THE LEARNING EFFECT IN COWORKING SPACES: A CASE STUDY

Master Thesis 'Economic Geography'

Abstract

This master thesis consist of a case study at Growing Emmen, a coworking space in the North of the Netherlands. Previous research has shown that coworking spaces are places where innovation and new businesses arises. However, not much is known about the determinants of this learning effect. Thus, the following research question will be answered in this master thesis:

> How do the learning effects inside as well as outside a coworking space, primarily used by self-employed people, take place and how does this contribute to the perception of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

This master thesis explores this question using data collected through semi-structured interviews, short surveys and desk research. The results of this study show the importance of matching attitudes and values in order to facilitate learning. The results also show that this matching of attitudes and values is largely influenced by community building and the impact of management. It should be noted that facilitating a successful learning environment is a very complex process, in which trust and the perception of autonomy are important factors. This master thesis will further go into depth about these processes.

Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction

The working environment is changing. The focus is increasingly on a shared economy, with coworking spaces as an important factor (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2020; Bouncken & Reuschl, 2016; Oswald & Zhao, 2020). These coworking spaces contribute to flexible workspaces and social interactions between different types of professionals. Which is especially important for people who are self-employed, freelancers, and for micro businesses (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2016).

There are several reasons for the extensive use of coworking spaces by self-employed, freelancer, and micro businesses. First of all, the sharing of office equipment and office space offers a cost-saving benefit and renting a traditional office space typically entails a long-term commitment, which is too risky for smaller entrepreneurs and self-employed (Howell, 2022). The use of coworking spaces can also lead to increased productivity. Moreover, coworking spaces provide opportunities for expanding ones network, which is ideal for the self-employed (Aslam et al., 2021; Bednář et al., 2021). Even more, coworking spaces can foster a sense of belonging for individuals who would otherwise work alone and may also promote co-creation and collaboration (Aslam et al., 2021). Additionally, digitization in coworking spaces is an important reason for the self-employed to use these spaces. By utilizing the technologies available at coworking spaces, self-employed individuals can access tools they might not otherwise afford or use (Mátyus, 2021; Kojo & Nenonen, 2016). Especially digitization, which has made remote working possible, has offered significant opportunities for coworking spaces. This has led to an increased demand for coworking spaces, as larger companies show a growing preference for remote working service. As a result of to these advantages, the number of coworking spaces has risen over the last decade (Clifton et al., 2022; Oswald & Zhao, 2020; Yu et al., 2019).

Similarly to the growth in the number of coworking spaces, the rate of self-employment is also steadily increasing in Europe (Clifton et al., 2022). According to 'Statistics Netherlands' (2023), 1,2 million individuals in the Netherlands are self-employed in their primary job. This represents approximately 13% percent of the entire working population in the Netherlands. In Emmen, the city in which Growing Emmen is located, this is approximately 10%, which is a bit below the nation average. However, in the

neighbouring regions of Emmen the amount of self-employment is 13,2%, 14% and 14,7% of the population, which is higher than the national average.

A recent development that influenced the success of coworking spaces is the Covid-19 pandemic. Research by Cabral & Van Winden (2022) shows that 72% of 14,000 coworking spaces in 172 countries experienced a significant drop in the number of people who make use of coworking spaces shortly after the outbreak of Covid-19. The pandemic had large consequences for some coworking spaces. Mátyus (2021) states that due to social distancing and lockdowns in many countries, it became difficult to make coworking spaces profitable. On the other hand, some studies argue that the use of coworking spaces accelerated during Covid-19 because companies are planning to become fully remote. Covid-19 also resulted in coworking spaces becoming more flexible (Gauger et al., 2021; Howell, 2022). If this indeed is the case, and the number of remote workers in coworking spaces continues to increase, it will impact the self-employed users of these coworking spaces. How and whether this differs between regions is not yet clear (Howell, 2022).

Various empirical studies have shown that coworking spaces have local effects (e.g. Aslam et al., 2021; Bednář et al., 2021). Those local (learning) effects arise through the knowledge sharing, innovativeness and human resource development that take place in coworking spaces (Bednář et al., 2021). Aslam et al., (2021) and Bednář et al., (2021) have consistently found that the local effects are caused by internal as well as external effects of coworking spaces. However, what the learning effects in coworking spaces are and how they work is not evident yet. By recognizing the importance of understanding these learning effects, one can analyse and predict the local effects of a coworking space; inside the coworking space as well as outside the coworking space.

This thesis is based on a case study at Growing Emmen, a coworking space in the North of the Netherlands. Therefore, it is increasingly important to take into account the context and important case specific circumstances. Covid-19 is one of the most impactful circumstances that has occurred recently. Therefore, the impacts of Covid-19 will be carefully analysed during this study and within the case at hand.

1.1 Research design

This master thesis consists of a case study of Growing Emmen, supplemented with an interview of a provider of another coworking space in the Netherlands for context. For this case study, I will analyse the learning effects of Growing Emmen. The main users of these coworking spaces are self-employed people or work for SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises). Both coworking spaces fall under the category of private coworking spaces. The corresponding research question is:

> How do the learning effects inside as well as outside a coworking space take place and how does this contribute to the perception of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

This research question will be answered using four sub questions.

> Sub question 1: What are, based on the literature, the characteristics of coworking spaces that are mainly used by the self-employed (and employers and employees of SMEs)?

According to Bouncken & Reuschl (2016) different types of users and different types of coworking spaces influence the success of a coworking space. Therefore, some theoretical background will be stated, in order to better explain the outcomes of this research.

> Sub question 2: To what extent does the management of the coworking space support and consciously influence the learning effects inside and outside the coworking space?

Managerial decisions impact the success of coworking spaces. In an ideal situation the decisions of the management enhance the knowledge creation and knowledge sharing of the coworking space (Bednář et al., 2021). The literature review will further elaborate on the impact of managerial decision making on coworking spaces. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted in order to help answer this question.

Sub question 3: To what extent do users of coworking spaces interact with each other and how does this interaction occur? How do these interactions facilitate learning?

In the current literature a research gap exist about the determinants of the learning effect In coworking spaces. Self-collected data in combination with secondary data will be used to answer this question. The self-collected data consists of surveys among users and interviews with management.

Sub question 4: How do coworking spaces contribute to the perception of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

The final question will be answered using the results that have been obtained from the preceding sub questions, along with the outcomes of the user survey. These findings can be important for policy makers in order to gain knowledge about stimulating entrepreneurship (Howell, 2022; Mátyus, 2021). The findings also provide valuable insights for coworking spaces management, allowing them to understand the preferences of their users.

1.2 Readers Guide

This thesis begins with a literature review, in which the theoretical and empirical literature about coworking spaces will be presented. The literature review starts with presenting general characteristics of coworking space specifically for self-employed individuals. After, three ways of learning in coworking spaces are presented. Namely, learning through the presence of other professionals, learning through the providers of the coworking space and learning through community building. Thereafter, measuring entrepreneurial success will be discussed. The literature review will end with the presentation of the conceptual model. Chapter 3 will provide a detailed explanation of the methodology and the ethical issues of this thesis. This thesis uses self-collected data as well as secondary data. The advantages and limitations of this method will be discussed. Chapter 4 will present the results of the interviews, surveys and secondary

data. In this chapter the results also will be discussed in order to answer the research question. Finally, this thesis will end with a concluding chapter.

Chapter 2 Literature review

The literature review is structured as follows: Firstly, the definition of a coworking space is presented, followed by an exploration of the needs of self-employed individuals to use coworking spaces. Subsequently, literature concerning the learning effect within coworking spaces is presented, divided into three sections. The first section discusses the learning effect facilitated by interaction with other professionals at coworking spaces. The second section examines the learning effect facilitated by coworking space providers and the influence of architectural design on learning within these spaces. The third section elaborated on community building as a mechanism to foster learning within coworking environments. Thereafter, the measurement of entrepreneurial success among the self-employed will be discussed. Lastly, the conceptual model will be presented.

2.1 Coworking spaces used by self-employed

A coworking space is a place that provides office space and work equipment to diverse range of workers and professionals (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Howell, 2022). However, several definitions of coworking spaces exist. Spinuzzi (2012) defines coworking spaces as places where professionals are gathered near each other. While Capdevila's (2013) definition focuses on the resource sharing and community building that takes place in coworking spaces. Research by Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2020) and Bouncken & Reuschl (2016) show that coworking spaces are often called 'third places' in research. A 'third place' refers to a place where people can spend time between home and work. Bouncken & Reuschl (2016) also include autonomy for the users as an important element for this third space. In this context, autonomy means that the individual can decide where, when, how long, with whom and on the degree of openness and intensity they want to work. It is important to note that the coworkers have the opportunity, but are not obligated to do so. All these definitions are important in this research. But, especially the latter about autonomy, because the degree of autonomy, in particular the perception of autonomy the self-employed has, can largely impact the learning effect and the interactions in the coworking space (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2016; Merkel, 2019).

Coworking spaces are often used by self-employed individuals (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2016). One of the primary motivations for utilizing coworking spaces by self-employed individuals, is because they are not able to afford their own office space. However, while renting a coworking space may be more economical than leasing individual office space, it may not always be more cost-effective than working from home. Nonetheless, the perceived benefits, such as expanding one's professional network and increasing productivity (Aslam et al., 2021; Bednář et al., 2021; Howell, 2022), of coworking spaces often justify the decision to opt for them over working from home (Howell, 2022). Consequently, the question arises what the self-employed especially are looking for when searching for a coworking space. This will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Multiple factors are at play for self-employed when looking for a coworking space, think of location, and costs but also type of coworking spaces. According to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2020), Cabral & Van Winden (2022) and Weijs-Perrée et al. (2018), the type of lease contract and the accessibility and distance of the location are the most important elements for self-employed individuals to decide to use coworking spaces. Weijs-Perrée et al. (2018) states that users of coworking spaces often prefer coworking spaces with open plan working spaces as well as private working spaces. Besides those preferences for coworking spaces, the type of coworking space also matters. Kojo & Nenonen (2016) distinguish between public, semi-private and private coworking spaces. They found that profit-base coworking spaces prioritize specific segments, such as those inclined towards self-employment. Therefore, this paper will focus on private coworking spaces.

