Chapter 2
Telecommuting and Co-Working Communities: What Are the Implications for Individual and Organizational Flexibility?

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Abstract In recent years, telecommuting has increased exponentially, although rates vary across different countries. The US has one of the highest rates of telecommuting adoption in the world, with approximately 16 million US employees working from home at least 1 day per month—about 10 % of all employees (Shieh and Searle SOAC 2013: 6th State of Australian Cities Conference. State of Australian Cities Research Network, 2013). In Australia, it has been estimated that in 2013, 5.6 million adult Australians aged 18 years and over were 'digital workers'—that is, they use the internet to work away from the office (Di Gregorio Home is where the work is: Research snapshots, 2013). This represents 51 % of the total employed workforce in Australia. Telecommuting environments vary with regard to the life and work opportunities provided for telecommuters (Shieh and Searle SOAC 2013: 6th State of Australian Cities Conference. State of Australian Cities Research Network, 2013), as well as the range of advantages and disadvantages telecommuting can provide for both workers and organizations. Consequently, this chapter reviews existing literature in order to explore how telecommuting can either contribute to, or detract from individual and organizational flexibility. The emergence of co-working practices is also examined as a telecommuting environment that has the potential to overcome some of the issues that telecommuting poses both from the individual and organizational perspectives.

Keywords Co-working · Flexibility · Telecommuting · Teleworking

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews existing literature to explore how telecommuting can either contribute to, or hamper, individual and organizational flexibility. The emergence of co-working practices is examined as one way of overcoming some of the issues that telecommuting poses.

Work standardization was a defining feature of the industrial era, which was reflected in its work practices. For much of the twentieth century in industrialized countries, work could be viewed as 'standard'—that is full time and permanent waged employment, often where the male was the main income earner and the female the main domestic carer (Watson et al. 2003). Since the latter part of the twentieth century, significant structural changes to the nature of work and the economy have led to the decline of standardized work and the rise of diverse and fragmented employment relationships (Standing 2012). Changes in employment relationships have led to the relatively new concept of 'Flexicurity' which is a hybrid term combining concepts related to employment security and flexibility with regard to the general labour market context. Wilcox (2012), Chief Executive of the Australian Industry Group, stressed that employers need flexibility to maintain productivity and competitiveness, and employees need flexibility to meet family responsibilities and lifestyle choices, whereas the community needs flexibility to achieve economic growth, high levels of employment and increased workforce participation. However, others such as Viebrock and Clasen (2009) suggest that 'flexicurity' has an ambiguous and 'buzzword character' that pays little regard to existing traditions in labour market policies and is not easily distinguishable from "… an old agenda aimed at making labour markets more flexible and curtailing employee' rights" (2009, p. 23).

Other key changes in global labour markets have included the steadily increasing female workforce participation rate (Thévenon 2013). As women still disproportionally bear the responsibility for domestic duties and childcare, there is strong demand for flexibility in their working arrangements to reconcile work and home needs. In many countries, people are also living longer. The OECD (2006) has raised concerns that unless the workforce participation of older workers improves, the increase in retirees may threaten existing living standards and social welfare systems. Thus, far many policies have concentrated on trying to encourage older workers to maintain their employability and postpone retirement (Griffin and Beddie 2011). There are various ways this could be addressed—for example through workplace change and restructuring, focusing on financial systems, communities and housing to enable greater workforce and workplace participation (Per Capita Australia 2014, p. 7) to name a few. Thus, policies and practices are needed that create more employment choices for older workers, such as enabling flexibility around the hours and location of work to support different of levels of mobility and working capability. Similarly, improving the flexibility of work arrangements is critical to increasing inclusive work options for people with disabilities or health conditions, who are currently underrepresented in the workforce and over represented among the poor (OECD 2010).

Organizations face existential challenges in the postindustrial era as standardization and relative stability are replaced by rapid changes and volatility. One approach to uncertainty is to move toward employing more contingent and outsourced labour, and shrinking the core workforce (Kalleberg 2001). Another approach is to create more resilient and agile organizations by investing in workforce retention, innovation and capability development (Burgess and Connell 2013). Both approaches recognize the need for increased organizational flexibility in order to respond to ongoing economic and technological disruption. Contemporary organizations also have to manage more diverse and international workforces. In addition to introducing workplace flexibility policies and practices for equitable reasons, many jurisdictions legally require organizations to offer flexible working arrangements to employees who have caring responsibilities or to accommodate disability or health conditions. Another example is Australia's 'Right to Request' (RTR) provisions which give parents of preschool children and those with a disabled child aged up to the age of 18 the right to request flexibility with regard to their working arrangements.

