work-life projects. Throughout this thesis I have been using the terms ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ as conceptual tools to aid in both the empirical and theoretical analysis. In the project of dissecting the social these terms offer some utility in thinking through the potential orders of multivariate relationships. And yet they can be rather crude tools when approaching the complex textures of lived experience. The things we care about most in life - friendship, marriage, family - are complex phenomena that enfold both the intrinsic and instrumental within their purview. The complexities of work are of the same order. The intrinsic and instrumental, the social and economic frequently come entwined within the *gestalt* of encounters. Nevertheless, considering Coworking practices as regular, distributed acts of ‘immaterial labour’ which co-constitute a *shared resource*, a source of both intrinsic and instrumental value, opens a compelling line of inquiry into what conditions best support its ongoing creation and maintenance. This section will situate the immaterial within recent ‘theories of commons’ and highlight the challenges these theories pose for governance.

Theories of commons

Over the past four decades, theories of commons have moved from the fringes of academic inquiry to increasingly challenge some core assumptions underpinning the institutional dominance of private property, market-based transactions and the administrative interventions of the state (Benkler 2013; Ostrom 2015). Essentially, these theories propose that groups *can* collectively create, maintain and manage the

utilisation of shared resources through specific protocols embedded in culture and customs, rather than depending on the abstract logics of market exchange or state intervention. Theories of commons recognise humans as complex creatures, that their choices are always embedded within a web of social relations and subject to a diverse range of overlapping, competing and sometimes even contradictory motivations¹⁵⁹. This view dislodges the primacy that narrow self-interest and financial incentives occupy within mainstream economics and sociology, exemplified through 'rational actor theory' (Green and Shapiro 1994; Hector and Kanazawa 1997). Self-interest and financial incentives are still considered important, but they only occupy one part of a more crowded motivational picture. If price signals govern the logic of market exchanges, and the formalised power asymmetries of managerial hierarchies govern the logic of bureaucratic administration (whether 'public' states or private firms), *communities*, or at least communities with specific kinds of norms, are the vehicles for governing commons-based resources.

There have been two primary 'waves' of commons theory originating from different disciplinary arenas¹⁶⁰. This section will briefly outline the evolution from the first, 'Ostrom school' to the second 'networked-information' school.

¹⁵⁹ This thesis has highlighted many of the positive aspects of non-pecuniary motivation such as autonomy, craftsmanship, self-concordance, benevolence and solidarity. Of course there are also negative motivations that can equally override narrow self-interest, such as jealousy, prejudice, vengeance, hatred etc.

¹⁶⁰ This statement refers to the two most widely recognised schools of commons. It should be noted that some have identified further distinctions within commons theory.

Benkler (2013) for example notes a distinct eco-global perspective which conceptualises the biosphere of the entire planet as a commons subject to externality tragedies such as climate change usually traced to the work of David Bollier.

Papadimitropoulos (2017) places both the Ostrom, Benkler and Bollier visions of commons within a 'liberal' tradition. Which he contrasts with the 'reformist' commons vision of Kostakis and Bauwens (2014) and the 'anti-capitalist' commons of Hardt and Negri (2004). David Harvey's (2011) critique of commons would also likely fit under the anti-capitalist label.

Although I am cognisant of these further schools, they are not considered important for the argument presented in this chapter.

The Ostrom school of commons

The pioneering work of the political-economists Elinor Ostrom and her husband Vince Ostrom led the first wave of commons theory. When they began their research in the early 1970s, the dominant view of the time was that ‘open access’ resource arrangements would inevitably lead to ‘free rider problems’ (Olson 1965) and ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin 1968) scenarios. The prevailing view was grounded in ‘neoclassical’ assumptions about human motivation and a perceived ‘logic of collective action’ (Olson 1965) that predicted such collective arrangements would inevitably lead to inferior outcomes unless shared resources were broken up to either grant individuals property rights, or, in cases where this was infeasible, that the state intervened to claim ownership and manage public resources¹⁶¹. By contrast, the Ostrom’s research pointed to a wealth of empirical examples where local communities sustainably managed natural resources without relying on the formalised arrangements of individual ownership rights or the administrative control of the state. By highlighting how communities with appropriate norms can effectively manage common resources, they challenged both the underlying assumptions about human motivation, the ‘inevitable fallibility’ of cooperative logics and the binary solutions of privatisation or state control (Ostrom 1977).

The empirical material used to construct this first wave of commons theory was largely drawn from traditional contexts where small communities managed access to forests, fisheries or pastures through ‘customs’ guarded against their overexploitation¹⁶² (Ostrom 2015). Nevertheless, guided by the intuition that ‘resource arrangements that work in practice should be able to work in theory’¹⁶³ (Fennel 2011), Elinor Ostrom

¹⁶¹ These assumptions are understood to have strongly shaped thinking on environmental policy in the USA to the extent that Hardin’s ‘tragedy of the commons’ article was cited by their federal congress in 1969 (Elliot 2001:18).

¹⁶² To recapitulate the language of Tonnies, these examples classic *Gemeinschafts* with strong norms grounded in established traditions.

¹⁶³ Fennel (2001) labels this maxim ‘Ostrom’s Law’.

introduced and legitimated a theory of ‘commons’, (often called ‘common-pool resources’), into conventional economic theory, eventually being awarded a Nobel prize in the discipline for this contribution¹⁶⁴. In dialogue with scholarly collaborators, the Ostroms developed the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework to guide research on common property resource arrangements, which has been applied to analyse action within a diverse range of contexts. The IAD framework evolved and was refined by a community of scholars combining detailed empirical analysis of context specific resource arrangements with more abstract economic theory including game theory, transactions cost theory, social choice theory and public goods theory (Ostrom 2011).

The networked-information school of commons

The second, ‘networked information’ wave of commons theory began in the mid 1990s and was led by a small group of legal and media scholars studying ‘internet-mediated’ sharing practices and their governance arrangements. Whilst this wave is less associated with a single name, the legal scholars Yochai Benkler (2002; 2006) Lawrence Lessig (2001;2004; 2009) and more recently Brett Frischmann (2012; 2014) are some of the most visible and prolific proponents of this school¹⁶⁵. Pointing to numerous examples of voluntary labour through internet mediated

¹⁶⁴ Elinor Ostrom was jointly awarded the Nobel Prize alongside Oliver Williamson in 2009. She died in 2012 and at the time of writing is still the only woman be awarded the prize in economics. All the more remarkable given her disciplinary origins lay in political science rather than economics.

¹⁶⁵ The early works referred to here developed at the intersection of internet studies, media anthropology, intellectual property, cyberlaw and the economics of information. Some prominent examples that offer offer a flavour of this work include:

- ‘An economic models for trade in free goods on the internet’ (Ghosh 1998)
- ‘Overcoming Agoraphobia: Building the Commons of the Digitally Networked Environment’ (Benkler 1998)
- ‘The economies of online cooperation: Gifts and public goods in cyberspace’ (Kollock 1999)
- ‘Anarchism triumphant: Free software and the death of copyright.’ (Moglen 1999)
- ‘Some simple economics of open source’ (Lerner and Tirole 2002)

projects such as open source software, these scholars shared Ostrom's insistence that a diverse range of motivations can drive production and cooperation beyond financial incentives (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006) and that neither *markets*, *firms* or *governments* exhaust the range of options for optimally managing complex resource production and access arrangements (Benkler 2002). There were at least two important differences these scholars pointed out between the pre-industrial natural resource commons studied by Ostrom and the post-industrial networked knowledge commons which highlighted a difference social dilemma at their core. These will be briefly reviewed here in order to highlight which elements are relevant to the the analysis to the kind of *immaterial commons* that I propose was created and managed by Coworkers.