According to Rådman et al. (2022) the needs of the users of coworking spaces can be divided into five categories. These five categories are; social needs, business networking, knowledge exchange, productivity and physical well-being. Section 2.2 shows that those needs, as presented in figure 1, are closely related to the learning effect that takes place in coworking spaces. Business networking and knowledge exchange directly stimulate learning, while increasing productivity, social needs and physical well-being can enhance the learning effect indirectly through the sense of belonging to a community (Rådman et al., 2022).

Gerdenitsch et al. (2016) found that while some interactions within coworking spaces are formal, the majority are informal. This distinction is significant as it suggests that

not all of learning effects can be forced by management or other community members. Rather, many interactions occur organically as individuals develop trust and willingly share knowledge to assist one another.
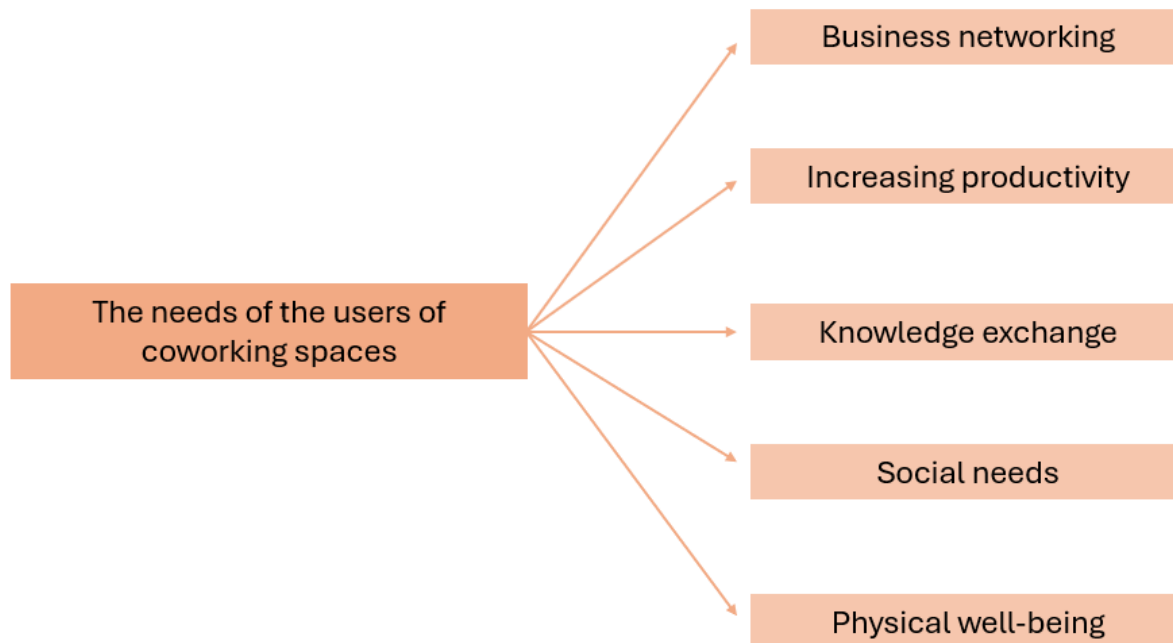

Figure 1: The needs of the users of coworking spaces based on Rådman et al. (2022)

2.2 Learning effects in coworking spaces

2.2.1 Learning effect through the presence of other professionals

The presence of professionals in coworking spaces can lead to knowledge sharing, although this is not necessarily always the case. The extent of knowledge sharing among professionals is primarily influenced by a combination of the type of users in a coworking space and their primary motivation for utilizing the coworking space. While some users of coworking spaces would like to expand their network, by finding business partners or people who can lead them to business opportunities, others prioritize opportunities for learning new things, receiving feedback or input from others or the development of their professional skills (Aslam et al., 2021; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Rådman et al., 2022). Differences in coworking space size also impact user behaviour. In general, smaller coworking spaces with less than 50 desks tend to have greater focus on business networking than larger coworking spaces. The reason for this is that in smaller coworking spaces, users are more likely to know each other, which makes it easier to identify potential partners. In larger coworking spaces -more

than 100 desks- users often do not know who else is working there. Hence, it tends to be more difficult to identify potential partners in those coworking spaces. Larger coworking spaces can offer marketing opportunities to stimulate business networking. As a result people can more easily identify whether important connections can be made (Rådman et al., 2022).

When the conditions are right there are several ways through which knowledge is shared. At an individual level, knowledge sharing occurs at a co-working space through mentoring opportunities. Regular users or experienced self-employed individuals can offer guidance to new users (Bouncken & AsLearninlam, 2019). Another avenue is through the sharing of tools and programs. Learning to work with different tools and programs leads to the development of new skills. Thereby, digitalization enhances the sharing of multidisciplinary skills (Bednář et al., 2021). Digitalization in the workplace offers numerous benefits, but it can also lead to reduced efficiency if coworkers fail to utilize the best available tools. The implementation of these tools can pose challenges. That is why it is essential for other coworkers, as well as coworking spaces management, to actively engage in digitization initiatives to comprehensively understand and effectively utilize these new tools and to share their knowledge about those tools with other coworkers (Mátyus, 2021). Another means through which users can learn from fellow members is by being challenged to collaborate on projects outside their own field of experience (Hysa & Themeli, 2022). Gaining multidisciplinary skills enhances collective learning in coworking spaces but also outside coworking spaces. The skills acquired in coworking spaces can also be applied within the region a coworking space is situated (Bednář et al., 2021).

The presence of other professionals can also lead to difficulties and tension in coworking spaces. This is primarily due to the heterogeneous nature of coworking space users, which includes both self-employed individuals and employees of larger corporations. Self-employed individuals and employees of smaller businesses often prioritize social interaction, whereas employees of larger corporations may prefer to engage primarily with their own colleagues (Rådman et al., 2022). Another source of tension arises from the perception of control over social interactions within the coworking space. Individuals may prefer autonomy in deciding their level of engagement in social interactions versus focusing solely on work tasks (Merkel, 2019;

Rådman et al., 2022). When coworkers do not have the feeling that they have control over their interactions they are more likely to develop negative feelings about the coworking space. Furthermore, during interactions with other coworkers it can be hard to be transparent. When facing difficulties in their work, individuals may be hesitant to disclose this information, as other users of the coworking space could potentially be clients or customers (Rådman et al., 2022). Moreover, when working in open spaces, other users can see what you are doing. This lack of privacy can negatively affect the success of coworking spaces (Aslam et al., 2021). All these factors can influence the learning process in coworking spaces, because users of the coworking spaces can develop negative feelings about the coworking space (Rådman et al., 2022).

Hysa and Themili (2022) provide an overview illustration the complexity of working in coworking spaces, as depicted in figure 2. The many factors that impact interaction within a coworking space, make learning in coworking spaces a complex process. First of all, it is important that the users of coworking spaces have, in addition to knowledge that is useful for others, matching values and matching attitudes; when members are too diverse this can negatively affect learning in the coworking space. When there is more conformity, this can result in more coworking between the members. This coworking leads to the sharing of a variety of information and skills, including learning to handle uncertain situations (Hysa and Themili, 2022).
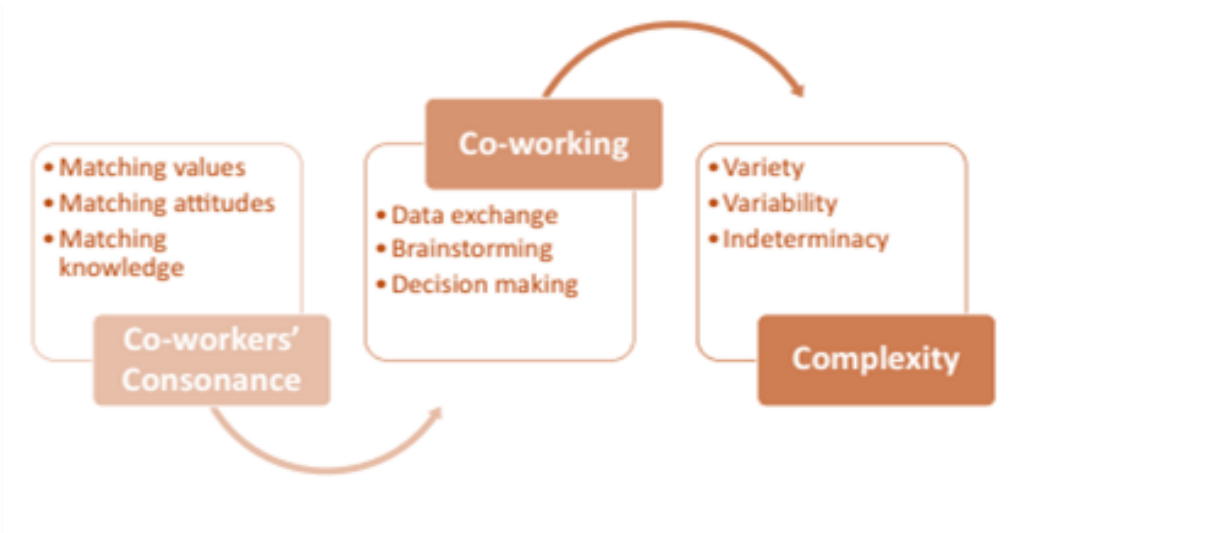

Figure 2: Co-working and complexity (Hysa and Themili, 2022)

2.2.2 Learning effect through the providers of the coworking spaces

One of the ways to stimulate knowledge sharing in coworking spaces is through the stimulation of the providers of the coworking space (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019; Rese et al., 2020). The providers of the coworking space can directly stimulate the knowledge sharing by facilitating communication channels for the members of the coworking spaces (Rese et al., 2020). Alternative methods to encourage learning among users of coworking spaces include organizing workshops, seminars and training sessions (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019). Mátyus (2021) state that the participation of the management in digitization initiatives is also of increasing importance. They can pass along the information to the users of coworking spaces using workshops or presentations. Another way to stimulate the learning effect is through the organization of open podia. The management of coworking spaces can organize open podia where all members can give presentations. If all members are allowed to present and watch other presentations, this can enhance community building and thereby the sharing of knowledge (Orel et al., 2021). According to Rådman et al. (2022) contact between the provider and the users is important. A simple interaction at the coffee corner between the user and the provider can increase the feeling of belonging to the community. As will be discussed in the following section this can enhance the learning effect in the coworking space.