2.2 Telecommuting and Flexibility

Telecommuting has been proposed as a way of contributing to individual and organizational flexibility. Telecommuting can be defined as ''any form of substitution of information technologies (such as telecommunications and computers) for work-related travel; moving the work to the workers instead of moving the workers to work'' (Nilles 1998). Other generally synonymous terms for telecommuting include: 'telework', 'remote work', 'virtual work', 'distributed work', or 'anywhere working'.

Where workplaces have implemented telecommuting, workers are not all colocated in the same geographic location (and may not even be working in the same time periods), but are instead connected via technology, usually the Internet (Lipnack and Stamps 2000). Telecommuting can occur in isolation without communication with other workers, or it can be collaborative where a group of workers cooperate toward shared goals (Zenun et al. 2007). Garrett and Danziger (2007, p. 28) found that telecommuting broadly encompasses three types of workers: "(a) those whose remote work is from the home or in a satellite office, (b) those whose telecommuting is primarily in the field, and (c) those whose work is 'networked' in such a way that they regularly work in a combination of home, work, and field contexts." The predominant model of telecommuting involves workers regularly (but not necessarily exclusively) working from their home or a nearby site that is neither owned nor leased by their employer.

Internationally, a growing number of organizations have implemented telecommuting arrangements (Hertel et al. 2005). In the US, it is estimated that in 2012, 3.3 million people considered the home as their primary place of work, growing by 79.7 % from 1.8 million in 2005 (Global Workplace Analytics 2013). The

number of US adults engaging in at least occasional telecommuting was estimated at 34 million in 2009, forecasted to reach 63 million by 2016 (Forrester Research Inc. 2009). In Australia, it is estimated that in 2013, 5.6 million adult Australians aged 18 years and over could be classified as 'digital workers'—that is, they used the internet to work away from the office (Di Gregorio 2013). This represented 51 % of the total employed workforce in Australia. Mostly this work away from the office is being undertaken at home with 82 % of digital workers (4.6 million) reporting working from home and only 28 % (1.6 million) reporting that they worked while travelling or commuting. Di Gregorio reports that 2.8 million Australians (49 % of digital workers) worked away from office at least two days a week.

Much of the extant literature on the topic recognizes that implementing telecommuting arrangements can potentially offer a range of flexibility benefits for both individuals and organizations. Some of the key factors highlighted in relevant literature are summarized in Table 2.1.

For individuals, telecommuting can enable flexibility in a number of ways that can help to improve their work–life choices. It can allow flexibility to accommodate other duties outside of the workplace, most notably domestic caring responsibilities (Troup and Rose 2012) and it can provide a much needed accommodation to increase accessibility options for those living with disability or health issues, such as reducing or eliminating the need for travel, and offers greater flexibility with regards to working hours (West and Anderson 2005). Telecommuting also enables individuals to have a greater choice of residential location and thus the ability to choose from a greater range of employers, not just those that have conveniently located workplaces (Tayyaran et al. 2003). Benefits for individuals associated with telecommuting flexibility include: increases to perceived autonomy, job satisfaction and performance, along with reduced stress and work–family conflict (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Furthermore, telecommuting has been posited to lessen time lost in long commutes (Fuhr and Pociask 2011), lower costs associated with travel to the workplace (Kitou and Horvath 2008) and reduce workplace distractions (Van der Meulen et al. 2012).

