

New forms of employment

Coworking, Spain

Case study 52: Policy analysis

Coworking has witnessed rapid growth in Spain, particularly in Madrid and Barcelona. The Barcelona city council runs a coworking centre alongside its business incubator facility, and sees the two concepts as complementary

Introduction

Coworking in Spain has experienced rapid growth since 2010, propelling it to third place in the Global Coworking Census 2013 which ranks countries based on the number of coworking centres (deskmag, 2014). The two regions that have experienced the highest increases are Madrid and Barcelona. The growth experienced by coworking centres in Spain has triggered the development of initiatives to promote the exchange of experience and ideas among the managers of coworking centres, as well as among policymakers. In this vein, since 2011, the Annual Conference on Coworking in Spain has been bringing together coworking centre managers and participants and public administration representatives to discuss developments in this sector. The Spanish Association of Coworking Spaces (AECOWORKING) was created in 2013, as was the Spanish Coworking Association (Asociación Española de Coworking, AECW). The AECW supports coworking centres in Spain through the provision of a number of services, including legal, administrative and strategic support as well as advice, training, and the organisation of seminars and events (Asociacion Coworking, 2014).

While the popularity of coworking is rising across the globe, its remarkable growth in Spain has led some analysts and professionals to believe that Spain is currently experiencing a coworking bubble as there are doubts over the real demand for such a rapid increase in coworking spaces. While answering this question goes beyond the aim of this report, the case study of Utopic_US – a coworking centre with three physical locations and a virtual platform – provides interesting insights into general developments of coworking in Spain (Eurofound, 2015). First, it can be argued that one of the most important issues concerning coworking in Spain is not the quantity, but the quality of coworking spaces. Rapid proliferation of coworking centres since 2010 does not necessarily imply improvements in their quality or capacity, because many of the smaller centres offer a limited number of spaces. At the same time, it is important to note that smaller coworking centres have fewer possibilities to survive, since the fees paid by coworkers constitute their main source of income. Achieving a critical mass of coworkers/freelancers/companies is not only an important task from a purely financial point of view, but also because without it the coworking centres could not provide a rich environment for coworkers to share ideas.

The increase in the number of coworking centres and spaces and the vitality of the coworking movement in Spain has nonetheless occurred without a deliberate policy on coworking, or a development plan. There is still some debate about what should be the role of public administration as regards coworking. On the one hand, the most visible role of the public

administration so far has been to create public coworking centres that allow participation at lower fees compared with private centres. According to most managers of private coworking centres, this constitutes unfair competition and puts a lot of downward pressure on their fees, an issue that was debated at the Coworking Spain Conference 2013 held in Madrid. The other mechanism of public support to coworking has been its public promotion in order to increase demand. This latter role is welcomed by private coworking centres in Spain which think public administration should not directly provide coworking services, but instead promote the phenomenon and its working methods among the unemployed self-employed and/or freelancers. However, public bodies have done very little so far to promote coworking. In this vein, one of the conclusions from the Coworking Spain Conference 2013 was the need to regulate coworking in Spain to provide specific legal coverage to coworking centres that are currently in a legal vacuum (Muy Pymes, 2013).

The policy followed by both the Spanish and Catalan governments to promote coworking has so far been to establish publicly funded and managed coworking centres in several cities and villages, but in an uncoordinated and ad-hoc way. In most cases this has meant the creation of a physical space, but very little attention has been paid to the dynamics inside, namely the effectiveness of the coworking methodology (this was one of the main points that emerged from the interview with the regional government). These coworking centres are, in most cases, managed by public local development agencies and are part of business incubator centres/programmes. They host self-employed workers and/or recently created micro companies with the objective of providing a favourable environment for them to grow and eventually join the incubator programme. In this vein, coworking is considered as some kind of pre-incubator facility. In other words, the promotion of coworking is conceived as part of a more general strategy for the development of entrepreneurship. This explains why, at the time of the case study (April/May 2014), publicly promoted and managed coworking centres were to some extent subordinated to the business incubator facilities, and were not seen as mechanisms to allow self-employed workers/freelancers to improve their working conditions, or unemployed people to return to the labour market. As described in greater detail below, this is also the case with coworking in Barcelona Activa.