The architecture of the coworking space also influences the level of interactions between users of coworking spaces. It matters whether places have open or private spaces and what size those spaces are. The available of facilities, including luxury facilities such as access to a gym and relaxation rooms, can enhance the efficiency of workers. The place in the building of those luxury facilities is also important. Additionally, the quality and style of the interior design are crucial factors (Aslam et al., 2021). Firdaus & Fuad (2021) elaborate further on the space and architecture of a coworking space. They use four work modes; focus, collaboration, learn and socialize to map the behaviour that takes place in the coworking space. They show that the distance between the tables, and the use of partition walls between tables matters for the amount of interaction between users. Figure 3 shows several designs of how the workplace can be arranged. Figure 4 illustrated the impact of various designs on learning within coworking spaces. The private cubicle and the cat cave are more closed

areas where users can concentrate to enhance learning. In contrast, a designated desk, a discussion table and meeting rooms facilitate discussion and interaction among members, thereby increasing the learning effect through collaboration. This learning effect includes the discovery of business opportunities, the sharing of knowledge, and the development of multiple skills.
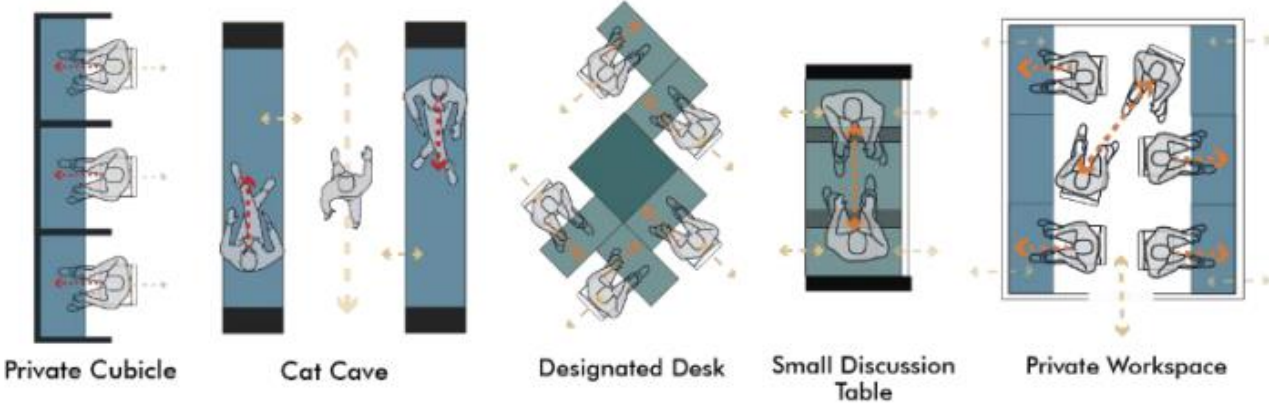
Figure 3: Several designs of workplaces (Firdaus & Fuad, 2021)
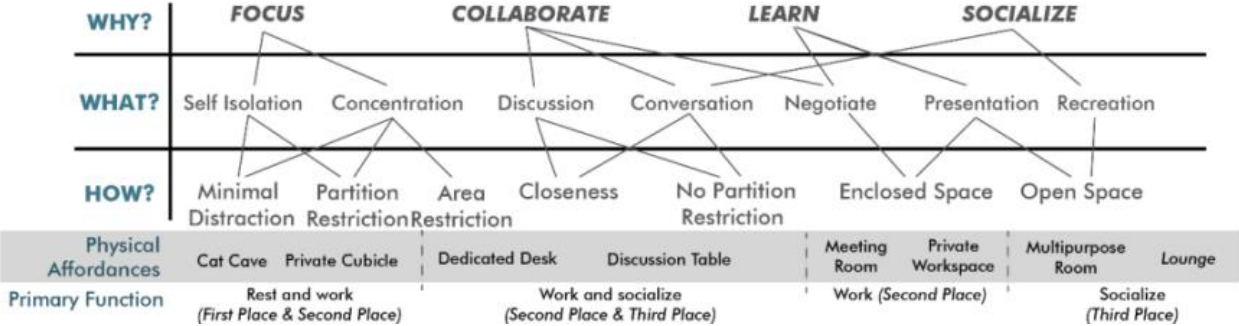
Figure 4: Example of a means-end hierarchy analysis of a coworking space (Firdaus & Fuad, 2021)

Socializing can take place in multipurpose rooms as well as in the lounge. The structure of the lounge and the location of the facilities such as coffee machines, printers, kitchen, football table can lead to distractions when they are near open workspaces. Hence, these areas should be situated in the lounge or in locations where users who are still working are not disturbed. Depending on the size of the coworking space, multiple socializing rooms should be available. The prices of the facilities should match the budget of the members of the coworking spaces. Thus, depending on the budget and type of users, providers of coworking spaces should determine whether or not to offer luxury facilities (Aslam et al., 2021).

2.2.3 Learning through community building

Rese et al. (2020) investigated barriers to the transfer of knowledge. They found that lack of time is a common barrier to the transfer of knowledge, similarly, trust issues towards other members of the coworking space also can be seen as a barrier. When members have homogeneous businesses as each other (as within the same sector of related services), they may prefer not to invite potential clients to the coworking space, due to the fear that other members with similar business might 'steal' the (potential) client from them. These trust issues influence the norms and values created in individual coworking spaces (Aslam et al., 2021). Rese et al. (2021) show that trusting other coworkers leads to increased reciprocity and emotional support. When coworkers exchange information, even with a non-binding agreement, they can develop feelings of trust and this can cause expectations for further exchange (Bianchi et al., 2018). This reciprocity increases the learning effect in coworking spaces. Besides reciprocity, trust also enhances openness, this in turn facilitates knowledge sharing (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019). On the other hand, when coworkers do not trust other coworkers, they are more likely to work alone (Rese et al., 2020).

Behavioural modelling is another way of learning through the presence of other professionals. Coworkers can learn from each other's behaviour and learn new professional skills (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Coworkers will develop similar values which result in increasing mutual support in coworking spaces (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016). In turn, this will lead to the feeling of belonging to the community, which enhances openness and the sharing of tacit knowledge (Capdevila, 2018; Orel et al., 2021). Belonging to a community comes with shared norms and values. According to Rådman et al. (2022) provider's presence at the reception at the beginning of the day can contribute to the feeling of belonging of the workers of coworking spaces. Furthermore, users of coworking spaces often develop routines. By talking to the same people during coffee breaks and sitting at the same table, coworkers develop routines that facilitate social bonding (Garrett et al., 2017; Hysa & Themeli, 2022; Wijngaarden, 2022). Those routines often are the same as when working at traditional workplaces, which can enhance the feeling of belonging to the community, especially for self-employed people who work alone or with fewer people (Garrett et al., 2017). Hence, the feeling of belonging to the community leads to trust. In turn, communities can lead

to knowledge sharing. First of all, because communities provide opportunities to share knowledge with other community members. Secondly, because coworkers seek to contribute to the community, primarily through the sharing of knowledge (De Castilho & Quandt, 2017).

2.3 Coworking spaces and (measuring) the perception of entrepreneurial success

In order to answer the research question, it is necessary to define the success of a business. The success of a business can be measured in different ways and therefore the definition is debatable. One can measure entrepreneurial success based on financial performance. However, in small and medium enterprises this can cause problems, because of a lack of information or a lack of key performance indicators (Vidyatmoko & Hastuti, 2017). Another way to measure entrepreneurial success is to look at the survival of the business. This is measured by the fact whether a business stays in the market or if a business leaves the market. This method of looking at the survival is more suitable for smaller firms and the self-employed, because it is measurable (Vidyatmoko & Hastuti, 2017). Besides the measurements as presented above, the determinants of entrepreneurial success are also crucial. One such determinant of entrepreneurial success is labour market experience. The labour market experience can enhance the professional skills and the professional network of self-employed individuals (Koster & Andersson, 2017). Coworking spaces provide an ideal environment for self-employed individuals to expand their networks (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019; Rådman et al., 2022). However, the degree to which this expansion occurs is influenced by the size of the network of the self-employed people in the coworking space. Generally, self-employed people built on their network during their labour market career, the more experience, the larger their network (Koster & Andersson, 2017). Therefore, a higher number of experienced self-employed individuals in a coworking space correlates with greater network opportunities for all members.

Hysa & Themeli (2022) found that a small number of coworkers did not experience business growth or productivity growth due to the use of coworking spaces. When the

complexity of working in a coworking space is high, a lower level of collaboration is achieved, and coworkers experience less business and / or productivity growth. Besides the complexity, the degree of community building also influences the business growth and productivity growth of self-employed individuals in coworking spaces. When the degree of community building is high, the coworkers strive towards improving their own business as well as improving the businesses of their coworkers (Orel et al., 2021).

2.4. Characteristics of Emmen

As stated in the introduction it is important to take the context into consideration when performing a case study. Therefore, this section will state some statistics about Emmen, the city where the case study takes place, that can potentially influence the results. Figure 5 shows a map of the Netherlands in which the provinces and the biggest cities in those provinces are shown. Figure 6 shows the municipalities of the province of Drenthe, the province where Emmen is located in.