The first point relates to the consumable nature of the resources themselves. Natural resources like forests, fisheries and pastures are depleted when used, and thus are sensitive to overexploitation, can even be destroyed if carelessly managed. This was the premise of the argument against open access advanced in Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons'. In economic theory, the degree to which one actors consumption affects another's capacity to simultaneously consume a good or service is called 'rivalry' (also known as subtractability). The governance dilemma for the shared resources studied by Ostrom thus hinged upon managing access to 'rivalrous goods' through institutional norms that guided sustainable consumption. But scholars in the networked school were studying information sharing practices through digital networks, a context in which Hardin's 'overgrazing' analogy is fundamentally misplaced. This is because *information is nonrivalrous*. Learning something, or in economic terms 'consuming knowledge', whether a mathematical theorem or a poem, does not 'subtract' from another's ability to use it¹⁶⁶. In fact some economists

¹⁶⁶ The remarkable consequences of this point has been realised and communicated poetically by several notable historical figures. For example:

Thomas Jefferson: '*He who receives an idea from me receives instruction himself without lessening mine. As he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me*'.

have long pointed out that because knowledge itself is the most critical input towards producing *more* knowledge, overall social utility would be maximised if knowledge resources were made freely accessible (Arrow 1962; Stiglitz 1999). This would allow more knowledge creators to ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’ (Scotchmer 1991). The insights of the networked-information scholars lay in analysing the way the digital infrastructures of the internet were radically transforming the *marginal cost* of reproducing information once it was discovered and codified (Lessig 2001; Benkler 2002). In other words the industrial era economic systems that supported the production and dissemination of knowledge through the mass sales of physical artefacts such as books, records and videos, were in the process of being disrupted by the ‘zero marginal cost dynamics’ of digital reproduction (Rifkin 2014). These scholars did recognise however that the cost of discovering, creating or producing the first codification of creative knowledge work can be exceedingly high.

This leads to the second insight raised by this second wave of commons scholars. Whilst the natural commons of the Ostrom school were not principally created by humans, and only required time for natural processes to renew them, knowledge commons require the application of human labour to create. Once knowledge is produced and codified into digital formats however they require virtual no ongoing labour to maintain. The social dilemma at the heart of digital commons is less about managing sustainable utilisation, and more about the curation of an *appropriate institutional logic to encourage their sustainable creation and renewal*. The more relevant social dilemma for codified knowledge commons thus centres around the fair attribution for the costs of knowledge production, and meaningful safeguards against forms of enclosure or appropriation of the collectively produced resources. Visible exploitation of knowledge resources, where the benefits of the efforts of a majority are captured by a minority, may erode the (non-pecuniary) motivations for ongoing knowledge production and refinement (Benkler 2017). This is why regimes of patents and intellectual property rights became the focus of much debate, hinging

George Bernard Shaw: *‘If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas’.*

on questions of how to balance the design of economic systems that both motivate knowledge production and maximise the social benefits that result from open access.

A third wave: the immaterial commons

Prominent scholars from both traditions have come together in the past decade and attempted to craft an integrated language of concepts, frameworks, theories and models to better analyse and guide the direction of commons based scenarios (for example, Hess and Ostrom 2007; and Frischmann, Madison and Strandburg 2014). In this light, the most recent work by Frischmann, Madison and Standburg on 'culturally constructed commons' (2009) and the challenges of 'governing knowledge commons' (2014) bear the closest resemblance to the immaterial commons advanced in this chapter. In these works they examine a variety of cases that span medieval guilds, modern research universities, patent pools, the Associated Press, open source software projects, Wikipedia, pooled genetic data in medical research, amateur sports practitioners in roller derby and even 'jamband communities' such as fans of the Grateful Dead. These are certainly not the tradition-bound communities in rural context first studied by Ostrom. And yet they still largely conceptualise culture as a collection of rules governing the creation, maintenance and access of *codified information*, rather than engage with the *emotional qualities* and *affective atmospheres* that I argue are crucial components in the organisation of Coworking and similar entrepreneurial communities.

I use the term *immaterial commons* to bring together theory on the protocols governing knowledge sharing arrangements with the growing research on emotion and affective atmospheres. The shared physical space of Coworking in particular draws attention to ways in which bodies produce, interpenetrate and are submerged within the shared atmospheric resource. The affective dimension of this commons not only requires labour to initially cultivate, but the periodic mobilisation of human (and perhaps non-human) bodies to interact in formations that recharge the atmosphere and replenish the resource. Such renewal depends on the performance

of affect laden interactions. The empirical chapters documented the various ways bodily performances animated Coworking practices, from welcoming gestures like smiles and greetings; to verbal and nonverbal expressions of encouragement and support; to various positive emotional performances, verbal and facial expressions of curiosity, wonder and other displays that contributed to the atmosphere¹⁶⁷. Moreover Coworkers frequently appeared sensitive towards perceived authenticity in these gestures, to value that the performances actually reflected the inner experiences of participants. Affective atmospheres, cultural norms and even the exchanges of favours through a social network appeared to suffer a kind of 'evaporation rate', in the absence of ongoing supply the atmosphere would disperse, need to be recharged. Whereas 'congestion' is often viewed negatively for many public goods, this form of commons relies on an *immaterial density*. In particular it was this affective atmosphere inside and surrounding Coworking spaces, often described in the vernacular by participants as an attractive 'vibe' or 'buzz', I argue was both substantially influential but has hitherto been overlooked in theories of the commons.

Immaterial commons as entrepreneurial infrastructure

Proponents of open access to knowledge can muster powerful arguments that social utility is maximised when as many people have access to as much knowledge as possible. This is because knowledge itself is reproductive and nondepletable, the more we have access to, the more we can create without losing what we have. The challenge however is that codified knowledge is also generally nonexcludable, if one wants to use knowledge in the world, it is difficult to keep it secret. The question that follows is how to best encourage ongoing investment in costly knowledge producing activities, given the inherent difficulties of excluding competitors or non-payers from reaping the advantages of such investments. The conventional answer to this 'free rider' problem has been to frame knowledge as a 'public good' and call for government intervention, either through directly funding knowledge production

¹⁶⁷ In Coworking other living bodies are also commonly mobilised towards the same ends, plants are arranged, pets are brought into the space - at least one Coworking space even offers a 'dogs of the space' calendar featuring members' pets.

through science and academia; or by enforcing systems of intellectual property rights through patents and copyrights (Frischman, Madisson and Strandburg 2014). Proponents of 'knowledge commons', argue that alongside these market or subsidy-based solutions there is a third alternative, that communities are able to create and manage knowledge as a common resource, albeit only when they can create or enforce their own norms or rules of engagement.

Entrepreneurial work however, does not only depend on access to knowledge, or at least not the 'codified information' we associate with commons-based digital projects. As scholars of entrepreneurial process (for example Shane 2003) and the empirical chapters in this thesis detail, entrepreneurial work involves processual iterations and experimentation; navigating between imitation and novel tweaks; constructing trust and learning from mistakes; social and emotional support in celebrating successes and in commiserating losses. As the communities of practice framework outlines and the empirical material in this research support, the process of maturing in the practice of entrepreneurship is as much about crafting entrepreneurial '*selves*' as it is about building *firms*. As we have seen, some of these processes can be digitised and shared through internet-mediated networks, but many require corporeal co-presence and regular face to face encounters.