Only in late 2013 did the Catalan government attempt to formulate a coherent policy. The department of New Technologies and Information Society in the regional Catalan government encouraged the creation of COWOCAT, the Catalan Coworking Association, in December 2013, as a tool to enhance the visibility of coworking in Catalonia and to promote cooperation among private coworking centres and public administration (Asociación Catalana de Coworking, 2014). The objective of the policy on coworking, to be implemented in the summer of 2014, is to allow unemployed people with a potential coworking profile to work without paying fees in a coworking space that is appropriate for their skills. Even though a cooperation agreement has been signed between COWOCAT, employer organisations, self-employed associations and the regional administration, the plan at the time of the case study (April/May 2014) had yet to be implemented. In other words, the logic of the policy plans concerning coworking in the coming years seems to point towards the increase of private demand and not the creation of public spaces. Moreover, some targeted action aimed at providing specific training for coworking managers is also encouraged and expected from the public administration.

The case analysed in this report corresponds to the coworking support programme developed by the local development agency of the Barcelona city council – Barcelona Activa (Espai Coworking ABF Barcelona Activa). Barcelona ranks first in Spain in terms of the number of coworking centres, according to the [Coworking Directory](#). It has built a reputation of a creative and innovative city where coworking plays an important role (Moriset, 2014). The coworking support programme is located in the 22@ Innovation District, a business district developed in a former industrial area of Barcelona, and one of Europe's largest urban regeneration schemes.

A tension can be observed between these two public support programmes for coworking, as they view coworking from very different angles. In the case of the Barcelona Activa programme, coworking is considered within an entrepreneurship logic, thus complementing the existing business incubator mechanisms. By contrast, the view underlying the support programme being developed by COWOCAT stresses the coworking methodology as a mechanism to allow the self-employed, freelancers and small companies to improve their working conditions and business prospects. Moreover, the two programmes are developing in a parallel way, without any contact between them. (As a matter of fact, COWOCAT, the Catalan Coworking association, is housed in the same building as the coworking centre developed by the Almogàvers Business Factory – Barcelona Activa. However, no mention was made of this when interviewing the managers of the coworking centre there.)

The analysis of the coworking programme of Barcelona Activa is based on two main sources. First of all, it covers an in-depth analysis of secondary documents including scientific articles, policy reports and newspaper articles. Secondly, it includes insights from several interviews with policy experts, managers of coworking programmes and social partners.

Background and objectives

The coworking programme within Barcelona Activa started in 2013 and there is no planned end date. Barcelona Activa, which developed the programme, is the local development agency of Barcelona City Council and the executive tool of the Economic Development policies. Barcelona Activa was created in 1986 to promote good quality employment, and innovative businesses and started as a business incubator coaching 14 business projects. Its programmes are targeted at different groups and its distinguishing feature is a personalised offer to participants in its programmes. The business incubator plays a central role in economic development in the city as the agent which designs and executes local policy in the field. Up to 2013, Barcelona Activa supported 4,293 companies through its Business Services and Programmes which will be integrated into the Business Support Office (OAE-Oficina d'Atenció a l'Empresa). It also accompanied 2,653 entrepreneur projects. Furthermore, 132 enterprises and 15 projects were installed in its business incubators. Regarding the employment area, 19,332 people attend Barcelona Treball Services, 46% of whom found a job within six months.

The first instrument developed by Barcelona Activa to support entrepreneurship was the Glòries Entrepreneurship Centre created in 2004. It is located in the 22@ district of knowledge and hosts the Resource Centre for Entrepreneurs (OECD, 2009). It allows for the installation of innovative start-up companies for a maximum period of three years, and has 63 modules of 18 to 110 m². The incubator was designed to facilitate the future of these businesses, creating cooperation networks and contributing to improving its competitiveness. The aim was to provide a space open to the public where entrepreneurs can work on an idea and transform it into a business.