In 2024 the municipality of Emmen had around 109.350 residents. 31.000 of them are between the age 45-65, 26.700 individuals are 65 years or older, 24.000 individuals are between the ages 25 and 45 and 27.500 are younger than 25 years old. The number of births is lower than the mortality rate, which indicates a shrinking population. With 326 residents per squared kilometre, the population density is below the national average (Municipality Of Emmen in Numbers And Graphics, 2024). Furthermore, the income of the residents of the municipality of Emmen is quite low. In fact, in the province of Drenthe, only the residents of the municipality of Hoogeveen have a lower average incomes than the residents of the municipality of Emmen (Municipality Of Emmen in Numbers And Graphics, 2024).

Further, the amount of self-employed individuals in Emmen is a bit below the national average, however the regions, Borger-Odoorn and Coevorden which are next to Emmen have more self-employed individuals than the national average (Statistics Netherlands, 2023). Among these regions, the municipality of Westerveld is in the top 3 of highest incomes in the province of Drenthe. While Coevorden and Borger-Odoorn follow Emmen and Hoogeveen in the top 4 lowest incomes in the province of Drenthe.

Figure 5: Map of the Netherlands
(Map Of The Netherlands, z.d.)

Figure 6: Map of the municipalities of Drenthe
(Municipalities in Drenthe, z.d.)

2.5 Conceptual model

Based on the above the following conceptual framework is developed.
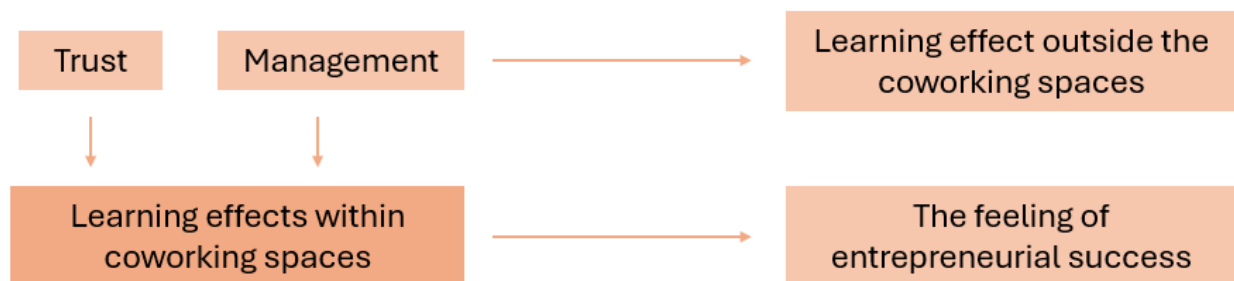
Figure 7: Conceptual model

The conceptual framework includes four relationships. The first is between the learning effect within coworking spaces and the feeling of entrepreneurial success. Based on the literature review it is expected that some learning will take place in coworking spaces and that this will increase the perception of entrepreneurial success. Entrepreneurial success is measured as survival in the market and whether the self-employed has the perception that their business is growing. This is measured by an open question in the survey whether the member of the coworking space experience business growth or learning through the use of the coworking space. As presented in

the literature review the learning can take place in multiple ways. Mentoring opportunities, networking, the use of tools and programs and the development of skills are examples of how this learning takes place. The learning is measured using those examples and using the member's self-reported perception of learning.

The variable trust is included in the model as a moderator. It is assumed that the relationship between trust and the learning effect within the coworking space can have a positive impact as well as a negative impact on the learning effects within the coworking space. When the degree of trust in the coworking space is low, this can negatively affect the learning process within a coworking space. When people do not trust each other, they are less likely to share their network with other members of the coworking space. They are also less likely to share ideas and tools with each other. Hence, a decrease in trust within the coworking space will potentially lead to less knowledge sharing. Likely, trust also influences the learning effect outside the coworking space. However, because of the nature of this research it will only be taken into account as a moderator of the learning effect within the coworking spaces.

Further, a relationship between the management and the learning effects within as well as outside the coworking space is expected. The management of the coworking space is assumed to have a positive impact on the learning effects within the coworking space. Organizing events for the users of the coworking spaces can enhance the feeling of belonging to the community, which can lead to an increase in knowledge sharing. In the same manner, the management can enhance community building by being present in the community. Lastly, the management can connect with parties outside of the community in order to stimulate learning outside the coworking space.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Central in this chapter is the process of data gathering and data analysis. This master thesis is explorative research which is primarily based on self-collected empirical data. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, short surveys and desk research. This combination of qualitative data collection is often used in case studies (Blumberg et al., 2014). This study is particularly suitable for qualitative research, because the goal is not to gather numerical data, but to find theoretical explanations of a phenomenon. Additionally, the rationale for the case study is discussed.

3.1 Case study

According to Blumberg et al. (2014) it is appropriate to use case studies when a phenomenon or context is not clear yet. It helps with understanding the real problem or situation and the results can be generalized to a theoretical disposition. However, single case studies have a disadvantage related to the robustness of the results. When using a single case in one time period it can easily be influenced by certain events. Those events can be in the personal life of the respondent and / or researcher as well as in the society at large.

This research is a single case study about Growing Emmen, a coworking space in Emmen, in the province of Drenthe in the Netherlands. As discussed in the literature review, the population density of Emmen is below the national average and there is an aging population (Municipality of Emmen in Numbers and Graphics, 2024). These demographics, combined with the types of businesses in Emmen, can shape the nature of coworking in the area. The same can be said about the cultural and social factors of Emmen, as well as the lack of infrastructure compared to other cities in the Netherlands. On the other hand, it is evident that the number of coworking spaces is increasing, aligning with technological developments both globally and within the Netherlands. Considering national trends, the case study in Emmen can be representative of other coworking spaces. The concluding chapter will further elaborate on the context and discuss whether the results can be generalized. An additional interview with the management of another coworking space took place. This will also be used in the results, in particular for the learning effect outside the coworking space.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

According to Blumberg et al. (2014) the interviews in case studies are often unstructured or even informal discussions. This can help the researcher towards other sources of information and evidence. However, the researcher should not become too dependent on the respondents. Therefore, this study will use semi-structured interviews. By using semi-structured interviews I hope to confirm the insights that are presented in the literature review, but also getting to know the perspectives of the respondent. The interview will start with administrative questions to identify possible errors, followed by classification questions in order to identify possible patterns. Thereafter, the target questions that are necessary to answer the research question will be asked. According to Blumberg et al. (2014) the decision about the type of data collection is part of phase 1. Phase 2 is about the structure of the interview and is shown in figure 8. The semi-structured interviews will take about 30 - 45 minutes and will be held in person. 3 Semi-structured interviews will be held. Afterwards they will be transcribed and coded in order to find patterns. The 3 interviews will be held with the management of the two coworking space. One of the interviewees has the role of matchmaker, while the other two have a more general manager role. Appendix A shows the questions that are asked in the interview.
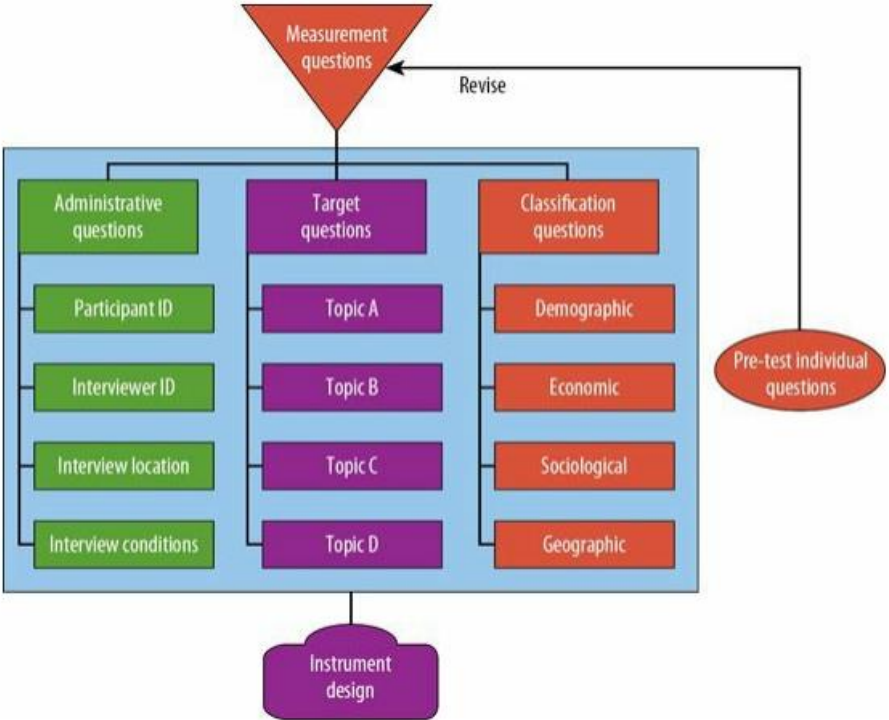

Figure 8: Flowchart for instrument design: phase 2 (Blumberg et al, 2014)

3.3 Surveys

As said before, the surveys will be used as a supplement of the semi structured interviews. The response rate is important, because it can explain and influence the results. Therefore, it is important to take into account the possible reasons why people do or do not fill in the survey. Also, some personal data will be collected. Again, the anonymity of the participants should be guaranteed and therefore the personal data will be anonymized. According to Blumberg et al. (2014) other obstacles should be considered. First of all, the respondent bias, it is possible that a respondent interprets the questionnaire differently than the researcher intended. Or that the respondent does not have an opinion but feels obligated to have one. Secondly, the researchers' bias. It is possible that the researcher interprets the results differently than the respondent intended. In order to deal with this, the survey includes open spaces in which the respondent can add comments when one thinks that the question or the answer is not clear. Further, open questions are preferred above closed questions, in this way the respondent can explain themselves more clearly. Lastly, the way of data collection does matter. The survey will be diffused by the providers of the coworking space in order to receive as many responses as possible. In this way users are more likely to fill in the survey, because it is shared by someone they know. Filling in the survey takes approximately between 10 and 15 minutes. The questions that are asked in the survey are shown in appendix B.