Table 2.1 Summary of benefits of telecommuting for individuals and organizations

Benefits for individuals	Benefits for organizations
Greater individual flexibility and autonomy (Gajendran and Harrison 2007)	The reduction of office costs (Offstein et al. 2010)
Flexibility for domestic caring responsibilities (Troup and Rose 2012)	Access to a global talent pool (Offstein et al. 2010)
Accommodation for those living with disability or health issues (West and Anderson 2005)	Increased productivity (Bloom et al. 2013)
Reduced time lost in long commutes (Fuhr and Pociask 2011)	Improved employee engagement (Sardeshmukh et al. 2012)
Reduced workplace distractions (Van der Meulen et al. 2012)	Improved retention (Di Martino and Wirth 2001)
	Claim reduced carbon emissions (Fuhr and Pociask 2011)

For organizations, telecommuting can provide flexibility with regard to the management of office premises and thus assist with reduced costs (Offstein et al. 2010) and potential carbon emissions (Fuhr and Pociask 2011). Perhaps the greatest set of benefits is likely to accrue from increased flexibility in workforce recruitment and management. Supporting telecommuting options allows organizations access to a far larger global talent pool (Offstein et al. 2010) rather than being limited to candidates who are either local or willing to relocate. Once recruited, telecommuting can help organizations to retain their staff, and while this may be particularly helpful in retaining valuable employees who have caring duties (Di Martino and Wirth 2001), telecommuting options have been found to more generally improve workforce engagement (Sardeshmukh et al. 2012) and reduce turnover intent (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Telecommuting has also been found to reduce absenteeism (Collins 2005), improve productivity (Bloom et al. 2013) and performance (Gajendran and Harrison 2007).

2.3 Telecommuting Issues for Individuals

While there are numerous posited benefits, telecommuting also reportedly has potential drawbacks and challenges for workers. Most notably, numerous studies have raised concerns about the possibility of reduced socialization and increased worker isolation (see Morgan and Symon 2002; Montreuil and Lippel 2003; Golden 2007; Di Gregorio 2013). For example, Bloom et al. (2013) conducted a telecommuting trial for workers in a call centre based in Shanghai, China. Despite the study finding that productivity greatly increased (by 13 % over nine months), at the end of the trial, over half of the employees who had expressed a preference to work at home changed their minds by choosing to remain in office due to social isolation and the reduced success rates associated with the promotion of telecommuting workers.

There are also acknowledged risks that career advancement may be hindered for those who practice telecommuting. Employees who telecommute can be perceived by their managers and colleagues as having 'opted out' of a career regardless of their actual choices (Leslie et al. 2012). Research conducted by Maruyama and Tietze (2012) found that a common reported outcome of telecommuting, especially for women who spent more than 50 % of their working time at home, was reduced visibility and a lack of career advancement. Cooper and Kurland (2002) found that telecommuters were at risk of professional isolation, a more specific type of social isolation, and this was connected with exclusion from employee development activities. They found that telecommuters missed out on three important sources of employee professional development. The first being interpersonal networking with other colleagues in an organization. The research study found that some managers felt that the reduction in face-to-face interactions with telecommuting staff had a negative impact on organizational camaraderie, which in turn reduced productivity. A second source of professional development was the

learning that happens informally and spontaneously, often through face-to-face contact and observation. Telecommuters in the study felt that they missed out on much of the informal learning that happened in the office—especially information sharing that could better support being able to do their work tasks as well as help their more general professional development. The third source noted by the study was mentoring as some managers reported feeling hampered in their ability to coach and develop telecommuting employers because they were not able to support them as they worked.

There can also be the additional stigma associated with managers and co-workers viewing telecommuting as an opportunity for 'shirking' (Peters et al. 2006), meaning telecommuters would not be trusted to work diligently without supervision. The belief that telecommuters do not perform as well as those in the office can negatively affect how a telecommuting employee is perceived in a team. An experimental study conducted by Dutcher and Saral (2014) found that false beliefs about telecommuting team mates such as their being less productive than their non-telecommuting counterparts led to lower team effort and thus lower productivity. These false beliefs were held by both telecommuters and non-telecommuters despite the study finding no evidence that telecommuters were less productive. The lower the team's estimations of productivity associated with telecommuting, the lower were found to be the resulting effort and performance (Dutcher and Saral 2014).