In June 2011, Barcelona Activa launched the Almogàvers Business Factory (ABF). The objective was to provide additional space for very small and innovative companies, due to the high demand for the Glòries Business Incubator Services. Covering 4,872 m², the ABF incubator established 27 companies and entrepreneurial projects in its first year and developed a public-private management model that included seven collaborating organisations.

Two years later, in 2013, Barcelona Activa started the coworking programme within the ABF. The idea of creating the coworking centre came out of the need to allow self-employed people with potentially good ideas to have a shared space where they could start developing them alongside other coworkers. The initiators were the managers of the ABF centre, who thought of coworking as an interesting instrument to help the self-employed and small companies to develop their ideas in the broader context of the ABF. All those involved in the creation of the support programme were members of Barcelona Activa and no other actor was approached when

launching the programme. The creation process took approximately three months, as the physical space for the centre was already available. Coworking experts were not consulted in the process. There were three main objectives behind the creation of the coworking programme. First of all, the programme was meant to address the need to provide support to self-employed people with innovative business ideas but who did not meet the formal requirements of the business incubator or the Business Factory. Secondly, it sought to meet the high and growing demand for coworking in a context of increasing self-employment among young people in particular. Finally, it aimed to facilitate access to the Barcelona Activa business incubators for non-technological companies and start-ups. Thus the programme to support coworking was conceived as a complementary tool to the existing business incubator mechanisms, and follows the same logic of public coworking centres that have been created in the region in recent years.

No alternative was taken into consideration before the coworking programme was created. It was clear for Barcelona Activa managers that a tailor-made instrument, based on the coworking philosophy, was necessary to help self-employed workers to access additional business services. From this perspective, it makes perfect sense that other goals to be attained by coworking, such as improving the working conditions of the self-employed or helping the unemployed re-enter the labour market, were never mentioned by the managers of the programme. There was certainly the idea of supporting the local labour market, but this was never made explicit.

Coworking in the Barcelona Activa ABF Programme is defined as a new form of understanding work that allows independent professionals from different sectors to enjoy a limited, though shared, working space with other business initiatives in a similar situation, hence facilitating synergies among them and providing a favourable environment (including a wide array of business support services) for developing innovative business ideas (Barcelona Activa, 2014).

The coworking space within the ABF is targeted towards micro companies of fewer than three people who are starting their business (less than three years of activity) as well as self-employed (professionals). The participants' activities must meet certain ethical standards, namely respecting the space and its participants and not posing any environmental or social threat.

The support programme was designed top-down, with almost no involvement of coworking experts or professionals. Moreover, the founders did not have to abide by any EU support framework or rule. In the interview, the coworking programme management said there was no exchange of experience with other countries or with other Spanish coworking centres. Once the programme was running the management contacted a Spanish expert on coworking regarding their participation and involvement in the Spanish Coworking Conference, as well as in the Coworking Europe Conference 2013 in Barcelona.

Characteristics of Espai Coworking ABF Barcelona Activa

The coworking centre in the Almogàvers Business Factory building has a total of 17 spaces, though the average occupancy at any time is between eight and 10. Most of the coworkers work in the creative design sector, architecture or ICT. They are mostly self-employed, though there are some micro companies with one or two employees. The coworkers are aged between 25 and 40 and are mostly male. For all coworkers, the activity developed in the coworking centre constitutes their main job, or at least their main source of income.

The programme allows access to the coworking facilities of the ABF at a reduced fee compared with market prices. The fee is approximately three to four times cheaper than private centres. All coworkers pay the same fees. It emerged from the interviews that the key dimension of the support instrument is the reduced fee compared with that of private coworking centres. The contract signed between the coworking centre and the coworker establishes the duration of the stay, initially for a minimum of one year, which can then be renewed. The self-employed/freelancers/companies that access the support programme also benefit (mostly free of

charge) from the other services of the business incubator, including communication and bureau services (reception of guests, mail reception, receipt and shipment of courier and packages, a basic telephone service, internet connectivity services, Wi-Fi in common areas, parking for cars and bikes); cleaning and maintenance of common areas; use of meeting rooms and classrooms; use of rest and office areas; security services; high value-added services (access to the different strategy and business management programmes organised by Barcelona Activa: Preparation of a Strategic Growth Plan; business training in the different areas of business management; support in fundraising; support for internationalisation; actions to promote cooperation between companies; and other programmes and services developed to meet subsequent needs.).

