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Published

2015

Journal Title

Employment Relations Record

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

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NEITHER OFFICE NOR HOME: COWORKING AS AN EMERGING WORKPLACE CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines, reviews and provides insights from a recent research project that focuses on a range of new and related work practices that have been dubbed 'coworking', a rapidly emerging workplace phenomenon characterised by open-space work environments that lie between working from home and working in a traditional office environment. It analyses the factors that are driving the increasing use of coworking centres and seeks to better classify the often eclectic range of organisations that presently operate under the coworking moniker. While much of the coworker research to date has focused on links between collaboration, innovation and entrepreneurship between unaffiliated 'free-lance' coworkers, this paper further considers how public and private sector organisations are using the services of coworking centres as an alternative to home-based telework. This research suggests that coworking centres are occupying an increasingly important niche area as an alternative workplace of choice for an emerging new cohort of workers and are therefore a highly relevant area of research in relation to the future of work in an era of deregulated labour markets, telework and rapid technological change.

Key words: coworking; coworkers; telework; workplace collaboration; innovation; entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

Coworking is a rapidly emerging workplace phenomenon characterised by open-space work environments that lie between working from home and working in a traditional office environment. Supported by cloud-based information and communication technology (ICT) tools and practices, coworking arrangements are further linked to technologically-mediated work practices (Andrade, Ares, Suarez & Giret 2013; Ross & Blumenstein 2013, 2014). Coworking centres therefore include both technical and social aspects. Australian public sector organisations have further begun to trial the use of regionally based coworking centres by their staff, as an alternative to more

traditional working from home teleworking arrangements (Cameron 2012; Forbes 2014).

Despite its growing popularity (Deskmag 2013) and potential impacts on employment practices, coworking has only recently begun to attract any serious academic study. This preliminary study reviews the emerging literature and associated research on coworking centres and practices and seeks to further develop some of these nascent theories in order to better analyse these emerging alternative workplace practices. The purpose of this paper is to explore why people use coworking centres, as opposed to either working from home or in more traditional office environments, and what kinds of workers use coworking centres. The paper also considers what is the relationship, if any, between coworking, innovation and entrepreneurship and seeks to define and classify the multitude of often eclectic establishments that to date have been loosely ascribed the coworking moniker. It considers how a range of differing coworking models may influence emerging work and employment practices, as well as considering possible directions for future theoretical development in this area.

METHODOLOGY

This preliminary study is supported by qualitative research conducted by the authors on coworking centres in 2014. This included interviews with 22 owners, managers and users of 19 coworking centres in South-East Queensland and Vancouver. A focus group session was also conducted with 10 members of a Brisbane-based coworking centre. Interviews were further conducted with eight participants who were linked to coworking centre issues including representatives of regional governments and industry in South-East Queensland. Please note that while this primary research provided some general background support for the following discussion (and helped to 'inform' the literature), this paper focuses on a review and analysis of the current extant literature as outlined above. Therefore further specific background details of the co-authors' research on this topic are not included in this paper, as this data will be further analysed and published at a later date.

BACKGROUND

Coworking

The rapid growth in coworking centres around the world has been reflected in terms such as the 'coworking phenomenon' or 'coworking movement' (DeGuzman & Tang 2011; Uda 2013). Between 2012 and 2013 the number of coworking centres worldwide increased by more than 80 per cent, while the number of people using coworking centres more than doubled during this time

(Deskmag 2103). By early 2013, more than 110,000 people worked in nearly 2,500 coworking spaces worldwide, with the rapid uptake in the use of coworking centres forecast to continue (Deskmag 2013). What then do we mean by coworking and what factors are attracting people to work in coworking centres?

As outlined in Figure 1, coworking lies between working from home and working in a traditional office environment. The former has often been linked to teleworking, defined as ‘working outside the conventional workplace and communicating with it by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology’ (Bailey & Kurland 2002, p. 384). The potential benefits of teleworking for business include increased productivity levels, reduced commuting times and costs (and associated reduced employee stress), a wider pool of potential skilled employees and improved employee job satisfaction linked to a better work/life balance (Bosua, Gloet, Kurina, Mendoza & Yong 2013; DOC 2013). A Bell Atlantic study, for example, suggested that 25 hours working from home was equivalent to 40 hours working in the office (DOC 2013). Telework has further been touted as a potential strategy to reduce air pollution and traffic congestion (Bailey & Kurland 2002, p. 384). Such arguments supported the Australian Federal Government’s stated aim to increase the number of its ‘out-of-office’ employees from six per cent to 12 per cent between 2012 and 2020 (Moses 2013).