In addition to expressed beliefs about telecommuters, there are also subconscious effects that can exert influence over a telecommuter's standing in an organization. Elsbach and Cable (2012) investigated the importance of "passive face time" and found that just being seen in the office was enough to create inferences about the observed person's work-related traits. These inferences were formed without the need for active interaction and where no information was provided about what the worker was doing or how well the worker was doing it. If the worker was seen during expected work hours, then the worker was viewed as being "responsible" and "dependable"; if the worker was also seen outside expected work hours, then the worker was seen as "committed" and "dedicated" and more likely considered as having the potential for future leadership roles. Such perceptions can be problematic for telecommuting workers who are not frequently seen in the office. The researchers found that telecommuters develop strategies to compensate for 'non face time' such as sending e-mails or voice mails early or late in the day and by making themselves immediately available when working from home. However, these compensating strategies tend to lead to another paradoxical problem that arises from telecommuting.

Although telecommuting is proposed as a solution to better manage work–life conflicts as it allows workers to have more flexibility as to when and where they work, that same flexibility can contribute to increasing work–life conflict by blurring the boundaries between work and home. Where telecommuting employees feel that they need to prove their commitment to work by demonstrating work out of standard hours or a level of responsiveness that they would not feel necessary if they were working from an office, this is likely to further blur such protective boundaries. For example, Pocock and Skinner (2013) examined the use of email

by workers outside of work hours and found that while workers valued the flexibility to respond rapidly, this was also associated with work–life interference.

A partial explanation of the paradoxical outcomes of telecommuting is the differences in individual cases and their contexts. Some researchers suggest that individual characteristics may play a prominent role in determining successful telecommuting outcomes (Khalifa and Davison 2000; Raghuram et al. 2003). Others argue that telecommuting success is more dependent on organizational support and training (Martínez-Sánchez et al. 2008; Lautsch et al. 2009; Lautsch and Kossek 2010). Maruyama and Tietze (2012) found notable differences in perceived telecommuting outcomes depending on gender, the presence of caring responsibilities, and occupation. Similarly, Cooper and Kurland (2002) found there were salient differences in the way public and private sectors organizations perceived and approached issues arising from telecommuting. Not only are individuals and organizations different, but so are the premises at which telecommuting takes place. So while telecommuting has been associated with fewer distractions, it has also been associated with additional distractions (Sullivan and Lewis 2001). This can be explained by some telecommuters having to share their working space and hours with others, such as family members, while others do not. Likewise, some telecommuters may have dedicated office space in their home with good quality equipment and communication services, while others may not. Hence, such differences can result in differing outcomes (Fonner and Stache 2012).

2.4 Telecommuting Issues for Organizations

There are a number of issues that can arise for organizations considering implementing telecommuting practices. Many of the issues that individuals face can also create issues from an organizational perspective. For example, social isolation has already been raised as a significant issue for individuals who telecommute, likewise, the organization may also be affected if the employee disengages as a result of social isolation.

Another prominent issue, raised previously in this chapter, is the concern that reduced face-to-face time will impede workplace socialization. Workplace socialization is widely recognized as a critical component of workplace learning and organizational knowledge transfer (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991; Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). For example, Davenport and Prusak (1998) highlighted the importance for organizational knowledge transfer of unplanned informal workplace conversations, such as those that might occur around a communal water cooler, despite managers viewing this as wasted time. Colocation with work colleagues has been recognized as important for tacit learning, that is, learning that cannot be easily codified (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Parrino 2013). Consequently, separation from the central workplace may lead to those who are working away from the office being excluded from knowledge sharing and transfer (Davenport and Prusak 1998; Zakaria et al. 2004). It could also result

in reduced learning (and thus reduced capabilities) for the employee, and fewer opportunities for the employee to share knowledge with others, thus reducing overall organizational learning.

While many of the issues associated with telecommuting can be addressed by better support, policies, and training, many organizations and managers struggle with knowing what to do (Peters et al. 2006; Lautsch et al. 2009). Best practices are far from clear and often depend on the individual situation and context. Managing telecommuting requires adaptive strategies to balance a range of needs (Lautsch and Kossek 2010). Managers are often apprehensive about the loss of control due to no longer being able to see the telecommuting employee and can be tempted into implementing restrictive policies in order to wrest back some of that control. These attempts could potentially undermine the benefits of telecommuting for both the worker and the organization (Lautsch and Kossek 2010). Similarly, if not fairly and adequately supported, telecommuting can affect the cohesiveness and effectiveness of teams. Facilitating communication and the coordination of virtual teams can be challenging, with both managers and staff reporting concerns that telecommuting would impair collaborative teamwork (Mahler 2012). Despite Dutcher and Saral (2014) finding in their study that the belief that telecommuters were less productive than their in-office counterparts did not hold up to the evidence, they found that the false belief still had the potential to negatively impact on team productivity. Moreover, if telecommuting options are not open to all (or able to be taken up by all), resentment can occur from those who are unable to telecommute (Lautsch et al. 2009; Mahler 2012).