Knowledge may beget more knowledge, but only if the motivational systems are sufficient to sustain the labour of production. Knowledge producers are unlikely to sustain their efforts if they perceive open access as exploitative. What of the immaterial commons produced by entrepreneurial communities? What are the reproductive, autocatalytic properties of an entrepreneurial commons? Does access to these resources through community participation result in downstream benefits in the form of more entrepreneurs and new firms, products and services? How might we weigh these potential benefits against the costs incurred by those undertaking the *immaterial labour* of producing and maintaining such a commons? Whilst this research project was not designed to answer these questions, there is a theoretical direction grounded in the commons that provides a foundation for such future inquiry to which we will now turn.

In 'Infrastructure: the social value of shared resources', Frischmann (2012) advances a provocative reframing of how might think of infrastructure and the benefits of its management as a common resource. There are two features of this work that are useful to recount here in order to highlight the tension resulting from the provision of Coworking spaces as private enterprises, and the organic growth of entrepreneurial communities that organise around them.

The first point related to Frischmann's general definition of infrastructural resources, which he claims is an appropriate conception when they meet the following three conditions:

1. *'The resource may be consumed nonrivalrously for some appreciable range of demand.'*
2. *Social demand for the resource is driven primarily by downstream productive activity that requires the resource as an input.*
3. *The resource may be used as an input into a wide range of goods and services, which may include private goods, public goods, and social goods.'*

(Frischmann 2012:14).

These terms expand the conceptual scope of resources that are 'functionally infrastructural' beyond the usual associations with physical construction works such as roads, ports, sanitation systems or telecommunications networks. Within Frischmann's more capacious definition, we can include environmental resources, such as the oceans and atmosphere, but also *cultural resources*, such as shared languages, customs, ideas and legal systems. Frischmann's argument is that if a resource meets these three conditions, then overall social welfare may be maximised through its management as a commons¹⁶⁸:

¹⁶⁸ Although he cautions against the blanket assumption that 'if infrastructure, then commons' (Frischmann 2012: 60)

'Commons management structures the relationships between infrastructure and infrastructure-dependent systems in a manner that creates a spillover-rich environment, where spillovers flow from the many productive activities of users. These activities yield new and unanticipated innovations, knowledge, social capital, and other public and social goods that lead to economic growth and development as well as social welfare improvements not fully reflected in traditional economic measures.'

(Frischmann 2012:15)

The second key contribution of his work follows from the recognition that many of the positive social spillover effects of infrastructure effectively occur 'downstream'¹⁶⁹. More significantly, this leads to a significant gap between the 'private demand' and 'social benefit' for infrastructural resources. The gap stems from users' willingness to pay only for services that reflect their anticipated private benefits, whereas many of the positive social effects of infrastructural resources are realised in the creative utilisation towards ends unable to be anticipated or captured as benefits by paying users. This simple analysis has consequential effects, especially for infrastructural resources that are supplied through private means. Given that profit-seeking entrepreneurs will logically seek out arrangements in which they can *capture* the largest amount of value through the highest possible prices, there are good reasons to question how well markets will optimally steer investment and design choices towards infrastructural arrangements that maximise downstream social utility.

These points raise two fundamental questions regarding the relationship between Coworking *enterprises* and Coworking (or entrepreneurial) *communities*.

¹⁶⁹ Economists call such 'spillover' effects that have effects beyond contracting parties in a transaction 'externalities'. These can be negative such as environmental pollution, or positive such as the production of knowledge or culture.

- First, to what extent do *entrepreneurial communities* produce *immaterial commons* that are *functionally infrastructural* in that they produce downstream positive spillovers that maximise social utility?
- Second, to what extent do privately provisioned *Coworking spaces* natively optimise to support the *cultivation* and *sustainability* of entrepreneurial communities?¹⁷⁰

This thesis has advanced the argument that the *pioneering* Coworking community in Melbourne did produce such an immaterial commons that, at least to the extent that ethnographic assessments can gauge, produced notable social spillover benefits¹⁷¹. Yet it also noted how the Coworking industry itself significantly transformed over the course of this investigation, many new enterprises entered the market and many existing spaces adapted their offerings towards private offices. I was certainly not the only observer to note the striking shift away from the focus on community mobilisation towards real estate enterprise¹⁷², and this was a common assessment amongst the old-timers of the local Coworking scene. The assessment was rarely positive amounts the pioneering community, although sometimes noted as part of ‘growing up’ by Coworking space operators, their investors and the real estate industry actors. The analytical puzzle I frequently pondered lay in explaining the gap between the perceived social value of community participation, and the direction of the design features the market appeared to reward, which tended towards large spaces with private officers in strategic locations. Frischmann’s theory of commons-based infrastructure offers a direction towards resolving this puzzle. Whilst

¹⁷⁰ By natively optimise I mean if pursuing profit maximisation unencumbered by policy or regulatory pressures intended to modify their designs.

¹⁷¹ As much of the empirical material of the thesis details, these benefits ranged from the clearly economic, such as supporting nascent entrepreneurs to create new startups, products and services, improving information efficiencies through searching and matching or reducing transaction costs; to the more social or wellbeing oriented through the cultivation of friendships, and the looser psychological and emotional support in facing the challenges of non-standard work. Needless to say, this thesis never attempted to quantify such benefits.

¹⁷² In essence, the pursuit of profitable margins through lease arbitrage.

customers are more willing to pay for private offices as they can better anticipate and capture the private benefits, these arrangements may be less likely to cultivate an entrepreneurial, immaterial commons that produces the positive social spillover effects for the wider contexts they inhabit¹⁷³.

Immaterial commons and material clubs

In the early phase of this research, the network of active members within the community I was studying largely overlapped with the formal membership of Coworking enterprises, but it never precisely matched it. From the beginning I noted many formal Coworking space members that never appeared interested, or at least rarely participated in, the social dynamics. There were also members of the entrepreneurial 'Coworking' community that carried respect and influence, but were never formal members of Coworking spaces. The divergence between these two networks appeared to grow over the course of my research, as many renounced their formal Coworking memberships, but retained active participation in the communities that were initially organised around Coworking spaces, including occasionally voluntarily coordinating Coworking-like activities such as 'Hoffices'. The 'market logic' of paid Coworking memberships granted clear rights of access to use the *material spaces*, but they did not in themselves guarantee access to the full range of affective and informational resources of the *immaterial commons*. Accessing this value required participating in the 'community orientated logic', the processes of sharing information, constructing trust and forming relationships cultivated through the social practices outlined in Chapter six.

¹⁷³ Incidentally, Frischmann's capacious view of infrastructure is strikingly similar to Faulconbridge's (2015) call for policy makers to focus on:

Investment beyond 'hard' economic infrastructure and into the relational processes in which knowledge sharing and social learning take place.

These parallels are all the more remarkable given these two scholars reveal no awareness of each other's work through citations.