The initiative was funded entirely by the local development agency. In the case of other public coworking centres in the province of Barcelona, there has been financial support from European FEDER funds. In particular, around 60% of the public coworking centres in the province of Barcelona were co-financed with European FEDER funds (DIBA, 2012). There is no contribution from social partners to the Espai Coworking ABF Barcelona Activa, except for some distribution of information among their members.

There are no geographical or sectoral limits on the scope of the programme. There are also no age limits for freelancers. As the coworking programme is expected to allow starting companies and/or self-employed people to develop their activities alongside other coworkers and/or companies, there is no requirement to prove performance or financial viability. The criteria used in the selection process are related to the assessment of the potential benefits the self-employed/freelancer/company may obtain from participation in the coworking programme. This includes the person's formal qualifications, the field of activity and, particularly in the case of micro companies, the innovative character of the idea. However, the assessment based on these criteria is rather informal and qualitative as there is no predefined set of elements allowing for objective exclusion criteria. Furthermore, the candidates' activities, interests and/or qualifications are assessed with respect to their 'fit' with other coworkers, to favour active interaction among them.

There is no income support for the participating self-employed/freelancers/companies. There is also no link between the programme and unemployment or any other type of social protection benefit (for instance, there is no need to be receiving unemployment protection benefit to be accepted in the coworking centre).

As of May 2014 there was only one coworking centre under the Barcelona Activa support programme. The other public coworking centres in the province of Barcelona are administered, managed and monitored by their respective local development agencies.

As mentioned previously, there is little public promotion and dissemination activity on coworking in Spain. The Diputació de Barcelona (the Barcelona province government) has published a catalogue with the public coworking centres in the province of Barcelona and, in the case of the ABF Barcelona Activa support programme there has been some dissemination through the webpage of Barcelona Activa and the ABF. Moreover, Barcelona Activa has organised conferences to promote coworking. Between January and April 2013 Barcelona Activa invited the manager of a private coworking centre in Barcelona to give a series of seminars on coworking in the Almogàvers Business Factory. The objective was to provide information about what coworking means, its advantages and the current situation in Spain and Catalonia.

Particularly important are the actions to promote cooperation between companies. These include the organisation of meetings where coworkers and/or micro companies present their activities and share their challenges with the other companies and/or self-employed workers. There are also common activities, including weekly breakfasts and lunches. Thus networking is considered one of the key services provided by the ABF coworking centre, particularly because coworkers

believe that no other coworking centre in the Barcelona area provides so many networking opportunities.

The interview with the coworking management revealed that the implicit requirement for those participating in the coworking programme is that they will continue their activity and grow in the context of the Almogàvers Business Factory, though there are no formalised criteria to determine how and under what conditions this will happen. In other words, the coworking facility is conceived as some kind of business pre-incubator whereby very small, innovative and recently created micro companies may find a favourable environment to consolidate and expand. This is confirmed by the fact that the management of the coworking centre are particularly interested in generating synergies between coworkers and companies in the business incubator, but do not pay so much attention to the synergies among coworkers, which is the most valuable dimension of coworking in private centres. This includes not only the physical interaction (the common spaces of the coworkers and employees in the business incubator are shared) but also the development of joint business initiatives.

When it comes to the regulation of the coworking support programme, it is important to stress the lack of a formal policy on coworking at any level of public administration, whether national, regional or local. This means that any local development agency will follow its own criteria when developing and implementing its own support programme. As a consequence, public support for coworking in the form of new centres takes place in a very ad-hoc way, case by case without any kind of guidelines or recommendations. This also applied to the creation of the ABF coworking programme.