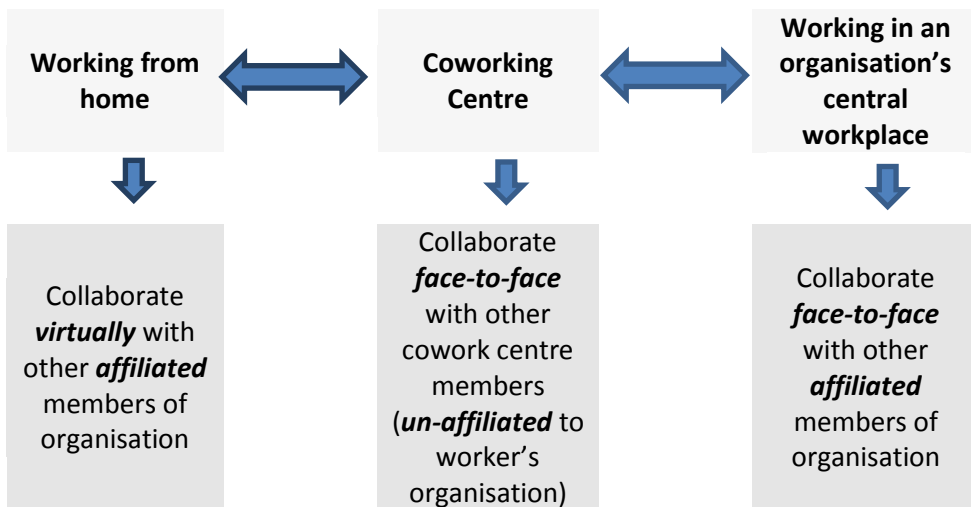


Figure 1

However, while a growing body of literature has developed around teleworking (Bailey & Kurland 2002; Bosua et al. 2012, 2013; De Jong & Mante-

Meijer 2008; Ellison 2004; Wellman et al. 1996) the coworking centre concept remains an emerging area of research.

Uda (2013, p. 3) defines coworking as 'a way of working in which individuals gather in a place to create value, while sharing information and wisdom by means of communication and cooperating under the conditions of their choices'. Therefore, to a large extent coworkers may choose when, where and how they work. The physical proximity afforded by the coworking centre further allows face-to-face interaction amongst the coworking centre members, similar to the 'water cooler' effect found in traditional offices. As outlined above, coworking centres further combine technologically mediated and face-to-face communication (Goebbels & Lalioti 2001). The former includes collaborative virtual environments (CVEs) that allow coworkers to 'share a common virtual space' and interact with the external environment (Andrade et al. 2013; Goebbels & Lalioti 2001). Hellman uses the term 'virtual adjacency' to describe these ICT-supported workplace changes (Melissaratos & Slabbert 2010, pp. 204-217).

Research suggests that the above attributes have made coworking centres popular among mobile professionals, who pay a regular desk rental fee and work alongside other *unaffiliated* professional workers (Spinuzzi 2012, p. 399; Uda 2013). Access to high speed broadband is normally an inclusive part of the desk rental fee. Relatively cheap up-front costs and access to high speed broadband then make coworking centres an attractive alternative to renting traditional office space, particularly for start-up firms and self-employed workers (Ross & Blumenstein 2013). Further, the proliferation of ICTs and worker mobility has created opportunities for individuals to come together, providing 'opportunities for informal and serendipitous communication' (Liegl 2014, pp. 165-166). Coworking centres such as Indy Hall in Philadelphia, founded by Alex Hillman in 2006, further personify the growth of the 'coworking community' as a place where 'hip' free-lance creative workers gather and share knowledge (DeGuzman & Tang 2011; Schuermann 2014). Creatives, creative freelancers and entrepreneurs actively seek out 'the right [coworking] place' to foster innovation, stimulation, inspiration and innovative practices, as well as one that provides a lively social and open cultural environment in which to work and collaborate (Capdevila 2014, 2013; Liegl, 2014, p. 169; Moriset 2013). The 'Network Hub', located in Vancouver, typifies this approach by defining coworking as follows:

Coworking is redefining the way we do work.