The survey at Growing Emmen was filled in 8 times. Knowing that there are 250-300 members at Growing Emmen and the survey was sent out in the app of Growing Emmen, the response rate is approximately 3%, which is not very high. However, the survey asks questions about how someone is learning in the coworking space and why people visit the coworking space. Hence, wat matters is their personal experience. Therefore, these 8 surveys are useful for this master thesis. Furthermore, secondary data of this coworking space is used to complement the results. The next section will further elaborate on this.

3.4 Secondary data

The secondary data used in this master thesis is part of a marketing campaign of Growing Emmen. According to Blumberg et al. (2014) it is important to answer some questions to decide whether secondary data is suitable to use. Those questions are

about the purpose of the data, the scope of the data, the authority of the data, the audience of the data and the format of the data. Below the considerations of using the data will be discussed. The purpose of the data used is to promote the coworking space and is part of a marketing campaign, therefore the data is accessible online for everyone. The data mainly consist of positive information about the place and focuses less on the barriers of interaction, therefore the data can only be used in certain parts of this research. It can be used in the part of how the learning effect occurs and how the interaction between the members has started, because this information is factual and is not solely based on an opinion. The marketing campaign consists of 2 parts, both will be used in this master thesis. The first part consist of 19 members elaborating on their experience first meeting another member, and building a relationship with them. This is part of the marketing campaign 'making each other stronger'. For the second part of the marketing campaign, entrepreneurs talk about their experience with entrepreneurship and what the role of the coworking space is in 40 podcasts episodes. Therefore, this data is particularly suitable for exploring the underlying success of interaction between members of the coworking space. Because the podcast series is still uploading new interviews, this case study only uses episodes 1 to 40. Apart from, the disadvantage that the marketing campaign cannot be used for all parts of the thesis, there are also some advantages of using this secondary data. Namely, that someone else is asking the questions, which can lead to a different view on the subject than that of the researcher (Blumberg et al., 2014).

3.5 Ethical issues

As there are participants involved in the master thesis, data gathering comes with some ethical considerations. The information provided by the interviews and surveys can be privacy sensitive for the person as well as for the business. Therefore, it is important to store the data at a safe place during and after the research. During the research the data is stored at the X-drive of the university. The interviews, surveys and observations will be anonymous. The coworking spaces of which only the interview with the manager will be used in this master thesis will remain anonymous and will be referred to as coworking spaces in the Netherlands. However, in consultation with the management, Growing Emmen will be is mentioned by name. The results of the interviews and surveys are only visible for myself and my supervisor. After the master thesis is finished

the interview transcript and survey data will be stored at the repository (Y-drive), only accessible by the supervisor, of the university and will be deleted after five years. The participants will sign a document of informed consent in which they give permission that the given information may be used in this master thesis and that the data will be stored for five years at the Y-drive of the university.

3.6 Limitations

There are some limitations in this research that should be taken into account. First of all, regarding the interviews. Those will be held in Dutch, because that is de primary language of the respondents. Often, one can express themselves better when speaking in their first language. However, some ideas can be lost in translation. Furthermore, there likely will be a respondent bias as well as an interviewer bias. The respondent can interpret the question differently from what the interviewer intended. Or the interviewer interprets the answers of the respondent differently from what the respondent meant. To counter this, the interviewer will try to be as clear as possible during the interview and may ask for clarification when they think that there might be a misinterpretation. In order to reduce biases in the survey, it consist mainly of open questions. When the respondent interprets a question differently than the researcher intended, the researcher is more likely to notice it. However, open questions are not always possible. Therefore, the last question of the survey is about remarks the respondents wants to make.

Chapter 4 Results and discussion

This chapter presents an overview of the results obtained through semi-structured interviews, surveys, and secondary data. These findings will be analysed in relation to the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review, and subsequently discussed to address the research question. The chapter's structure closely mirrors that of the literature review to ensure coherence and alignment.

4.1 Data overview

This study employed a multi-method approach to data collection, including three semi-structured interviews with providers from two coworking spaces. These interviews were held in person. One of the interviewees functions as a matchmaker within the community, actively fostering connections among members. Two of the interviews were held at Growing Emmen, while the other interview is held at another coworking space in the Netherlands. Additionally, eight users of Growing Emmen completed a survey about their experiences.

Furthermore, the marketing campaign of Growing Emmen is incorporated into the results. This campaign includes short interviews with 19 users (Named: making each other stronger) about successful collaborations that emerged at the coworking space. It also consists of 40 episodes of a podcast series in which users discuss their experiences with entrepreneurial growth and the influence of the coworking space. The first episode was recorded on February 11, 2021. The series is still uploading new episodes, but the latest that is used in this case study is the recording of May 27, 2024. Notably, the last 5 episodes used have a new interviewer compared to the first 35 episodes. In three episodes the learning effect at Growing Emmen is not specifically mentioned, therefore these three are excluded. Also, two of the episodes are with the same people that I interviewed in person, therefore these two episodes are also excluded.

The other coworking space does not provide additional information about their members on the internet, and because only one person from that coworking space completed the survey, only the interview will be used to address the questions regarding the learning effect outside the coworking space and the impact of the management.

The table below contains administrative details about the respondents off both the interviews, the surveys, the making each other stronger campaign and the podcast series. The details of the podcast series are randomized, the numbers are not corresponding with the number in the podcast series.

Interviews	Function	Starting date at coworking space	Date	Coworking space
R1	Manager of the parent company	September 2023	15-05-2024	1
R2	Secretary and responsible for the community, events, marketing, projects, and office rental	May 2018	23-05-2024	2
R3	Matchmaker and community manager	Almost 3 years	23-05-2024	2

Table 1: Administrative information interviews

Surveys	Gender	Age	Work status	Coworking space
R4	Man	50-54	Self-employed	2
R5	Woman	50-54	Self-employed	2
R6	Man	45-49	Self-employed	2
R7	Woman	45-49	Self-employed	2
R8	Man	55-59	Employee of a medium company (49-249 employees)	2
R9	Woman	50-54	Owner of business	2

| R10 | Woman | 50-54 | Employee of a small company (<50 employees) | 2 |
| R11 | Woman | 45-49 | Self-employed | 2 |

Table 2: Administrative information surveys

Podcast	Gender
P1	Man
P2	Woman
P3	Man
P4	Woman
P5	Man
P6	Man
P7	Man
P8	Man
P9	Man
P10	Man
P11	Man
P12	Man
P13	Man
P14	Woman
P15	Woman
P16	Man
P17	Man
P18	Man
P19	Woman
P20	Man
P21	Woman
P22	Man
P23	Woman
P24	Man
P25	Man

P26	Man
P27	Man
P28	Man
P29	Woman
P30	Man
P31	Woman
P32	Woman
P33	Man
P34	Man
P35	Man

Table 3: Administrative information podcast

Interview	Number of members involved in the interview
Interview 1	2
Interview 2	2
Interview 3	2
Interview 4	3
Interview 5	3
Interview 6	3
Interview 7	2
Interview 8	2

Table 4: Administrative information 'making each other stronger'

4.2 Why do people start visiting a coworking space?

The literature review identified the main needs of coworking space users. The following 5 categories were presented; social needs, business networking, knowledge exchange, productivity and physical well-being. Figure 9 shows the needs of the users of Growing Emmen, based on the survey they filled. The respondents were allowed to select multiple answers. All of the respondents filled in networking. The next most selected answers are social needs and visiting events. Social needs was also identified by the providers of the coworking space as an often-heard reason for visiting the coworking space. Based on the podcast series again networking appears to be the most mentioned reason for self-employed to become a member of Growing Emmen.

Additionally, getting clients and working together with like-minded people instead of working alone are often mentioned.
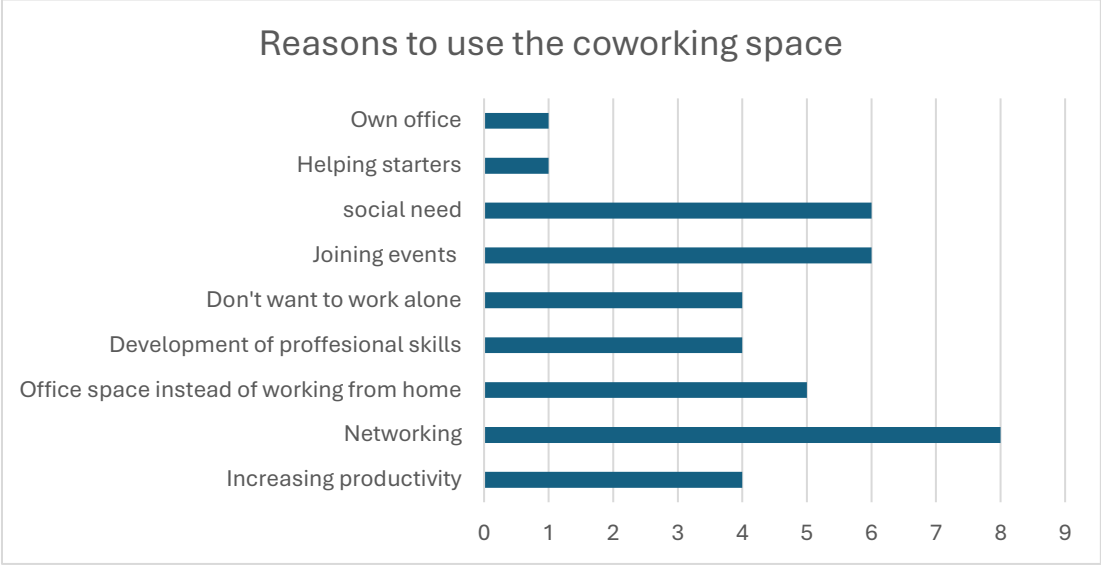

Figure 9: Reasons to use the coworking space based on the survey (2024)

According to the podcast series, the social need arises especially from the fact that being an entrepreneur can be lonely, one works alone, and has to make all the choices by themself. For those who previously lacked connections with other entrepreneurs, the coworking spaces offer immediate value by providing a sense of recognition and community. Also, social needs, like talking about personal troubles and sharing information with each other appear to be of significant importance. Furthermore, according to R2 it should be noted that entrepreneurs have a specific mindset that is not alike to other people. Entrepreneurs are innovative and go-getters. That is their power, but thereby the need arises to meet people that are alike. This enhances the social need in coworking spaces. Beside those needs, entrepreneurs should first hear about the coworking space in order to become a member. Furthermore, the needs of users of coworking spaces can differ between regions. For example: respondent 15 of the podcast series compares the west of the Netherlands with the north of the Netherlands, as she lived in the west before moving to Emmen. She notes that in the north, people tend to focus more on personal connections rather than results, which can enhance the emphasis on encounters over the type of lease contract.