When joining the coworking centre, all self-employed/freelancers adhere to the terms and conditions established by the Almogàvers Business Factory coworking centre. This includes things such as the use of common spaces, working time and schedule, relationship with other coworkers and so on. There is no formal obligation to participate in the common events and activities organised by the centre but, according to the coworking centre management, this is to some extent taken for granted as this is precisely what adds value to the activity of coworkers. In fact the level of participation is very high, and informal relationships between coworkers and other companies in the Almogàvers Business Centre are significant. Even though few tangible outcomes can yet be attributed to these relationships, the management of the coworking centre mentioned that one of the coworkers had made contact with a crowdfunding company at the centre and was developing his own business project as a result.

In future Barcelona Activa plans to regulate its specific coworking instrument in more detail. This includes issuing a more precise definition of the potential coworker profiles (for instance by limiting it to certain activities to achieve easier cooperation among coworkers).

The management at the time of this study (April/May 2014) had no plans to increase the number of coworking spaces in the ABF, or to create new centres elsewhere. There are two main lines of action. First, the management of the coworking centre is working on the development of a virtual coworking platform. Secondly, their focus now is on developing better services for coworkers to improve their performance in the ABF, as well as to make coworking more visible. The move to expand services came from a realisation that coworkers' needs have changed. At the very beginning, they mostly required some technical training to complement their formal qualifications. However at the time of the case study coworkers' needs were less related to gaining technical skills and more to the need to gain contacts that could help them to develop their business idea, both from a technical and a managerial/financial point of view. The coworking space management are also trying to reorient the training provided from a focus on technical aspects towards a greater emphasis on competencies needed to develop a business idea, such as communication and marketing, legal training on hiring practices, and regulations.

Outcomes

Macro level

As the programme had only been in place for 10 months at the time of the case study, it is still too early to assess the impact it has had on the local labour market or economy. On the macro level, the main expected impact relates to enhancing the competitiveness of certain sectors, including the creative design sector. In this regard, the management of the coworking centre mentioned that a large part of the innovative potential of self-employed 'creatives' was wasted due to their isolation.

The regional government representative highlighted that, in the short term, the main impact of the expansion of coworking is related to offering employment opportunities to the unemployed.

Trade unions are, in principle, positive about the development of coworking, but they believe it will have very little impact on the labour market. They agree that coworking may have a positive impact on economic development in the medium and long term, but do not consider it to be a mechanism that could alleviate some of the challenges facing the Spanish labour market.

Micro level

A first systematic assessment of the impact on coworkers will be carried out by the end of 2014 and will be available in April or May 2015. The evaluation will be made by the ABF management; thus it will yield only informal and qualitative information based on management perceptions. Regarding the transition into the business incubator, the management pointed out that there have been cases of coworkers collaborating with some of the companies in the incubator facility and, in particular, two of them moving into the space of a crowdfunding company in the incubator. The management felt that teamwork was among the skills cultivated there. Moreover, one of their priorities is to enhance the opportunities for coworkers to acquire other skills, linked to company law and administration, through the courses they organise.

For coworkers, the centre has facilitated access to services such as finance (thanks to the links with some crowdfunding companies in the incubator) as well as consultancy and training. Some of the micro companies in the coworking centre have accessed some of these services, particularly finance. But the most important micro impact is the construction of the network of self-employed workers and companies that may share interests and constitute an important asset of participation in the coworking centre. The management highlighted this as one of the differentiating traits of the ABF due to the particular context (organisational, as in the ABF incubator, and also geographic, it is situated in the 22@ district of Barcelona). They also mentioned that the selection process for membership of the coworking space in the Almogàvers Business Factory acts as a reputational device that helps coworkers find financial resources to consolidate and develop their activity. This is because one of the conditions to access the coworking space is to have a very innovative idea; having participated in the centre is recognition of innovativeness.

The most important aspect of the coworking methodology for beneficiaries is the contact with other coworkers and the development of synergies. According to the management of the coworking centre, one of the strengths of the ABF centre is that coworkers may enjoy another type of interaction – that between coworkers and the companies established in the business incubators. The management cited, for example, how some of the self-employed in the coworking centre got in touch with an equity crowdfunding technological company located in the business incubator and has its own separate coworking space. In particular, two of them moved from the ABF coworking centre to the crowdfunding company's coworking space.