Communities, and the immaterial value they create, are not able to be owned or controlled by entrepreneurs, and thus it is difficult to exclude 'non-payers' from the value they produce¹⁷⁴. There is however another economic institution that is more frequently applied towards shared, nonrival goods that are excludable, called *clubs*. Club theory¹⁷⁵ was first proposed by the economist James Buchanan (1965) as a way of optimally managing access to resources like swimming pools, tennis courts or gyms. For clubs to operate effectively, the 'goods' must be 'shareable' (non-rival), 'congestible' and 'excludable', that is, there must be a feasible and economic way of making users pay for the good and excluding non-payers. Rather presciently for the time, Buchanan also noted that if users are motivated by non-economic concerns, such as 'camaraderie', the optimal consumption arrangements for clubs can break down¹⁷⁶.

Clubs work well for *material goods*, just as it is relatively easy to build a fence around a swimming pool or tennis court, so it is easy to exclude non-payers from accessing office space and amenities. But these assumptions break down when managing access to the *immaterial value* cultivated through community relations. This is why I have conceptualised the product of community labour as a *commons* rather than club. It is also offered as a hypothesis that might explain the direction in which private Coworking industry actors have proceeded over recent years, largely away

¹⁷⁴ Communities, by definition, manage dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of access through cultural protocols rather than hierarchical decrees. Thus individuals rarely have the power to exclude others, apart from peculiar cases such as cults with powerful leaders. Some communities have special processes such as councils of elders that do have the power to effectively 'excommunicate' members in extreme cases.

¹⁷⁵ A comprehensive overview of club theory is considered unnecessary here, but for an updated technical definition: '[a] Buchanan club is a decentralized, voluntary organization sharing an impure public good that is excludable and congestible.' (Sandler 2013: 282).

¹⁷⁶ '[A]n economic theory of clubs can strictly apply only to the extent that the motivation for joining in sharing arrangements is itself economic; that is, only if choices are made on the basis of costs and benefits of particular goods and services as these are confronted by the individual. In so far as individuals join clubs for camaraderie, as such, the theory does not apply' (Buchanan 1965:2).

from *community managed immaterial commons* and towards *privately managed material clubs*.

8.4 Paradigms and value regimes

Techno-economic and socio-institutional paradigms

What might this theoretical proposition of an immaterial commons mean for the future of organising entrepreneurial knowledge work? As this thesis approaches its completion, a final widening of the frame will consider this question in two parts. The first section will look back to contextualise not only the rise of Coworking, but the way new technology and modes of organising can cultivate new ‘value regimes’. The second part will look ahead to consider how the tensions that played out in this particular ethnography might be resolved in the future.

Chapter two opened with an account of how the practices of Coworking emerged as both an expression of, and response to, the technological and economic developments that have transformed work practices for many knowledge workers. Most proximately, these entail the ‘stack’ of technologies that have enabled the unwiring of knowledge work from physical location - accessible laptops, wireless internet and smart devices coupled with numerous software applications that support mobile and collaborative forms of work. As a consequence, knowledge work can now be conducted in strikingly different ways from past decades (Spinuzzi 2015). Historically, such comparable changes in the technical tools of work have not merely increased the productive output of similar kinds of tasks, but provoked momentous alterations in the nature of the ‘value added’ by human labour, and in the ‘modes of organising’ that spill over into wider structural transformations of society (Schumpeter 1939; Kondratieff 1979; Freeman 1984; Perez 2003).

Paradigmatic shifts in the dominant techno-economic modes of production are easy to observe with historical distance, and historians and sociologists can meaningfully point to eras where horticultural, agrarian or industrial production dominated (Lenski 2015). But bright lines between these periods are seldom distinguishable to those living through the changes. This is partly an inherent function of innovation diffusion curves. Even the most revolutionary changes begin with only a handful of innovators and early adopters (Rogers 2010), and distinguishing the 'edge' from the 'fringe' is not always easy (Hagel et al. 2010). But it is also because macro-level paradigms are constituted by subsets of 'meso-level' technological revolutions. Carlota Perez (2003) for example, argues that what we commonly refer to as the 'industrial revolution' involved at least five major technological waves. First, the proto-machines in early factories alongside canals; second, the development of steam, coal, iron and railways; third, steel and heavy engineering; fourth the automobile, oil, petrochemicals and mass production; and fifth, the most recent incorporation of information and communication technologies (Perez 2010). The technological and economic consequences of these revolutions are easy to point out, but each wave was also accompanied by equally profound changes in the ordering of social institutions, and even the underlying systems of meaning that are invoked to sustain them (James 2006; Lenski 2015).

The key question of contemporary debate is the extent to which the advent of the internet, the growth of ubiquitous mobile computing and the promise of new innovations like blockchains are technologies that will be largely accommodated within the current order of social, organisational and economic relations; or whether they are the birth pangs of a wider 'macro-level' paradigmatic shift¹⁷⁷. A spectre haunting any considerations of this question is the divergent forecasts on the transformative effects of artificial intelligence. Whilst predictions that we are on the threshold of mass-employment-replacing artificial intelligence have been around in

¹⁷⁷ There are certainly many popular writers (and some scholars) that claim we are in the midst of a larger paradigmatic shift, notwithstanding differences of opinion on the magnitude and consequences (for example: Hagel et al 2010; Gratton 2011; Rifkin 2011; Ismail et al. 2014; Ito and Howe 2016; Stiegler 2017).

various guises since the 1950s (see for example McCarthy et al. 1959), these have significantly amplified in recent years¹⁷⁸.

Although there is considerable divergence on the revolutionary prospects of artificial intelligence amongst experts, there is broad consensus that technology frontiers will continue to encroach upon *routine* forms of labour, and the most 'valuable' role humans play in the processes of production will continue to shift towards *non-routine* forms of work (Autor and Dorn 2013; Frey and Osborne 2017). This is, curiously, a reversal of the trajectory of modernisation, where the *skilled* pre-industrial artisanal class were largely displaced by the industrial organisation of *unskilled* labour (Braverman 1974; Hounshell 1985). An influential presentation of these different categories of work was advanced by Frey and Osborne (2013) in their paper the '*future of employment: how susceptible are jobs to computerisation*'. Building on previous classifications of work tasks (for example by Autor et al. 2003), the authors developed a simple typology constructed along two axes, routine and non-routine; manual and cognitive, to conceptualise four overarching clusters of work tasks:

¹⁷⁸ The potentially revolutionary effects that would stem from the development of a 'general artificial intelligence' has been discussed both positively and negatively by figures such as Raymond Kurzweil, Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, Nick Bostrom, Max Tegmark, Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and Sam Harris.