This case study has found the following ways in which people became familiar with the coworking space: entrepreneurs may discover the place through people in their or their friend's network, through other entrepreneurial communities or because the physical

location is remarkable. R5 and R7 gave the latter as the reason how they get into contact with Growing Emmen. It is an impressive building in a visible location, which made them curious. The latter is a particularly interesting group of new members, because they are probably in other networks than the current members. Since, they do not join the community because they already know members. As a result the community keeps growing and stays varied.

Furthermore, the literature review identified the type of lease contract, accessibility of the location and the distance from home as important conditions for potential members whether they become a member of the coworking space or not. Based on the interviews and podcast these conditions indeed play a role. Growing Emmen, as well as the other coworking space, offer a variety of lease contracts in order to meet the needs of the members. Members can choose for themselves whether they want to have access to all services all the time or to have a less extensive membership. Furthermore, they can decide whether they want an office space or want to work at flexplaces. This appears to be important, because the members have different needs: while some members are mainly a member of Growing Emmen because they need office space, others value the network and the social interaction more. Further, the accessibility of the location and the distance from home are important considerations. It is observed that members of both coworking spaces predominantly come from the nearby area. Members who have a longer travel time believe it is worth the effort because their membership at Growing Emmen adds significant value to their business. This added value is particularly evident in the networking opportunities, as will be discussed in the following sections. Respondent 4 of the podcast series states the following:

"On the other hand, you also deal with entrepreneurship and building a network. The way I resolved this was by becoming one of the office managers at Growing Emmen. Essentially, you are then treated to an established network and interact with people who are in the same situation, like-minded individuals. This inspires me to keep going and face challenges head-on."

4.3 Learning through the presence of other professionals

Users of a coworking space have multiple avenues for interaction. They can convene in communal areas such as the coffee corner or lunchroom, at the flex spaces, cross paths in the hallway, engage through the digital app provided by Growing Emmen (specifically in the subcommunity circles), attend events and workshops, or be

matched by a dedicated matchmaker within the coworking community. All in all, there are enough ways in which the members of the coworking space can meet and interact with each other. After the members have met each other, collaborations can arise. Besides the above avenues for interactions members can also start a collaboration because they were introduced to each other by a mutual connection. However, many collaborations originate from regular encounters within the coworking space or through the matchmaking services offered. Sometimes, it's a combination of these factors that lead to collaboration. The informal interactions appear to be very important as the basis of interactions. As well as experiencing pleasure at the coworking space. Also, the needs of the entrepreneur and the reason why the entrepreneur is a member of the coworking space largely determines the outcome of the interaction and the number of interactions the member has. All of the respondents of the survey said that they have relatively a lot of contact with other members and that they are satisfied with that. The podcast does not always provide information about the amount to which the members are satisfied with the interaction. However, several interviewees cite that they value the autonomy in Growing Emmen: that one can decide for themselves whether they want to attend events and be present at the lunch and how often they visit Growing Emmen. Like respondent 14 of the podcast series who says the following:

"You can seek out people if you wish, but it is not obligatory. You can join groups, but it is not required, so you can shape your participation in Growing Emmen according to your own preferences, and I find that very appealing. The freedom to engage without obligations, except for the monthly financial contribution, is very liberating. You are free to participate in everything, but there is no requirement to do so. This flexibility is very pleasant."

Respondent 7 also mentioned autonomy as an element of the workplace which she likes, she says the following:

"It offers both tranquility and interaction. You can seek out what you need."

The app of Growing Emmen also plays an important role in the feeling of autonomy a member has. Members can be active in the community in the way they want to be. According to the management of Growing Emmen, members can disable notifications for topics they are not interested in. When they open the app, they can still see the messages, but you not be overwhelmed by them.

There are several ways in which members learn from each other in coworking spaces. The literature review identified mentoring opportunities, sharing tools and programs, collaborating on several projects, brainstorming and receiving and giving feedback. The foundation for learning is a strong community and the right people with the right mindset who are involved in the coworking space. Section 4.3 and section 4.4 will further elaborate on that. In line with the literature review the case study shows several ways in which learning in a coworking space can arise. Based on the self-collected data and the secondary data the following ways in which learning arise are identified. First of all, users can learn because they start a company or spin-off together with other members of the community and thereby, they learn from each other and they learn what running a business is like. This can both be with entrepreneurs who have the same or differing skill sets. Secondly, members of the community can also do short term collaborations with each other. They can learn from each other's skills and way of working. Also, in terms of business opportunities, members can help each other. They can give each other feedback, tips, clients or the right equipment. In this way members can improve their professional skills, like communication. The same happens when members are sparring or brainstorming with each other and yield novel creative ideas. All members have a common denominator, namely entrepreneurship. Hence, members in two different sectors can share their ideas of how they look at a particular part of business and learn from each other. Others learn from other community members through product or service testing, where one user evaluates the offering of another, enabling the provider to refine their product or service based on feedback. The tester of the product or service can learn from the experience or from the product or service itself, for example when the service is about helping others with starting a business. However, the collaboration can change over time. As can be seen in the 'making each other stronger' marketing campaign with the interviews with 19 members. One of the members of interview 2 state the following:

"At that time, I knew nothing about entrepreneurship, and I wrote my business plan with her using the tool that is still in use today. I was an early adopter! It's so useful to think about your plans in this way."

"In mid-2023, we reached a turning point where coaching was no longer necessary, and we became sparring partners for each other. We are very good at reflecting on each other's ideas. When I have a thought, she asks, 'Have you considered it this way?' It's a great synergy! Now we can collaborate remotely because since October, we have shared an office at Growing Emmen."

Belonging to a community, sparring and learning from other members can also lead to an increase in self-confidence, which can contribute to the success of one's business. Furthermore, less experienced entrepreneurs learn from more experienced entrepreneurs through their network and experiences. In turn, the more experienced entrepreneurs are interested in the way that younger people view entrepreneurship. Social needs again appear to be of significant importance. Members learn that there are indeed like-minded people, with whom you share the same challenges. Together they can talk about it and learn how other people handle these challenges. Another way of learning that takes place in this coworking space is through the organization of workshops and events. Those are facilitated by the provider, but users also collaborate with each other to organize events. Attendees of these events can learn from the organizers, who in turn develop skills and complement each other's strengths in event management. Furthermore, friendship is a solid foundation for collaboration or receiving small favors from each other. The power of this community is that it is not solely based on business interaction, but rather on building a strong community in which collaborations are founded on trust. In addition to trust, it's worth noting that reciprocity is also an important factor for successful collaboration in coworking spaces. Both receiving and sharing information are important for learning. For example, in the semi structured interview the management said the following:

"Everyone has a certain specialization, whether it's specific knowledge, a network, or an experience they have gone through in their life. We believe that everyone can learn something from another member. You also possess this. If you share your expertise with the community even once, you receive something in return 249 times. That's quite a return on investment. So, even if you are there for yourself, share your knowledge once and see what you can get back in return."

Hence, the learning effect in the community is very high. The podcast series is a great example of the sharing of information to other members of the community. The podcast interviewees shared their stories about how they became entrepreneurs. They discussed that challenges they faced as well as the factors and people who were particularly helpful to them. Each podcast concludes with asking the interviewees for tips they would offer to other entrepreneurs.

Although, we should not forget that learning through other professionals is a very complex process. However, in order to understand the learning effect in coworking spaces, it is important to understand the whole process. This means that in order to

achieve the learning effect in coworking spaces, we first have to know how the attitudes, values and knowledge in the coworking spaces can match among the members. As will be discussed in the following sections, and shown in figure 10, community building and the impact of the management impacts the amount of trust and autonomy in the coworking space, which affects the matching values, attitudes and knowledge of the members.
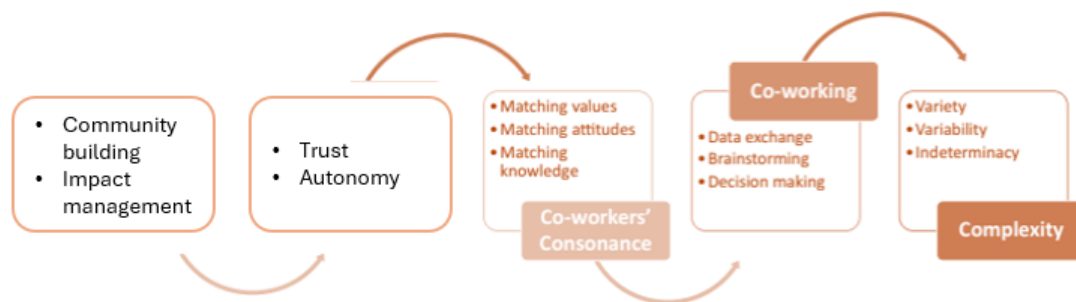

Figure 10: Complexity of coworking, expansion of figure 2 (Hysa and Themili, 2022) (2024)

4.4. Impact of the providers of the coworking spaces

This case study shows that the providers of the coworking spaces largely influence the learning effect and community building, especially in the start-up phase of the coworking space. A first example of how providers influence the learning effect is through the architecture, it is important to carefully think about the architecture of the place. The goal of the coworking space in this case study is to facilitate encounters. In order to achieve this goal, the architecture of the place should allow encounters. This requires conscious choices. In addition to office spaces that can be rented, the providers should provide enough open spaces where members can meet each other. As to the literature review concluded there should be places where people can focus, collaborate, socialize and learn from each other. All those elements are presented at Growing Emmen. In their own office, members can focus, while in the flexible workspaces, they can collaborate and learn from each other. The coffee corner and the lunchroom are places where people can socialize, work together, and exchange knowledge. Further, the literature review presents several arrangements of the workplaces that can enhance learning. The respondents of the survey experience the architecture of the place positively. Respondent 5 says the following:

"An inviting and vibrant environment that encourages conversation with both familiar and unfamiliar members. You can learn a lot from these interactions."