Managers can also struggle with how to best support the infrastructural needs of telecommuters. Reliable and adequate information technology and communications systems are known to be associated with better telecommuting outcomes (Bélanger et al. 2001; Collins 2005). However, supporting off-site work seats can add complexity to the organization's existing arrangements and require additional expertise (for example, knowing how to set up and use virtual communications software). These challenges are compounded by the uncertainty that many managers face around the occupational health and safety risks and requirements in relation to telecommuting workers. Legal responsibility and liability can differ between jurisdictions and many organizations do not have adequate policies to guide managers and staff. While Montreuil and Lippel (2003) acknowledged that telecommuting was generally seen by workers as having a positive effect on their health, the researchers identified some specific risks that applied to telecommuting workers. In addition to distress from isolation, telecommuters could experience ergonomic issues arising from work station design and long hours spent working without adequate breaks.

2.5 Emergence of Co-working

Co-working is an emerging form of work organization that arose out of the needs of telecommuting employees and independent consultants working from home and to overcome isolation and loneliness (Spinuzzi 2012). Co-working is a practice

where people occupy a desk on a casual or temporary basis in a workspace that is shared with others. Unlike a traditional workplace or "hot-desking" workplaces where employers have enacted a policy of no set desk spaces (Hirst 2011), the workspace is not usually controlled by an employer but is managed by an external organizer with the aim of facilitating access to shared working spaces and resources. These facilities are then accessed by a range of individuals who may be employed by an external organization or they may be self-employed or contractors (Foertsch 2013).

The co-working spaces themselves and the types of work undertaken there are fluid and emergent. While co-working practices seem to be most prevalent in the technology and communications fields, the co-working model is expanding to other professional and creative fields (Surman 2013). Some co-working spaces are more formally organized, for example, with a dedicated role to support learning and development, while others may emerge from a company casually renting out some unneeded space. In addition, there is recognition of the prior existence of informal co-working spaces such as libraries (Caldwell et al. 2012; Chen et al. 2013) and coffee shops (Liegl 2014).

2.6 Potential Benefits of Co-Working to Flexibility

As co-working practices are still a relatively new phenomenon it means that, as yet, there is scant academic research published on the topic. What appears to be clear is that, co-working is meeting a market need as there has been an exponential increase in the creation of co-working spaces and numbers of people taking up co-working since its advent in the early 2000s (Deskmag 2012). Co-working spaces are becoming more prominent in communities as well, with some universities being associated with community incubators and 'accelerators' operating as a bridge until entrepreneurs and their businesses can operate alone (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp 2014).

Co-working by its very nature is social, and thus a primary benefit is its potential to address one of the biggest issues associated with telecommuting—that is, social isolation. Co-working provides an opportunity for people who work geographically away from their fellow organizational colleagues (or those who may have none due to being self-employed) to be able to still work in the company of other people. Co-working spaces may even provide some additional benefits as they enable social access to others, without the same distracting or destructive office politics that plague some organizations.

Co-working may also be able to address some of the professional development drawbacks of telecommuting. Although co-working does not prevent the lack of face time with office colleagues or professional visibility within an organization as a co-working employee is still working at a geographical distance (and indeed, there is evidence that employees in satellite offices can suffer loss of professional visibility even though they are colocated with other organizational colleagues

(Morganson et al. 2010)), it may create other developmental opportunities that are unlikely to exist for those working from the organization's central office.