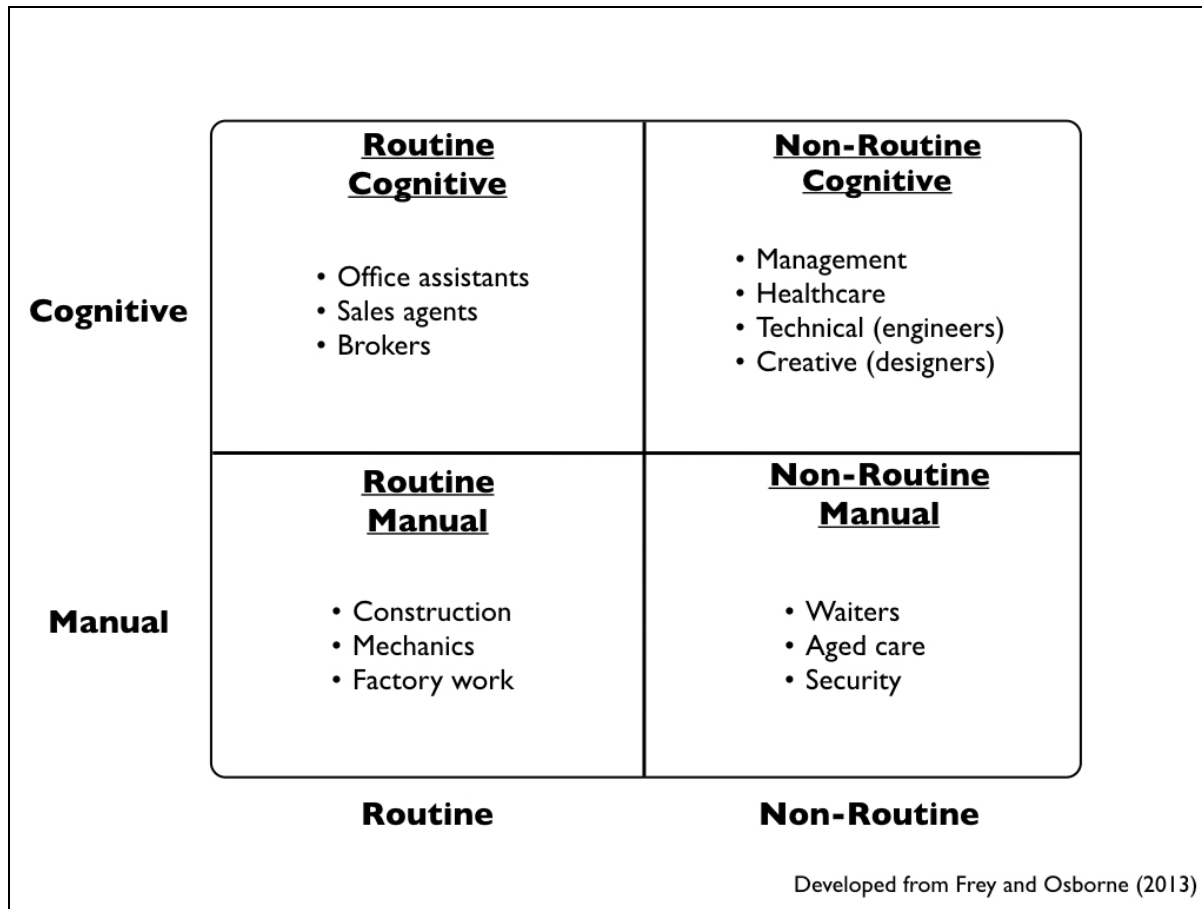


Figure 56: A typology of work tasks

Moreover this ongoing displacement is disconcertingly polarising, redirecting human labour towards both the upper right quadrant of highly skilled and well remunerated forms of knowledge work, such as computer engineering and specialised professional services; but also towards the lower right, less skilled, lower paid services, such as hospitality and aged care (Autor and Dorn 2013). This is why the ‘computer revolution’, spanning both algorithms and automation, has been accused of hollowing out middle income jobs, partly explaining the marked growth of income and wealth inequality over past decades in many advanced economies (Krueger 1993; Atkinson 2008). It is these projections that underpin headline grabbing quotes such as ‘47 percent of total US employment is at risk’ (Frey and Osborne 2013:1). This growing concern has been framed as a ‘race against the machine’ (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2011), with much attention focused on how education might bolster

‘creative and social intelligence’ to continue to advance human productivity such that it can outperform computers in important areas (Goldin and Katz 2009).

These changing patterns of work have been of concern to perceptive analysts of technology trends for some time (for example by Bell 1974; Toffler 1980; Reich 1991 and Castells 1996). As chapter two argued, the entrepreneurial knowledge work pursued by Coworkers is in part a response to the hollowing out of routine forms of work. As these technological trends show no sign of abating, we can only expect more people to become engaged in these pursuits, navigating the distinct challenges of organising entrepreneurial knowledge work in alternative collective arrangements, less clearly mediated by markets or hierarchies (Adler and Heckscher 2006).

Value regimes

These technological trends have certainly elevated the stature of creative knowledge work in the new economy. But this is only part of the story, as economic historians point out that regardless of the ingenuity of technological inventions, their productive potential is unable to be realised without complementary advances in the ‘social technologies’ of management, which often lead to a ‘radical reorganisation’ of labour inputs and processes (David 1990; Chandler 1992). Neither are the effects of how we manage work quarantined from other social arenas, and new assemblages of material capital and immaterial modes of organising can also lead to unforeseen qualitative changes in wider social relations (Perez 2003) and, indeed at the individual level, the constitution of different subjectivities through work¹⁷⁹ (Hardt 1999). As we glimpsed briefly in the discussion of the evolution of commons theory,

¹⁷⁹ Here I am referring to the relationship between different experiences of self and forms of identity and the nature of work. For example, the paradigmatic modes of work are also accompanied by temporal and spatial parameters. The rhythms of agricultural work are dependent on natural forces of seasons and weather; factory based manufacturing requires temporal synchronisation between manual labour and mechanised assembly lines; paper based offices have their distinct routines of storage and retrieval of information; and, in this tradition, digital and entrepreneurial work in cafes and Coworking spaces has its own spatial and temporal frames within which subjective experience and social identification unfold.

the productivity waves unleashed by the consolidation of these ensembles have historically disrupted the relationship between the scarcity and abundance of certain goods, whether they be the availability of food, clothes or, more recently, access to information¹⁸⁰. This reconfigured relationship between what is scarce and abundant has a close connection with compositions of value(s), both in the economic sense of what people are willing to exchange for a good, and in the sociological sense of what is considered 'good, proper or desirable in human life' (Graeber 2001:1). Such clusters that combine conceptions of what is economically *valuable*, and socially *valued* have been conceptualised as 'value regimes' (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014).

The concept of a 'value regime' brings together dimensions of the ethical, the social and the economic, and their related varieties of activities and experiences. Echoing the earlier discussion of 'value spheres' by Weber and Habermas, a stable value regime affords individuals a coherent experience between their ethical intuitions, preferred forms of sociality and economic livelihoods. Some scholars (for example Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014; Rushkoff 2016; and Cohen 2017) argue the dominant value regime of industrial societies has been corroded, and the resultant crisis is leading to various novel experiments in binding the ethical, the social and the economic together¹⁸¹. The value regime concept offers a final outer framing of the immaterial commons cultivated by the Coworking community described in this thesis. The emphasis on emotion and affect demonstrated how the commons-based activities were not simply about managing 'knowledge', but highlights the attempt at weaving *social* and *ethical* considerations

¹⁸⁰ These categories are chosen as emblematic examples of primary, secondary and tertiary modes of production. However economic history does not follow a simple, linear progression from scarcity to abundance, it is possible that certain changes render some 'goods' scarcer, time, trust, clean air etc. Furthermore, the presence of 'abundance' itself shifts the problem space towards new challenges. For example whilst digital photography has vastly increased the numbers of (bad) photos people can take, it introduces a new problem of finding, categorising and storing 'good' photos.

¹⁸¹ Value regimes also include an aesthetic dimension that helps signal their composition.

that accord with the economic imperatives of non-standard, creative knowledge workers. If this broader conception of the relationship between the rapidly transforming techno-economic and socio-institutional paradigm is correct, we should expect to continue to see many Coworking-like experiments in the future.