Respondent 6 says the following:

"Focused on contact and informality, it is a place where you meet new people and help each other with challenges."

There are enough open spaces where people can meet informally, but respondent 10 also mentions that there are also enough places where people can work in silence. Members can also have their own office space in which everything that is needed is available. However, in the survey there was one member who sometimes experienced the office spaces as negative. Some offices always have a closed door, which makes it difficult to connect with those members. The same member would like more coffee corners on different floors, in order to make it easier to meet members that work on a different floor. On the other hands, as presented in the literature review and confirmed by the podcasts, the autonomy also appears to be important for users; members like to have the choice whether they want to work in silence or in open spaces or whether they want to attend events an be present in the lunchroom and at coffee. Though, the choice of different kinds of workplaces in the flex workspaces is limited, as the several arrangements of the workplaces as presented in the literature review do not seem to be used. However, this research will not go into depth about the learning that occurs a the flex workspace, because those places where not often mentioned in the podcast series and the interviews with 19 members that are part of the marketing campaign 'making each other stronger'. It might be interesting to adjust the flex workplaces to adjust the flex workplaces to a more diverse setting in which people can choose in which setting they want to work. On the other hand, members that have their own office are free in how they can work in the setting they like the most or are most productive in. Thus, the office places are more in line with the literature review about the arrangement of the workplaces.

A second way in which the management has an impact on the coworking space is through the amount of ownership that the members experience. It's important to balance the number of events you organize as a provider and how many events you let your members organize. By organizing events as a provider, you can underline topics that you as a provider consider important. Though, the members should have some feeling of ownership in order to feel responsible for the success of the coworking space. Therefore, it is important that they have the opportunity to organize events themselves. The providers of Growing Emmen mentioned that at the beginning it was

hard to find the right amount of ownership for the members to experience, but in time the right balance was found. However, it remains important to communicate with the members and be aware of their needs.

Third, as presented in the literature review, trust is important in coworking spaces. The providers of the coworking space play a vital role in this. When people want to join the community, the provider can explain the norms and values in the coworking space during the intake and reject people who do not seem the have the right intentions. However, this alone is not always sufficient. Additionally, there should be some form of social control during the membership. In turn this enhances trust in the coworking space. The interviews with the 19 members (part of the marketing campaign 'making each other stronger') show that trust in Growing Emmen is very important and the basis of collaborations.

On a scale of 1 tot 5, do you trust other members with sensitive information about your business or ideas?

5. Always
25.0%

4. Often
75.0%

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is trust in this coworking space for you?
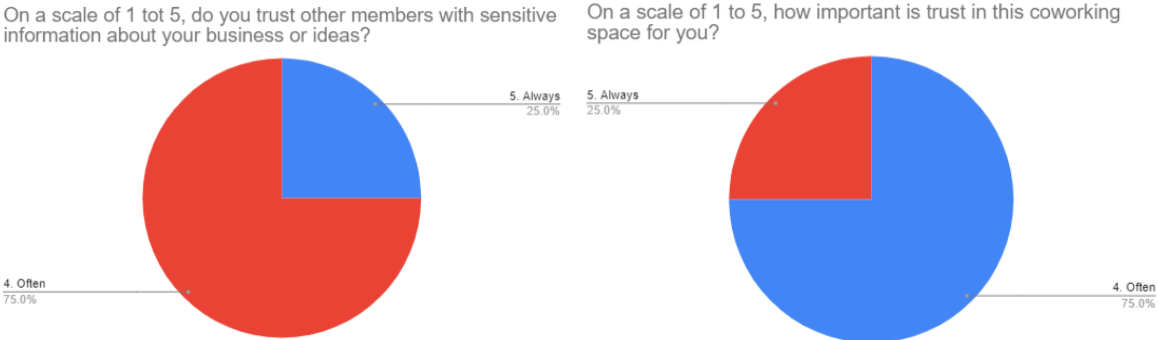
5. Always
25.0%

4. Often
75.0%

Figure 11: Trust at Growing Emmen, based on the survey (2024)

The survey also highlights the importance of trust in the coworking space, as can be seen in figure 11. The podcast underlines the importance of trusting each other and the effects on the learning within the coworking space. Trust is the basis for collaboration and for people in Growing Emmen to get clients, because members know each other and trust each other. Looking at the conceptual model, trust was only included in the model in relation to the learning effect within the coworking space. However, it can be argued that trust is also a mediator between the management and the learning effect within the coworking space. The management impacts the amount of trust in the coworking space, for example by controlling the community at the intake. However, this research has not enough evidence to state that with certainty.

Actively matching members to each other also appears to be an important factor for the provider to influence the amount of interaction in the coworking space. This is somewhat remarkable since it has not been mentioned a lot in the literature, Bouncken and Reusch (2016) mentioned upcoming matchmaking services but did not further elaborate on it. Actively matching members takes place in multiple ways and contributes to the learning effect as well as the community building. The coworking space studied here has a community manager with the role to actively match members. Everyone who is a member of the community is involved in the matchmaking process: every new member is matched to 2/3 members by the dedicated matchmaker who works for Growing Emmen, which leads to around 30 matches per month. This way everyone is actively involved in the community, and is offered opportunities to learn. Those matches can lead to new business opportunities, but also to friendships. Social needs and networking are important needs of the members, actively matching fulfills both needs. Besides the matchmaking process during the intake, the providers also connect people to each other at events or in the lunchroom. This is possible, because the providers of the coworking space are almost always present at the coworking space and are involved with the members. Though, it remains important that the community also keeps itself running. To achieve this goal, the management provides important places and activities such as the lunchroom, social events and business events. Lastly, the management of the coworking space provides a digital app in which people can join a subcommunity. In this way people are matched on the basis of a topic or interest, the sub communities are not solely focused on the business, but also on pleasure, hobbies and friendships. Here, the provider does not actively match members, but they facilitate a tool that makes it easier for members to find the people they are interested in.

4.5 The importance of community building

As presented in the literature review, community building is of increasing importance in coworking spaces. A strong and healthy community leads to an increasing enthusiasm of members to be present at events. The management of the coworking space can enhance the community building by facilitating ways to make new members feel welcome. The management tries to do this by matching new members to 2/3 other members and by introducing them in the digital app of the coworking space. In this way new members have some contacts in the coworking space, but other members are

also aware that someone is new and can pay extra attention to them. The management of the coworking space also notes that pleasure, building friendships and trust is very important in order to have a strong community. Furthermore, the intake at the beginning of a membership is a form of social control beforehand. When someone does not have the right attitude, they will be refused as members. The right mindset and the right people are important in order to remain a strong community. Members should feel safe and comfortable when they visit the place.

Some barriers to interaction and community building exist. For example: respondent 5, 6 and 9 noted that some people are not often present in the coworking space. When other members are not often present in the coworking space it can be difficult getting to know them. This is something the management team tries to tackle by talking to those members who are not often present. Though, it is still important for the users to experience autonomy. Furthermore, as one of the interviewees said:

"in every community there will be some people that are often presented and others who are not, that is not necessarily a bad thing. It is important for every member to experience value in the coworking space."

Respondent 8 notes difficulty in making spontaneous contact with strangers as another possible barrier of interaction. However, the management team has a focus on new people and are willing to help them make contact with other members. Respondent 3 of the podcast series identifies another barrier to interaction, namely that it can seem that everyone in the community is very successful and barely experience difficulties. This can make members feel insecure and less willing to share their difficulties. This is issue has been addressed. In the podcast series: it highlights both the successes and challenges of entrepreneurs.

4.6 The learning effect outside the coworking space

As presented in the literature review, the management mainly influences the learning effect outside the coworking space. For my analysis all three interviews will be used, because the results of both coworking spaces are relevant for answering this part of the research question. The survey does not contain enough relevant information about this part of the research question and therefore those answers will not be used in this section. Some podcasts highlight the contributions of members to the learning effect outside the coworking space. The conceptual model has not taken this relationship into

account, but because of the outcomes of the podcast this relationship will be discussed in this section.

The literature review presented diverse ways in which the learning effect within the coworking space can be extended to the environment the coworking space is situated in. One of those ways is to make events accessible for individuals who are not part of the community. Both coworking spaces that are investigated in this research indeed make some of the events accessible for external parties and individuals. However, not everyone is always welcome, which makes sense because it should be beneficial to be part of the community compared to not being part of the community.

Both coworking spaces do indeed focus on engaging with parties and individuals outside the coworking space. Growing Emmen has observed that once a community is well-developed and maintains a positive image, it attracts attention from external entities such as municipalities and knowledge institutions seeking collaboration. These entities value partnership with Growing Emmen because they offer services tailored to (young) entrepreneurs, a target audience these entities often find challenging to reach. Coworking spaces facilitate these entities' access to their target audiences. Moreover, Growing Emmen, together with the municipalities and knowledge institutions, developed a new program for starting entrepreneurs. Such a program directly benefits the community and its surroundings by offering young entrepreneurs support and opportunities for starting their businesses. This is also in line with the mission of Growing Emmen to make a contribution to the local environment. By acknowledging the importance of the environment, the learning effect outside the coworking space can increase.

Furthermore, the podcast reveals that at least six members of Growing Emmen are committed to contributing to the local community. This commitment aligns with their membership at Growing Emmen, as they believe that being part of the organization facilitates their efforts to benefit Emmen. Thus, it can be observed that not only the management of Growing Emmen strives to contribute to the local environment, but its members also share and support these values.

Again, this shows the value of matching attitudes and values, not only between the members, but also with the management. This can explain the success of Growing Emmen.