Inspired by the participatory culture of the open source movement and the empowering nature of it, we are building a more sustainable future.

We are a group of connected individuals and small businesses creating an economy of innovation and creativity in our communities and worldwide.

We envision a new economic engine composed of collaboration and community.

WORK FOR YOURSELF, NOT BY YOURSELF! (The Network Hub, New Westminster, Vancouver)

Despite the above coworking hype, Land, Otto, Böhm and Johansson (2012) take a somewhat less benign view of the increasing use of coworking facilities by workers in creative industries by suggesting that coworking can be simply seen as a logical extension of neo-liberal labour market deregulation. Within this environment, the so-called 'freedom' afforded by coworking centres comes at the cost of insecure work, linked to short-term projects and contracts (Land et al. 2012). Further, because coworkers operate on a freelance or self-employed basis, they also pay the costs of production for the creative good or service. This in turn enables companies to 'secure cheap creative labour through the market rather than an employment contract' (Land et al. 2012, p.47). Creative work is therefore often 'precarious work'! (Land et al. 2012). Feedback from coworkers who were interviewed during the course of this research provided some support for this argument, with those working in creative industries, such as film and animation, advising that there were very few full-time jobs in these industry sectors in regions such as South-East Queensland. However, the same interviewees were also mostly positive about the coworking lifestyle, including their ability to collaborate with other centre workers.

Capdevila (2013) suggests a role for governments in supporting the creation of coworking centres because of their potential to support collaborative and innovative work practices that may in turn generate and support local economic development. In this regard, the Dutch government pioneered the development of publically supported coworking environments, dubbed 'smart work centres' (SWCs) (Bomhof & van Hoorik 2009). This research further found that some Australian regional governments similarly were taking an active role in encouraging and supporting the creation of coworking centres in order to foster regional economic development. These initiatives were generally predicated on two strategies. First, coworking centres were seen as a potential way to reduce the number of locally-based people, especially skilled and professional workers, who were commuting to adjacent larger urban areas for work. This nurtured local communities and businesses, along with keeping day-to-day spending within the region. Second, these strategies aimed to foster locally based entrepreneurship, including the development of

knowledge intensive industries via information and communication technology (ICT) focused coworking centres. Ross and Blumenstein (2013) similarly linked ICT focused coworking centres, such as ICT-incubators, to entrepreneurship and 'born global firms'. The following section further explores these claimed links between coworking, collaboration and creativity.

Coworking, collaboration and creativity

Spinuzzi (2012, p.402) suggests that the social interaction afforded by coworking centres between *unaffiliated* coworkers provides further opportunities for collaboration and innovation than can be achieved when working from either a home or traditional office environment. Coworking proponents suggest that the subsequent 'cross pollination' of ideas among an eclectic group of coworking members then supports innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship (Hyde 2003; Merat & Bo 2013; Stumpf 2013). These claims are supported by research that was conducted on coworking centres operating across 10 countries, which found that the shared spatial settings offered by coworking spaces stimulated creativity through the creation of valuable contacts allied to a culture of open knowledge exchange (Stumpf 2013). Similar links between open knowledge dissemination and innovation are found in the knowledge management literature (Anand & Singh 2011, p. 933; Nissen 2002; Nonaka 1994, 1995).

Parrino (2013) also investigates how physical proximity amongst coworkers may in turn build relational proximity that leads to increased knowledge exchange. He suggests that such knowledge transfers have been particularly important in technology clusters (Parrino 2013, p. 2). Capdevila (2013) further builds on this premise by suggesting that coworking centres may act as *micro-clusters*, with the potential to generate similar knowledge dynamics to those found in large industrial clusters, such as Silicon Valley (see Hyde 2003), albeit on a smaller scale (Capdevila 2013).

However, there are some important caveats here, as not all coworking centres are going to automatically support cooperation and collaboration amongst their members. Rather, research shows that some coworking centres exhibit little or no such collaboration (Parrino 2013; Spinuzzi 2012). This is in part because the term 'coworking centre' has been used to cover a broad and eclectic group of organisations to date, ranging from community spaces, such as local libraries, to large professionally run dedicated coworking spaces. Further, many co-centre users have differing needs and expectations.