8.5 Working futures

Once we know what to look for, many contemporary experiments in collectively arranging creative knowledge work can be examined as entrepreneurial communities that cultivate immaterial commons. The following section will briefly outline some examples that the diverse varieties these communities and their commons-based norms can take in different parts of the world.

Enspiral¹⁸², is an entrepreneurial network that originated in Wellington, New Zealand with strong social norms. Although they initially organised around a Coworking space (or ‘co-share’ space as they called it), at a certain point they decided the shared physical space was no longer necessary for the community to endure¹⁸³. Enspiral consist of a member owned foundation at the core, host regular retreats and have a collection of purposely design social practices (including a publicly available handbook of collaborative customs¹⁸⁴). The network focuses on supporting members to undertake meaningful work (‘working on stuff that matters’), within an ethic of autonomous, peer-to-peer relations. In support of this, they have designed their own open source digital tools to assist with collaborative decision-making and resource management, and the community incubates new ventures in which they retain an equity or a revenue relationship.

¹⁸² <https://enspiral.com/>

¹⁸³ As one of the founders put it to me: ‘it’s like we needed a share house to get to know each other, but at a certain point, we grew up and could host parties at each other’s houses’.

¹⁸⁴ Available at: <https://handbook.enspiral.com/>

Sensorica¹⁸⁵ is an ‘open value network’ that originated in Montreal, Canada. The founders explicitly modelled their structure and processes on the commons-based peer production of Yochai Benkler. The community is organised around producing open software and hardware, such as 3D printers and ‘Internet of Things’ devices. They embrace the ‘third industrial vision’ as a coordinating vision and organise hackathons around ‘high impact’ social projects. The founders have developed an open value accounting system¹⁸⁶ to record various forms of material and immaterial contributions towards projects from community participants.

Las Indias¹⁸⁷ is a community of cooperatives that originated in Madrid, Spain. The community is organised around four primary enterprises: innovation consultancy services; psychology, education and human resource services; open software programming services; and business and arts product incubation services. The community’s values are strongly rooted in the ‘Spanish cyberpunk movement of the 1990s’, and emphasise distributed network architectures, ‘hacker ethics’, economic democracy and devolution of knowledge to the commons. They also embrace what one of the founders (David de Ugarte) calls a ‘*phyle*’, a transnational community of people and enterprises that share knowledge, wealth and solidarity¹⁸⁸. Las Indias holds a strong frame of social identity (members are called ‘indios’) and commitment to ‘kibbutz-like’ commons orientated production.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.sensorica.co/>

¹⁸⁶ http://valuenetwork.referata.com/wiki/Main_Page

¹⁸⁷ <https://lasindias.coop/>

¹⁸⁸ The term *phyle* is an interesting search for a post-westphalian unit of solidarity. Given the fraught and complex relationship between Spanish sub-national identities (Catalan, Basque and Galician) and the Spanish state, the place of origin of this term is perhaps understandable. de Ugarte used the word *phyle* to signal ‘a wider transnational space of economic democracies. We imagined networks of phyles generating wealth, social cohesion, and ensuring liberties for real people rather than the governments’ power and their borders and passports.’ More information about this concept is available here: <http://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Phyles>

Beyond the three featured above, there are many other examples of entrepreneurial communities organising around various work and life projects. Ethos VO¹⁸⁹, based in the UK, are a network of entrepreneurs that organise their products and services work around issues their members are most passionate about contributing towards. The communities supporting Wikispeed¹⁹⁰ and Wikihouse¹⁹¹ organise around the work of designing and publishing open source blueprints for cars and houses. L'atelier Paysan¹⁹² and Farm Hack¹⁹³ are communities that do the same for appropriate farm equipment for alternative forms of agriculture. Fairmondo¹⁹⁴ is a German based member owned, online marketplace aspiring to be a 'cooperative 2.0'. There are even a number of mutual aid networks¹⁹⁵ around the world that have been explicitly established to share resources and diffuse the risk inherent in pursuing entrepreneurial work. Many of these projects are featured by their founders in emerging conferences such as Ouishare¹⁹⁶, first held in Paris in 2012 or the Platform Cooperative Conference¹⁹⁷, the first of which was held in New York City in 2017. Websites such as Shareable¹⁹⁸ and the P2P Foundation¹⁹⁹ provide focal points to describe, catalogue and theorise these various initiatives around the world.

¹⁸⁹ <https://www.ethosvo.org/>

¹⁹⁰ <http://wikispeed.org/>

¹⁹¹ <https://wikihouse.cc/>

¹⁹² <https://www.latelierpaysan.org/>

¹⁹³ <http://farmhack.org/tools>

¹⁹⁴ <https://www.fairmondo.de/global>

¹⁹⁵ <http://www.mutualaidnetwork.org/>

¹⁹⁶ <https://www.ouishare.net/>

¹⁹⁷ <https://platform.coop/>

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.shareable.net/>

¹⁹⁹ <https://p2pfoundation.net/>

These projects are cited here to indicate the breadth of current experiments in alternative forms of organising commons based entrepreneurial work. Moreover, just like many of the examples we have seen from the Coworking world featured in this thesis, the projects above encompass many dimensions of life experience beyond the narrow domain of activities traditionally associated with work. No doubt closer ethnographic analyses of these communities would reveal some similar tensions germane to the processes of community organisation presented in this thesis. However, there are three notable features worth highlighting here because their deficiency or absence appeared to erode the ongoing motivations of members in the Coworking community featured here, and thus attending to them will likely affect the sustainability of such ventures in the future²⁰⁰.

Vision and purpose

The first is the prosecution and maintenance of a vision sufficiently distinct from the dominant mode of market capitalism in which the community based project is embedded. Many of the projects featured above explicitly hew to a mythology that orients the logic of collective action away from narrowly self-interested or transactional norms. The pioneers of Enspiral, Sensorica and Las Indias all have roots in the counter-hegemonic ideologies of the Alter-Globalisation and Occupy movements, and have subsequently embraced the models and mythologies of commons and peer-to-peer theorists such as Yochai Benkler and Michel Bauwens.

Practices and customs

Vision and purpose may be necessary but not sufficient for a resilient entrepreneurial community. Distinct practices instantiate the alternative cooperative logics that underpin commons based production. As we saw in [Chapter 6](#), practices support the

²⁰⁰ It should be noted that sustainability may not necessarily be a goal of entrepreneurial communities, perhaps in some cases the emergent, transient nature of connections is the most appropriate form for them to take. Furthermore, even healthy communities, like all other phenomena, will have a natural 'lifespan'.

socialisation of newcomers into a community, and enable them to learn what is appropriate or expected. They are also fundamental to maintain the support of commons-based sharing within broader cultural environments that are often hostile to this logic. Strong practices distributed among the community guard against forms of free-riding that may erode motivations for commons-based participation. Whilst the practices documented in this thesis were never made explicit (and in fact only formally documented and organised as part of this thesis), some communities codify their implicit practices as 'explicit customs' through handbooks and guides. Codifying practices as customs can serve a function of reinforcing the logic of practices or helping scale the reach of these communities. There can however, be a danger in doing this. Given that a strong part of the logic that animates community life is the *participative*, improvised nature of social interactions, codifications can also amplify the negative dimensions of 'reification' (Wenger 1998). Reification, or the process of making abstractions concrete, is a necessary part of community life, but it can also congeal the previously spontaneous participation around a fixed set of rules or procedures that obstruct the innovative capacity of a group and the responsive evolution of collective norms²⁰¹.