No significant differences are appreciated in the effects depending on the sector of the coworker, though it is suggested that coworkers in the IT sector are more likely to benefit positively from

the coworking centre due to the predominance of these activities both in the incubator and the coworking centre. ABF is developing some specialisation in technology companies, and most of the applications to the coworking centre are made by self-employed workers and/or companies in this sector, which is something the management values. The centre's effect on the working conditions of the self-employed is not regarded as relevant. That is, the focus of the management is not so much on improving the working conditions of participants in the coworking centre (by providing a helpful and supportive environment and thus reducing the stress associated with the traditional isolation of the self-employed) but on guaranteeing they can successfully develop their activities, and eventually (in the case of micro companies), improve their performance. In other words, more attention is paid to the outcomes than to the process, though there is certainly a relationship between both.

Strengths and weaknesses

The main problems encountered by the management of the coworking programme are related to the ability to run it effectively without having a strong familiarity with coworking as a working methodology. The programme was designed very informally and in an ad-hoc manner and, as a consequence, they are learning by practising.

A second related problem is the role played by the coworking centre within the ABF. As mentioned above, the management of the coworking centre do not have a clear idea of the differences between a coworking centre and a business incubator. On the contrary, the impression is that the coworking centre is just an appendix to the business incubator that may act as a stepping stone to the incubation programme for some of the coworkers. This has had repercussions for the programme. First of all, the number of coworking spaces is very limited. This means there is not a critical mass of coworkers with whom to interact and exchange ideas/perspectives. The management justified the small size of the centre by arguing that the coworkers interact not only with one another, but also with the micro companies in the business incubator. Secondly, there are no services targeted exclusively to coworkers. Essentially, the same services enjoyed by the companies in the business incubator are also accessible to the coworkers. The services required by coworkers are changing and it is important to be responsive to these changing needs, but it is difficult to provide differentiated services to coworkers and the micro companies in the business incubator. The first reason is the small size of the coworking centre. Furthermore, the lack of expertise and specific knowledge on coworking hinders the development of more adequate services for coworkers.

Despite these problems and challenges, the management of the coworking centre in the ABF are convinced of the positive contribution and success of the coworking centre. First of all, the broader environment where the coworking centre is located facilitates the exchange of ideas with businesses in the incubator, as well as potential partners and/or sources of financing. The case of self-employed workers in the coworking centre benefiting from the opportunities offered by the technological equity crowdfunding company is the best example (at the moment) of this. Secondly, the reputation gained by participation in the centre (due to the existence of a selection process that does not exist in private coworking centres) opens up financing possibilities for coworkers and contributes to the overall success of the centre.

The overall assessment of the support programme is positive for the management of the centre, though they acknowledge there are many aspects that should be improved to enhance its efficacy. In particular, as the underlying objective of the coworking support programme was to provide a complementary mechanism to the existing entrepreneurship programmes within the Almgövers Business Factory, they think it is providing a useful tool for growth and expansion for the coworkers that do not meet the incubator's entrance requirements. They think the coworking centre is doing well as a stepping stone for the self-employed and micro companies hosted. The problems arising from the lack of a critical mass of coworkers are thus downplayed by the

coworking centre management. Overall, they think that blurring the boundaries between the incubator and the coworking centre (regarding the working methodology) and connecting them is a major strength rather than a weakness.

This view is shared by employer organisations, which think it is a positive development to have public coworking centres managed by local development agencies in close relationship with local business incubators. They see coworking as a potentially effective tool to promote entrepreneurship among coworkers as well as to improve their business prospects.

The weak points highlighted by the actors interviewed are related to the general design of the coworking policy at regional level. Employer organisations feel there is no clear policy orientation and stress the need to develop a coherent strategy to facilitate cooperation among private and public coworking centres, as well as to eliminate some administrative barriers. So far, public promotion of coworking has introduced some distortions in the coworking market by putting downward pressure on fees charged by private centres. If coworking is to become a mechanism to help the self-employed and/or small companies, it is important that public policies focus on promoting coworking among the self-employed and eventually the unemployed. This is particularly true as, after the boom experienced since 2010, many coworking centres are starting to close down. Trade unions also agree on this last point and think that coworking can be useful as a mechanism of inclusion of the unemployed. Both employers and unions are positive about the initiative of the Catalan regional government to develop a strategy including the public administration, coworking centres and social partners.