Table 1 outlines some of the differing roles and characteristics of coworking centres uncovered during the course of this research. It shows that these

centres may play quite opposing roles, with associated different characteristics that attract different users.

Table 1: Differing coworking centre characteristics

Characteristics		Characteristics
Short-term membership Characterised by short term day to day, or week to week membership	<i>versus</i>	Long-term membership Characterised by longer term lease arrangements.
Community workspaces eg library, community centre	<i>versus</i>	Professionally and/or privately run centres
Hybrid space/mixed use building may concurrently offer desk rental, studio/small office rental, event space, coffee shop etc.	<i>versus</i>	Dedicated coworking space only
Non-collaborative environment centre functions as an alternative to a traditional office space	<i>versus</i>	Creative collaborative group environment eg ICT incubator
Heterogeneous centre members Members have a diverse/eclectic background.	<i>versus</i>	Homogeneous centre members Members have a similar background.

Interestingly, anecdotal feedback and observations from this research supports the work of Parrino (2012), who suggested that knowledge transfer amongst coworkers doesn't generally just happen organically. Rather, the level of knowledge transfer depends on the role and focus of the coworking centre, along with the existence or otherwise of organisational policies that actively promote interaction amongst the coworking centre members (Parrino 2012). Such policies may include the layout of the centre and organised social and/or other regular group activities. Larger coworking centres also often operate their own internal ICT supported collaborative software. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that successful collaborative type coworking centres also require a local centre 'champion' or manager to foster and promote collegiality amongst otherwise unaffiliated coworkers.

Spinuzzi (2012) analyses the distinction between non-collaborative and collaborative coworking centres under the guise of activity theory. He terms the former model as ‘good neighbours’ and the latter as ‘good partners’ (see Figure 2). The ‘good neighbours’ coworking centre model simply operates as an alternative to a traditional office space and focuses on sustaining ‘neighbourly’ relationships that support everyone’s parallel work (Spinuzzi 2012). While a certain amount of social interaction is required to ensure a harmonious shared office space, centre members under this model essentially perform their own individual work, which is unrelated to other activities in the centre.

The ‘good partners’ model in contrast focuses on team collaboration within a ‘federated work space’ (Spinuzzi 2012). This approach is often found in ICT focused coworking centres, particularly those using open source software. However these coworking relationships will often be transient in nature as one project finishes and another begins, leading to a realignment of different teams within the centre (Andrade et al. 2013; Spinuzzi 2012). The coworking centre then becomes a nexus of transient teams. Intuitively it could be expected that the ‘good neighbours’ model would be more likely to be associated with a heterogeneous group of coworkers, while the ‘good partners’ model would be comprised of a more homogeneous community (and/or be linked in some way). However, cooperation between heterogeneous members is still possible. Professional workers such as accountants and solicitors, for example, are still able to provide financial and legal advice to otherwise unrelated coworking centre members.

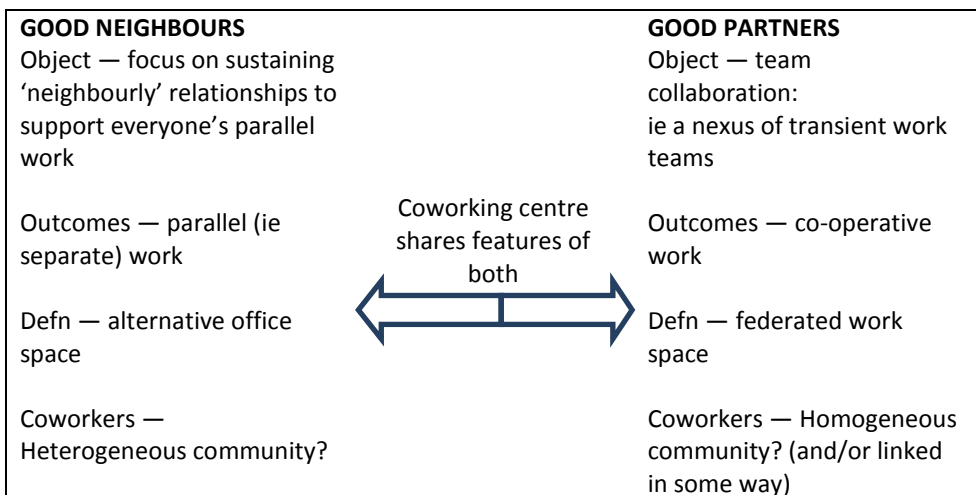


Figure 2: Good Neighbours versus Good Partners

Source: developed from Spinuzzi (2012)