²⁰¹ Whilst it was not deemed necessary to highlight this theoretical aspect in this thesis, the duality of participation and reification is a core part of Wenger's (1998) presentation of communities of practice theory. Wenger considers reification a 'double-edged sword' - developing a shared set of symbols are necessary for communities to cohere but such efforts can easily erode the organic 'aliveness' of community participation.

Wenger on participation:

'Participation in this sense is both personal and social. It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging...in this experience of mutuality, participation is a source of identity. By recognizing the mutuality of our participation, we become part of each other...a defining characteristic of participation is the possibility of developing an "identity of participation," that is, an identity.'

(Wenger 1998:56)

Wenger on reification:

Reification is 'the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into "thingness" (Wenger 1998: 58).

Accounting and governance

The most distinguishing feature of these enduring entrepreneurial commons-based communities however lies in the various systems of 'contributory accounting' and 'community governance' that acknowledge a variety of value creating inputs from community members and offer avenues to shape decisions that will affect the collective. This ethnography proposes that the absence or weakness of these systems were central to the movement away from commons-based production. This third feature does however present a bold design challenge for the future. What makes entrepreneurial communities both effective and attractive is the (relatively) 'permissionless' acts of creation and pursuit of opportunities. This is the core feature that distinguishes the open source projects celebrated by the network-information commons theorists from other forms of organising work through firms or markets. Anyone with an internet connection can edit a wikipedia page or fork code in Linux, but these changes will only be considered by following the software-encoded rules, and the community enforced norms. For example, in the case of Wikipedia, if new changes on an article do not follow the injunctions on encyclopaedic writing and evidence-linked claims they will likely be rejected by another Wikipedian. It is this open, permissionless boundary of participation coupled with clear protocols for organising quality work that is the most compelling feature of these commons-based systems. But Wikipedia and Linux are clearly donation based projects, the labour of their creation is largely indirectly subsidised through the employment arrangements

'The power of reification - its succinctness, its portability, its potential physical persistence, its focusing effect – is also its danger. The politician's slogan can become a substitute for a deep understanding of and commitment to what it stands for. The tool can ossify activity around its inertness. Procedures can hide broader meanings in blind sequences of operations. And the knowledge of a formula can lead to the illusion that one fully understands the processes it describes.'

(Wenger 1998:61).

of the volunteer workers²⁰². For communities that form around a mythology of aligning meaningful work with livelihood sustaining income, these questions of income and investment become much more important features of the system.

Contributory accounting systems aim to maintain the permissionless, self-directed forms of participation with methods that convert the range of immaterial contributions into 'equity', or a stake in the end product or service into which that labour is directed, where the ownership, control and benefit of the labour is compensated, or at least not appropriated (Birchall 2012). Entrepreneurship is a highly asymmetrical arena, most startups fail, a small number turn a profit, and a tiny amount become extraordinarily successful or profitable. *Contributory accounting systems* aim to diffuse both the financial benefits of success and risks of failure across a larger number of actors. Beyond equity in products or services, *community governance systems* provide avenues to dynamically steer decisions that might erode the trust-based participation necessary for community orientated logics to endure. Of the projects cited above, Sensorica has the most explicit contributory accounting system as part of their open value network and Enspiral²⁰³ and Fairshares²⁰⁴ have crafted comprehensive, if elaborate, multi-stakeholder governance models that aims to address these imbalances.

Emerging technology, decentralised accounting and governance

²⁰² For example, many open source software programmers are employed (and highly employable) in the private sector as software engineers. Many Wikipedians are employed as academics in Universities.

²⁰³ Enspiral has developed a digital decision making tool, Loomio, that helps community members create proposals and capture community sentiment on decisions that will affect their future.

²⁰⁴ Fairshares promotes a model of multi-stakeholder governance that includes both the usual founders, workers and investors but also workers and users which have differential voting rights to steward the direction of the enterprise.

Ostrom's work demonstrated how traditional communities manage common resources through tailored governance arrangements that can serve to maintain both the natural resources and the legitimacy of community management²⁰⁵ (Ostrom 1990). These methods work appropriately for the *gemeinschaft*-like contexts in which strong norms and ties, or dense and enduring social networks, mean the social consequences of reputation loss can be severe. But reliance alone on social memory and trust-bound reciprocal norms is a challenge for both communities of mobile entrepreneurial knowledge workers, and organising commons-based projects at scale. These two dynamics tend to push decentralised, community orientated modes of organising towards centralised, hierarchically or market orientated accounting and resource allocation systems which are often less aligned with community preferences, and as I have argued in this thesis, often less optimal for managing the uncertainties of entrepreneurial work and the needs of contemporary knowledge workers.

This problem is one of the reasons there has been so much interest in 'distributed ledger technologies' such as blockchains in recent years (De Filippi, 2015). By combining cryptography, distributed ledgers and smart contracts, these technologies enable the creation of real 'digital assets' (often called tokens) that can be created and distributed when new projects are created. By creating and distributing digital tokens, entrepreneurs can attenuate the resource challenges that accompany nascent ventures by rewarding early contributors towards an idea and early adopters of prototypes. If projects are successful, and the functionality of tokens are useful or

²⁰⁵ The eight core commons design principles identified by Ostrom include:

1. Clearly defined boundaries which defines who has access.
2. Appropriation and provisioning rules tailored to local conditions.
3. Collective choice arrangements that allow resource appropriators to participate in decision-making.
4. Effective monitoring and accountability to appropriators.
5. Graduated sanctions for resource appropriators who violate operational community rules.
6. Conflict resolution mechanisms that are cheap and rapidly accessed.
7. Self determination of the community and recognition by higher-level authorities.
8. Larger common pool resource systems are organised in the form of nested enterprises of multiple levels with smaller ones at a local base level.

their prices rise, these early contributors are rewarded. If not, minimal funds are lost in the process. Through such socio-technical developments, entrepreneurial communities might be able to better distribute both the risks and rewards tied to the uncertainty of entrepreneurial work.

There is already an emerging set of technical infrastructure that may enable this problem to be better solved in the future. For example, Collective One²⁰⁶, is a platform designed to support the development of open, decentralised and collaborative initiatives to which anyone can, potentially, contribute and which are collectively owned and self-governed by their contributors. This is a promising direction for future practice and research, nevertheless, it is acknowledged that at the current time of writing many of these promises are still largely unrealised and much activity within the 'blockchain industry' has been dominated by speculative capital.