Co-working spaces can attract a diverse range of users that in turn, can enable rich learning experiences. For example, research conducted in Queensland, Australia found that users of co-working spaces in libraries created curated ecologies of hybrid personal learning environments that combined work, play and learning (Caldwell et al. 2012). While telecommuting employees who use co-working spaces may still miss out on the informal and spontaneous opportunities to learn from their colleagues, they can gain access to informal learning and mentoring opportunities from others outside of their organization who are sharing their co-working space. This opens up the possibility of learning new skills and knowledge that cannot (or are difficult to) be found within the organization. In particular, co-working spaces have developed in conjunction with a strong association to entrepreneurialism and start-ups, as many new businesses use co-working spaces as an affordable and flexible way of renting office space. There has been an interest in the co-working space model to encourage the formation and growth of new businesses and to inject innovation and creativity into existing ones (Johns and Gratton 2013). Large companies and governments are starting to locate some of their employees in co-working spaces to stimulate new ways of thinking and operating (Sharp 2013). For example, one of the authors recently conducted research interviews with a sample group of 'Spacecubed' co-workers and staff. Spacecubed is a 'coworking, collaboration and innovation workspace' based in Perth, Western Australia and was created in March 2012. In 1 year it outgrew its original space and opened another venue to accommodate its 300 plus members. Spacecubed has amongst its members: telecommuters; entrepreneurs; local government; not-for-profit-organizations; bank staff; private enterprise; and more. Members join the community environment in order to share ideas and innovate, supported by numerous facilitated and informal events such as start-up weekends (Connell and Tharaup 2014).

While co-working spaces may not address the loss of face-to-face intra-organizational networking that is so important to career development, it can potentially create new opportunities for networking and professional visibility outside of the traditional organization. This can benefit telecommuting individuals by expanding their interpersonal networks and the scope of their professional reputation while also benefitting organizations by increasing access to external networks. Increasingly, co-working spaces are developing more formal programs to support learning and professional development activities such as regular networking events and organized educational seminars (Bizzarri 2010).

A key aspect of many co-working spaces is the provision of information technology and communication infrastructure. While some co-working spaces require a user to supply their own computer and others will provide desktop computers, generally, internet and printing facilities are provided as standard. In addition, many co-working spaces also provide access to meeting rooms that can be booked by users. In this way, co-working spaces can enable greater access to telecommuting for those whose might otherwise be excluded due to not having adequate equipment and facilities. For example, co-working hubs have been created outside

of metropolitan centres to enable people to remain living in rural and regional areas providing access to high quality office infrastructure and reliable communications technology that they may not have at home.

Another benefit that co-working spaces have is that they are a professional work environment that is separate from the home. As such, co-working spaces can play a role in helping to establish and maintain work–life boundaries. They may even help counter some of the stigma and concerns in relation to nonwork distractions that can be associated with working from home, as telecommuters are working in an environment free from domestic distractions, while amongst other professional workers.

2.7 Conclusion

Telecommuting can be used to improve flexibility for both individuals and organizations. It can expand workforce participation options for those who may face barriers attending work—such as people living with disability or health issues. It can enable flexibility as to where and when work gets done, so that individuals can have more choices in balancing other responsibilities such as caring for children. For organizations, telecommuting facilitates greater flexibility in managing office space and staff. Offering telecommuting options to employees may help to improve workforce engagement and retention, as well as potentially expanding recruitment access to a more global talent pool. However, telecommuting is not without its risks and challenges. The most notable risk is the likelihood of social isolation if people work all day from their homes and see little of their work colleagues. This isolation can lead to professional isolation and reduced learning and development opportunities, which is harmful for individual careers and can also impact negatively on organizational teamwork and knowledge transfer.

Co-working is emerging as a way of working that enables individual and organizations to gain many of the benefits of telecommuting but without many of its drawbacks. In particular, co-working can help address the social isolation that many telecommuters report experiencing, as well as providing easy access to reliable infrastructure on a flexible basis. While co-working may not address issues such as loss of visibility within an organization or exclusion from face-to-face everyday office learning and mentoring, co-working offers new and expanded opportunities for learning and networking that may not be easily found within an organization. Moreover, governments and larger organizations are starting to support staff use of co-working as a way of stimulating innovation and creativity.

In summary, this chapter outlined some of the key issues related to individual and organizational flexibility in relation to telecommuting. By examining relevant literature, it illustrated that there are a number of advantages and disadvantages that are apparent from both perspectives, while finally, proposing that co-working may not be able to solve all the issues that telecommuting raises, but it does offer a promising new way of working that can contribute to individual and organizational flexibility.

It is recommended that future research on the topic includes an empirical study of co-working, co-workers, and telecommuters in order to gain a better understanding of the issues.

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