The transient nature of many coworking centre users also means that the internal dynamics of these centres are not static but rather subject to change, as their membership changes. Research also suggests that ‘like tends to attract like’ (DeArmond & Crawford 2011), with anecdotal evidence suggesting that some coworking centres become more homogeneous over time. Therefore a ‘good neighbours’ model may morph into a ‘good partners’ model or, alternatively, the loss of a manager or coworker ‘champion’ may see a ‘good partners’ model shift towards a ‘good neighbours’ model. Many coworking centres are also likely to exhibit elements of both approaches.

Coworking and telework

In contrast to the independent free-lance coworker typology outlined above, some larger organisations, including the public sector, have begun to examine the benefits of using regionally based coworking centres as an alternative to allowing their employees to telework from home (Cameron 2012; Forbes 2014). Coworking centres offer a number of potential advantages in this regard. To begin, coworking centres negate the need for workers to invest in home-based offices. They further assist in overcoming the twin challenges of home-based teleworkers being either too distracted by home domestic life and/or feeling that they are never away from their work (Land et al. 2012). These findings were supported by this research which found that some coworkers deliberately left their computers behind at their coworking centres when they finished work in order to better separate their work and private life and therefore create a better work-life balance (also see Kjaerulff 2010).

Coworking centres also supply the social interaction that is lacking in a home environment and thus help to prevent workers from becoming socially isolated (Bailey & Kurland 2002; Bosua et al. 2012, 2013). Further, some of the productivity benefits extolled by proponents of home-based telework are linked to reductions in interruptions from fellow workers (Bosua et al. 2012; Hunton 2005). However, Bailey and Kurland (2002, p. 393) suggest that such interruptions may in fact “constitute much needed opportunities for spurring creativity and knowledge transfer”. Therefore, while teleworking from home may boost short-term individual productivity, reducing the number of interruptions from fellow workers may in fact have negative long-term consequences for organisations in terms of knowledge dynamics across the firm (Bailey & Kurland 2002, p.393). This may be more pronounced in knowledge intensive industries that require creativity and knowledge transfer. Coworking centres in contrast allow for interactivity among coworking members as outlined above.

Despite this interactivity, the introduction of telework impacts on our coworking centre model outlined in Figure 1. This model reflects much of the literature that suggests that coworkers are generally an eclectic mix of *unaffiliated* workers, which in turn supports collaboration and innovation, as outlined above. The introduction of cohorts of teleworkers from specific organisations, however, changes these group dynamics as it creates a potential mix of *affiliated* and *unaffiliated* workers across the coworking centre. This in turn raises questions about the interactivity and collaboration that may or may not occur within and between these different worker groups. While a full discussion of the possible outcomes of these affiliated/unaffiliated group dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper, the potential impact of telework on the coworker model provides areas for possible future research.

Coworking centres further have the potential to better address the legal responsibilities of firms in relation to telework and workplace health and safety (WH&S) concerns. In 2011, Australia's largest telco, Telstra, was found liable for the injuries of one of their employees, who had slipped down the stairs while wearing socks and no footwear when working from home. The telco was subsequently ordered to pay substantial compensation to the employee for medical expenses and lost income (Carruthers 2011). Coworking centres in contrast can be better vetted by organisations in regards to WH&S issues and public liability insurance (Cameron 2012).

Research further suggests that the potential for more widespread teleworking arrangements between organisations and their workers is limited by the issue of trust (Bailey & Kurland 2002; Bosua et al. 2012; Harrington & Ruppel, 1999; Peters, den Dulk & Ruijter 2010). Despite the plethora of modern ICT tools that can allow employers to monitor their employees' behaviour, many Australian firms still appear reluctant to trust their workers to perform adequately from home (Sweeney Research 2004). Anecdotal evidence collected during this research, in contrast, suggested that firms were happier to employ workers via telework arrangements at coworking centres, rather than from home, as they were more akin to an employee attending a 'normal workplace'. This research also suggests that Australian firms based in larger metropolitan areas are increasingly engaging the services of professional workers who live in Australian regional areas, who then perform work for the firm via a local regionally based coworking centre (Ross & Blumenstein 2013).