8.6 Limitations and directions for future research

This thesis has offered an ethnographic account of the motivations, practices and changing experiences of a pioneering group of Coworkers. The findings highlight the challenges inherent in organising entrepreneurial knowledge work as a *community*, especially developing appropriate governance arrangements that sustain and replenish the *immaterial commons* that constitute the core shared resources. Ethnographies, by definition, generate insights interpreted from empirical material gathered within bounded temporal and geographical space. The theoretical insights might be transferable to other contexts, but the validity of such claims are seldom inherently generalisable (Charmaz 2014)²⁰⁷. This section acknowledges that the

²⁰⁶ www.collectiveone.org

²⁰⁷ This tension between the methods of validity and generalisability developed through the quantitative procedures of natural sciences and the alternative methods of 'quality' and 'transferability' are a contested space of ongoing scholarly debate, but need not be

pioneering ‘micro-culture’ of the Coworking community featured here was itself incubating within the wider urban culture of Melbourne and national culture of Australia. Australia is an extremely prosperous country, with a generous social safety net, and has experienced unusually sustained economic growth over the past thirty years, with only minimal impacts from the 2008 financial crisis that affected many similar economies (Battellino 2010; Wilkins 2017)²⁰⁸. The state of Victoria, and the city of Melbourne consistently vote for more progressive political actors than the rest of Australia (Alcorn 2013). Alongside this relatively progressive political orientation, inner Melbourne has been acknowledged as a focal point for artistic, cultural and ‘bohemian’ activities (Dovey et al. 2009; Boston Consulting Group 2017). Interest in social enterprise is more prevalent in Melbourne and Victoria than most other parts of Australia (Barraket et al. 2016). Melbourne was the pioneering location of a School for Social Entrepreneurs²⁰⁹, which was actually based in one of the Coworking spaces in this study. The Difference Incubator, another social enterprise incubator was also located in the same building as one Coworking space²¹⁰. Small Giants²¹¹, the impact investment firm that brought B Corp certification to Australia is from Melbourne and was an early investor in Melbourne’s Coworking ecosystem; and

elaborated on here. The reference here relates to Charmaz’s commodious conception of theory:

‘An elegant parsimonious theory may offer clear propositions but have limited scope. An imaginative defuse theory may spark bursts of insight but offer interpretative frames with porous borders.’

(Charmaz 2014:160).

²⁰⁸ Whilst Australia has experienced remarkably sustained economic growth from the early 1990s and weathered the Global Financial Crisis better than most advanced economies, the past ten years has seen less favourable conditions for income growth, cost of living and housing prices, the combined weight of which has particular fallen on younger generations and those that entered the employment market during this time (Wilkins 2017).

²⁰⁹ The School for Social Entrepreneurs (<https://www.the-sse.org/>) first originated in Scotland, but a opened a number of other locations including Melbourne and later Sydney for a number of years. After operating for seven years the Australian operation closed in 2016, but continues in the UK, Canada and India.

²¹⁰ The Difference Incubator (<http://tdi.org.au/>)

²¹¹ Small Giants (<http://www.smallgiants.com.au/>)

there is even a loosely organised 'commons coalition transition' made up of a number of pioneering Coworkers.

There is little doubt that these variables all colour the backdrop in which this particular Coworking story unfolded throughout the course of the field research. Nevertheless, the core theoretical claim here, that entrepreneurial communities can craft distinct social practices that produce immaterial commons that call for community orientated governance practices, is a transferable proposition amenable to testing and refinement in other contexts.

The findings of this thesis point to future research in two distinct directions. The first is towards research that continues to focus on the phenomenon of Coworking itself; the second to research organised around the construct of entrepreneurial communities and immaterial commons.

Future research on Coworking spaces

First, the Coworking (and wider serviced office) industry has changed remarkably during the period of this thesis and will no doubt continue to evolve in the future. Unfolding trends across demographic, economic, technological, regulatory and competition frontiers will continue to disrupt and remix the intersection of desirability, feasibility and viability in how we provision access to flexible space for a range of work, social and community activities. The early years of academic research on Coworking spaces have naturally been focused on generating new, or matching existing, theories that purport to explain the phenomenon and (sometimes) predict dependencies from independent variables. Contemporary Coworking researchers should now be sufficiently equipped to compare and test these competing theories for the best explanatory and predictive fit in order to advance our understanding of the complex phenomenon. Many of the questions for example posed in the working paper 'Coworking: a transdisciplinary overview' (Waters-Lynch et al. 2015) have still been insufficiently addressed through rigorous analysis, particularly quantitative

research. Urban policy-makers will still need to grapple with the most appropriate, welfare maximising, policy responses to the rise of Coworking spaces. Coworking space entrepreneurs still need to choose between design decisions that will set path dependencies for the evolution of their enterprises. Coworkers themselves still need to assess their options, to better understand the evidence that accords with the benefits advertised by Coworking industry actors. As this thesis, and the burgeoning descriptive literature attest, Coworking is not a single thing - there are range of diverse possibilities, practices and arrangements organised under the rubric of this term. Scholarly work on Coworking has now sufficiently matured where we can move beyond descriptive and theory generating accounts to begin testing competing theories with more precision. Future research can help shape better decisions for different Coworking stakeholders by now focusing on more precise questions such as²¹²:

- What kind of Coworking arrangements actually increase productivity or competitive advantage?
- What kind of Coworking arrangements increase creativity or innovation?
- What kind of Coworking arrangements create new jobs or attract talent towards a region?
- What kinds of Coworking arrangements promote urban socio-geographic mobility rather than reify disadvantage?
- When and where does Coworking encourage localised, polycentric economic activity beyond the inner urban core?
- What is the relationship (and optimal distance) between Coworking spaces and urban amenities such as public transport?
- How is Coworking affecting other markets - real estate, labour, education?

²¹² The theory areas underpinning these questions are mapped out in (Waters-Lynch et al. 2015).

- What Coworking arrangements cultivate bridging versus bonding social capital?
- Which Coworking arrangements improve wellbeing for the solo self-employed?

Future research on entrepreneurial communities and immaterial commons

The second direction of research relates more directly to the concepts of entrepreneurial communities and immaterial commons. As these concepts are both nascent and more theoretical than empirical, future research should better define what is distinct about *entrepreneurial communities* from other, ostensibly congruent or similar appearing groups. In this chapter I have proposed three features considered important in enabling entrepreneurial communities to maintain and replenish an immaterial commons - a distinguishing 'vision and purpose', set of 'practices and customs' and 'mechanisms for accounting and governance'. These offer a starting point for transferability to test and refine in other contexts. Perhaps future research will find less features are necessary, perhaps more. Moreover there is much scope to investigate how emerging decentralised accounting and governance technology can enable or disable community orientated institutional logics. For example, perhaps blockchain based decentralised autonomous organisations will cultivate new forms of social solidarity amid the apparent widespread crisis of trust and legitimacy of institutions; alternatively perhaps translating the social, gift-like exchanges into quantifiable tokens will invoke a market pricing institutional logic that erodes organic community solidarity? Whilst we can draw on different theoretical traditions to support either side of this argument, these are empirical questions that should be explored across a wide range of cases.

This thesis has sought to contribute to both of these research projects, even if these contributions must remain partial. Empirically it has offered a detailed account of

Coworking motivations, practices and changing experiences that can be segmented into testable propositions for future investigations. Theoretically, it has brought together the concept of *entrepreneurial communities* with *immaterial commons*, and highlighted the challenges in *governing* these arrangements such that they may renew their promise and endure over time.

Ultimately, this thesis finds that even amid the most turbulent and seemingly transient experiences of contemporary knowledge work, the presence of community still lingers, not only as a nostalgic remnant from the past, but as a vivid vehicle for creating and managing resources vital for contemporary life projects and working futures. As scholars, perhaps it is time to move beyond *Gemeinschafts* or *Gesellschafts*, and reconstruct the concept of community, not as an anachronistic longing for a pre-industrial past, or as a waning concept within the pangs of industrial modernity, but as an evolving phenomenon searching for a niche within a post-industrial future. With the right focus, we might discover more of its seedlings hiding in plain sight, and its apparent 'liquid' present state not a sign of senescence, but a melting down within the chrysalis of its future transformation.

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