Finally, the increasing awareness among all partners and sectoral organisations of the positive role that coworking may have on the local/regional economy has led to the creation of associations (COWOCAT), conferences, seminars and a generalised consensus about the benefits of coworking. This is a very positive development as it will create the basis for a fine-tuning of policy instruments to consolidate and improve coworking.

Transferability

There are no problems in the transferability of the Barcelona Activa Coworking support instrument as it is configured at the moment, as it does not have any specificity that makes it dependent on certain pre-existing features of the local or regional economy.

Commentary

Despite the growing significance of coworking in Spain, both in terms of the number of centres and the potential benefits it may bring to the self-employed and the economy in general, there is no coherent public support policy either at national or regional/local level. At the moment, the approach from the public administration with regard to coworking has consisted of the creation of publicly funded and managed coworking centres, very often with support from EU funds. These centres offer coworkers similar services to those of private centres, but at a significantly lower cost. They have also taken some steps to increase the visibility of coworking and increase the participation of self-employed workers. However, these actions are regarded as insufficient by employers and managers of private coworking centres. They have accordingly welcomed the creation of a Catalan coworking association.

The general approach adopted by public administration regarding coworking has opened up a debate on the relationship between the public administration and managers of private centres. In particular, most of the private coworking centre managers think that the support given to coworking by public authorities has introduced an element of unfair competition. Even though there seems to be an agreement among all actors on this, little progress has been made in this regard.

The analysis of the regional support programme shows how the above-mentioned differences are a result of different views about the role coworking should play in the economy and the labour market. So far, the public administration views coworking mostly as a mechanism to enhance entrepreneurship. For this reason, most public coworking centres at the moment are managed through local development agencies and are located in their business incubator centres. Moreover, they tend to be small, hence reducing the potential benefits from interaction and positive synergies among participating coworkers. It is expected that coworkers will mostly benefit from their interaction with the companies and start-ups in the incubator. This would correspond to the situation in most public coworking centres, including the Barcelona Activa one. Another view among the public administration is of coworking as a mechanism to help unemployed people. On the other hand, private coworking centres tend to stress as their main goal the improvement of the working conditions of the self-employed, independently of how innovative and/or feasible their project is.

The perspective of employer representatives for small companies is that coworking can make a very valuable contribution to economic development in certain sectors of the regional economy. They think the local embeddedness of coworking (the attachment to the local level) is a pre-condition for its success and thus they advocate for building links between the local administration and business centres to include coworking centres in the local production context.

As concerns future plans, there are some general aspects regarding the development of a more coherent policy of support to coworking at the regional level. When asked about these issues, the person in charge within the regional government concurred with the employer representative on the need to develop a mechanism that allowed effective cooperation between the private coworking sector and public administration. In particular, the Catalan regional government is working on a plan to allow unemployed people with a profile that, in principle, would allow them to benefit from participating in a coworking centre. The idea would be to establish some collaboration with private coworking centres to invite unemployed people to observe and experience the work dynamics in a coworking centre. Thus there is a consensus that the public administration should promote and encourage the use of coworking among (unemployed) self-employed people.

Information sources

Websites

Almogàvers Business Factory, available at <http://www.barcelonanetactiva.com>

Asociación Catalana de Coworking, available at <https://www.facebook.com/cowocatcoworking>

Asociacion Coworking, available at <http://asociacioncoworking.es/>

Asociación Española de Coworking, available at <http://www.aecoworking.org>

Barcelona Activa, available at <http://www.barcelonanetactiva.com>

Comunidad Coworking, available at <http://www.comunidadcoworking.es/>

Coworking Directory, available at <http://wiki.coworking.org>

Coworking Spain Conference, available at <http://coworkingspainconference.es/>

Coworking Spain, available at <http://www.coworkingspain.es>

Deskmag, available at <http://www.deskmag.com>

Espai Coworking Barcelona Activa, available at <http://www.barcelonanetactiva.com>

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