Table 2: Coworking stakeholders

Independent/ self-employed workers	Creative/ knowledge industry sector	Public and private sector organisations	Regional governments
Alternative to conventional office	Ability to collaborate/share knowledge	Alternative to offering teleworking arrangements from home	Promotes regional economic development

CONCLUSION

This paper examined current research on coworking and sought to analyse and further develop some of these emerging theoretical coworking concepts. The paper explored the multi-faceted nature of coworking and sought to better classify and define these different organisations. As such, this research found no specific answers to our original research question, as to why people cowork and use coworking centres. Rather, our investigation revealed that people cowork for a broad range of reasons, including its relative cheapness, rental flexibility, the nature of their precarious work, the need for social interaction, the ability to engage in project work collaboration and a better separation of work and home life. Coworking centres were therefore found to exhibit different and sometimes opposing characteristics that fulfilled these divergent user needs (outlined in Table 1). The coworking classifications and frameworks outlined and discussed in this paper therefore will hopefully allow future research into this area to better focus on more specific coworking aspects, rather than be overwhelmed by the broad and sometimes contradictory nature of coworking in general (Spinuzzi 2012).

Much of the coworking literature to date has focused on the potential positive externalities which could be gained from collaboration between independent (or interdependent) coworkers, particularly in the creative or knowledge-intensive industry sectors. However, this research showed that such collaborative behaviour is by no means an automatic function of a coworking centre. Rather, it is predicated on the type and role of the coworking centre, and the expectations and needs of its members. Simply putting people together in an open office space, therefore, did not guarantee collaboration between its coworker members. However, coworking centres could set up the foundation for collaborative activities if the process were allied to organisational policies that actively supported interactivity amongst the coworking centre members.

This research further identified and analysed some new emerging coworking stakeholders (see Table 2), including public and private sector organisations,

which are using coworking centres as alternatives to home-based telework. The introduction of cohorts of *affiliated* teleworkers then has the potential to change group dynamics in relation to how they interact with other *affiliated* and *unaffiliated* coworkers at the centre. Regional governments are another emerging coworking stakeholder through their support of local regionally-based coworking centres, which were seen as a way to promote regional economic development (see Table 2). This research found some evidence to support the premise that coworking may support innovation, entrepreneurship and economic development. However these linkages appeared more pronounced in knowledge intensive coworking centres such as ICT incubators and start-ups.

What then is the future for coworking? This research suggests a number of possible future directions and scenarios. To begin, the rapid increase in coworking arrangements, as Land et al. (2012) suggest, may simply reflect deregulated labour and product markets that have shifted workers towards more atypical and precarious work, including subcontractor and self-employment type arrangements. Alternatively, coworking centres may occupy an increasingly important, albeit 'niche sector', that suits particular types of workers, entrepreneurs and sectors, such the ICT and 'creative' industry sectors. Further, regional governments may further exploit these micro-clusters and bolster local economic development. Finally, coworking centres may provide viable long-term alternatives to either working from home or head office, resulting in cities that are punctuated by a series of places to work (Dixon & Ross 2011).

While each of these scenarios could provide possible areas of focus for further research into this topic, there are some caveats here. Despite the rapid growth in the number of coworking centres across Australia, research suggests that they are unlikely to lead to the widespread decentralisation of the workforce in the short- to medium-term, as this would require significant changes to workplace cultures and attitudes. Further, given the often low margins associated with operating coworking centres and their transient clientele, the rapid growth in the number of coworking centres is also likely to be accompanied by a period of rationalisation, as some coworking business models inevitably fail.

Nevertheless, this research shows that coworking centres are occupying an increasingly important niche area as a workplace of choice for an emerging new cohort of workers and are therefore a highly relevant area of research in relation to the future of work in an era of rapid technological change. The growth of these alternative workplaces further underlies how managing workforces in this changing context requires firms to increasingly manage

complex geographically diverse and technologically mediated workplace relationships, including in-house, self-employed, regionally-based and off-shore workers (Bryant 2003; Brunelle 2013; Ross & Blumenstein 2013). It further points to the need for more research into these changing workplace patterns.

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