

Why the co-working industry must take creativity seriously



The rapid, ongoing growth of the co-working industry reflects a broader transformation: over the past decade or so, work has not merely become increasingly flexible and entrepreneurial – it has also been reinvented as a commodity. Sold to people desiring autonomy, comfort and a cure to entrepreneurial loneliness (among other things), co-working providers are refashioning work as a *consumer experience* requiring open-plan offices, trendy rooftop terraces, on-site gyms, retro furniture and other eye-catching perks.

Co-working spaces are half-right to adopt this way of thinking: flexibility and choice are the reality, at least in global cities, for entrepreneurial individuals and teams who can now freely select from among hundreds of trendy workspaces. Mobile technologies, virtual (team) work and flexible co-working contracts mean that a sizeable segment of the workforce is now 'free to go, free to stay' when it comes to physical work environments and locations.

Unfortunately, only very few co-working spaces go beyond the gloss to attract and keep members by realising the full potential of their services. For instance, only a handful of the providers we have met have evolved a systematic, mindful approach to sparking creative interactions between their members.

Co-working providers' inability to provide substance is a serious problem because, with users becoming more discerning than before, operators who fail to think more deeply about value creation will rapidly lose their competitive edge. They will learn the hard way that most co-working users, instead of longing for creative facades or vague notions of 'community', actually seek environments that support creative progress.

Through a [brand-new report](#), we seek to launch a fresh conversation on precisely this topic. Distilling key lessons from world-leading peer-reviewed organisational research, we position the creative process as a focal point of intervention for collaborative spaces that want to generate more value for their users.

To inform and challenge co-working leaders, our report offers two sets of insights. First, we rethink the very notion of creativity by shifting from an individual-level focus to the concept of **creative idea journeys**. These are relatively structured trajectories through which emerging ideas evolve into increasingly well articulated, viable business models and projects. We show how abundant value can be created by co-working spaces when emerging ideas are going through the so-called elaboration stage. In this phase, novel ideas need to be 'nourished' by high-quality interactions with diverse others; it is through such shared moments of creativity that member journeys can be accelerated and enhanced.

In a mobile context where members can seek input through a wide range of networks beyond their main workspace, a crucial question to ask is: what value is *your* space generating along your members' creative journeys? Are you keeping track of this value? Are you tracing – and promoting – the kinds of interactions that matter the most to your members?

The second set of insights we offer in our report concern particular aspects of the creative process and **how to best catalyse creative idea journeys**. Here is a summary of three of these aspects:

- **Feedback-sharing.** Collaborative organisations can grow into genuine 'creative communities' not by getting everyone to collaborate (as this is plainly unrealistic), but through cultivating practices of *feedback-sharing* ([Hargadon and Bechky 2006](#)). The generous giving and the active seeking of feedback are not a 'nice to have': rather, feedback plays an absolutely essential role in creative journeys and especially at the elaboration stage. Do you have members who are unsure whether their value propositions should emphasise cost savings, sustainability or experiential value, or whether they should pursue traditional marketing approaches instead of, or alongside, guerrilla marketing tactics? If you do, such members should never be far from a conversation that can generate relevant answers, or that expand your members' perspectives.
- Collaborative spaces are affective spaces. Organisational creativity research has broadly established that *positive affect* lubricates problem-solving and idea generation activity ([Isen et al. 1987](#)). Maintaining a positive social atmosphere is therefore a good thing from the perspective of creativity; however, a broad-brush approach is not enough. This is because minority members (in the start-up world, this can include rather large groups such as women!) often feel that they are not given the same regard as others. This is detrimental when, as a result, value-adding conversations fail to take place. Indeed, a sense of respect and equality is a prerequisite for most types of creative exchanges. (This is precisely why [female-oriented co-working spaces](#) and networks are on the rise).
- Building on more critical research we argue that the role of physical space in catalysing creativity is often grossly overstated ([De Paoli et al. 2017](#)). Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as 'creative space' – what does exist is assemblages of physical, digital and social elements that combine to shape creative environments. The concept of 'social affordances' – that brings attention to these intertwined forms of shaping – can help co-working leaders to overcome binary thinking in this realm ([Fayard and Weeks 2007](#)). In general, leaders should perform a reality check by lowering their expectations vis-à-vis physical space and heightening their interest in experimenting with how new combinations of spatial, social and digital features can transform their member experience.

In order to successfully contribute to the creative journeys of their members, co-working leaders, managers as well as designers must therefore focus on promoting their members' creative journeys while continuing to learn more about their complex dynamics. Those who engage in serious thinking and discussion around these topics will develop a significant advantage as co-working markets edge ever closer to a saturation point.

* *Stay tuned for a forthcoming post on 'co-working failures and ways to fix them'. The authors welcome inquiries relating to consulting and research opportunities.*



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' report [The Creative Process in Co-working and Collaborative Work. London: Creative Friction, 2018](#).
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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