4.7 The perception of entrepreneurial success

The perception of entrepreneurial success among the members of Growing Emmen was assessed through the survey. Due to the limited number of respondents, the results are not sufficiently robust to draw definitive conclusions. However, the findings will still be discussed as a foundation for further research. Additionally, the results will be analyzed to determine their relevance and potential connections to other findings in this study.

In the survey, two questions were asked about the perception of entrepreneurial success in coworking spaces. These questions focused solely on the relationship between the coworking space on entrepreneurial success. Although it is possible that this relationship is two sided: the entrepreneurial success might also impact the learning effect within the coworking space. However, that aspect is beyond the scope of this research.

Figure 12 presents the survey results regarding the extent to which members experience growth or success as a result of being part of Growing Emmen.
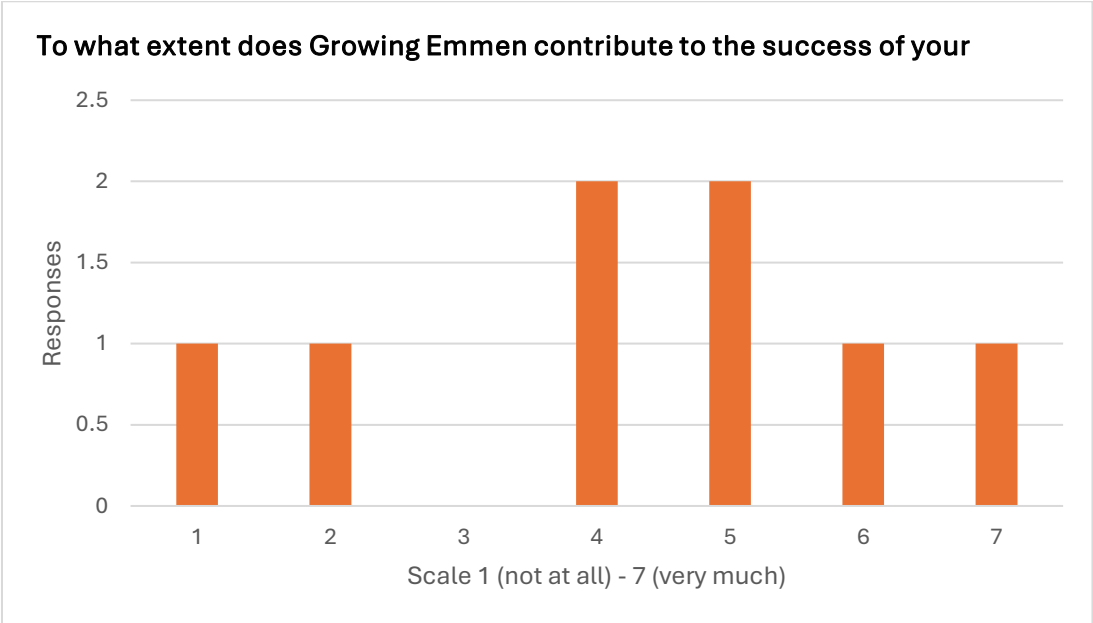

Figure 12: Contribution to the success of the business/job, based on the survey (2024)

The responses are quite diverse, but when combined with the answers to the question about what success in their business means to them, the responses become more coherent. For instance, the respondent who rated a 7, indicating that Growing Emmen significantly contributes to their business success, defined success as growth in profit. The respondent who rated a 6 associated success with increased productivity. Another respondent who rated a 5 defined success as the ability to embrace new opportunities and turn them into successes. Conversely, respondents who rated a 2 or 4 mentioned that their clients are not typically present at Growing Emmen, thus they do not directly experience business success as a result of their membership. The respondent who rated a 1 noted that he might not be representative of this survey, as he is a member of a medium-sized business and enjoys mentoring aspiring entrepreneurs, though this does not contribute to his own work; he simply finds satisfaction in helping others start their businesses. In general, all the members who rated below 5 did answer earlier in the survey that they are a member of Growing Emmen especially for the network and the social interaction and not necessarily for increasing their productivity or achieve business growth.

In the podcast series and the interviews with 19 members (Part of the marketing campaign: 'making each other stronger') of Growing Emmen, several members discussed their learning experiences and reasons for visiting Growing Emmen. While they did not explicitly state the extent to which Growing Emmen contributes to their entrepreneurial success, they did explain the value they derive from it. Many members mentioned that although they could work from home, they choose not to because they recognize the added value of being a member of Growing Emmen. This includes social interaction, networking as well as productivity increase.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

This master thesis answers the following research question, using a case study at Growing Emmen.

How do the learning effects inside as well as outside a coworking space, primarily used by self-employed people, take place and how does this contribute to the perception of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

Earlier research has shown that coworking spaces leads to learning, innovation and new businesses. However, a research gap exist about how this learning takes place. 4 sub questions are used to answer the research question.

Sub question 1: What are, based on the literature, the characteristics of coworking spaces that are mainly used by the self-employed (and employers and employees of SMEs)?

According to the literature review the most important characteristics of coworking spaces used by self-employed are the type of lease contract, the accessibility of the location and the distance from the residence. In this case study at Growing Emmen, this is not necessarily the case. The main characteristic of Growing Emmen are more related to network opportunities and social needs; the need of encounters with other entrepreneurs. The distance of the location to the residence does appear to be important, as a lot of members of Growing Emmen live nearby Emmen. The focus on encounters instead of the type of lease contract can likely be explained by the availability of coworking spaces in the region. Emmen is located in a rural area, with a low population density. Compared to other cities, there is a limited supply of coworking spaces. Furthermore, members of coworking spaces in the north might focus more on personal connections rather than results, which can enhance the emphasis on encounters over the type of lease contract.

Sub question 2: To what extent does the management of the coworking space support and consciously influence the learning effects inside and outside the coworking space?

This study found that matching attitudes and values of the members play an important role in facilitating learning. The management can influence this at the intake of new members and by often being present in the coworking space. Further, the management can enhance collaboration between members by actively matching members. They also play an important role in collaborating with municipalities and knowledge institutions in the region. Additionally, the members should also experience a sense of ownership of the coworking space. The management may influence the goings of the place, but the members are key to its success. The entrepreneurs that are present at Growing Emmen are go-getters and have the right DNA to make the place a success.

Sub question 3: To what extent do users of coworking spaces interact with each other and how does this interaction occur? How do these interactions facilitate learning?

The amount of interaction in coworking spaces can differ between spaces, but also between different members of the coworking space. The basis to facilitate learning in coworking spaces is very complex and starts with matching attitudes, values and knowledge in the coworking space. This is something the coworking space has to develop over time.

The interactions can occur in different ways. An important way is to actively match members to each other, this also enhances community building, which in turn can enhance the matching of attitudes and values of community members. Other ways in which interaction can occur at the co-working space is through informal meeting spots, such as a coffee corner, lunch table, in the hallway and at informal events. Collaboration as a result of formal interactions can occur through the app and business events such as workshops and networking events. The outcomes of the interactions are very diverse. Some lead to new business or long time collaborations, while others lead to receiving small favours or friendships. The latter may be a result that's specific to Emmen, as most of the members live near Emmen. Compared to other cities in the Netherlands, Emmen is relatively small and, as said before, more focused on personal connections rather than results. This may make people more inclined to want to build friendships, especially with like-minded individuals.

Sub question 4: How do coworking spaces contribute to the perception of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

Considering the results, it's difficult to make strong statements to answer this question. However, the amount of success the self-employed experience as a result of visiting the coworking space, depends on the main reasons why he or she is visiting the place and in which industry they are in. Members who visit the coworking space because they do not want to work alone, are more likely to give a lower rating to the success they experience as a result of being a member at Growing Emmen. Someone who visits the place because they want to increase their productivity, however, is likely to give a higher rating. This does not mean that the first group does not learn or does not experience added value of being a member, they just value social need fulfilment more than business needs fulfilments.

All in all, the learning effect in coworking spaces is a very complex process in which several factors play a role. Such as: management, members with a unique entrepreneurial mindset, autonomy, pleasure, community building, reciprocity, matching values and attitudes, and open and closed workspaces. All these factors elevate the coworking space to a successful place which enhances learning. Because of the complexity, a right combination of these factors is hard to identify. The right combination also depends on the location. In Emmen, members might be more active in the community because there are less alternatives in the area, making them more likely to remain at Growing Emmen. The complexity of presenting the right combination of these factors for different locations is beyond the scope of this thesis, therefore I won't be elaborating more on this.

5.1 Limitations

This research has its limitations. First of all, regarding a bias in the data collection. Respondents of the survey are probably more integrated in the coworking space than users that did not contribute in this study. Furthermore, the marketing campaign that was used in this study mainly consist of data about why members do interact with each other and less on why people do not interact with each other. For this case study this is not that problematic, but it can bias the results a little bit. Though, some barriers of

learning are mentioned, further research should elaborate on that in order to say more about the barriers.

Another limitation of this case study is that it can be hard to generalize the results to other areas. Growing Emmen is located in Emmen, the province of Drenthe in the Netherlands. The demographic, geographic, social and economic details of this place potentially influence the success of the coworking space.

5.2 Further research

As discussed in the above section, some limitations of this study exist. Some of them are related to further research.

Further research can expand the conceptual model that is presented in the literature, because some relationships potentially are both ways instead of the one way as shown in the conceptual model. Unfortunately, that was beyond the scope of this research.

Furthermore, it can be interesting to compare the results found in this research with other coworking spaces in regions with the same or other characteristics. In this way generalization of the results may become possible. Lastly, Further research can also go deeper into dept about the learning effect outside the coworking space.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide Providers

Thank you for having me. This interview will help me to answer the research question of my master's thesis.

> How do the learning effects inside as well as outside a coworking space, primarily used by self-employed people, take place and how does this contribute to the feeling of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

By 'learning effect within the coworking space' I refer to the extent to which individuals learn from one another through: using the same tools, acquiring new skills, networking, etcetera. By 'learning effects outside the coworking space' I refer to the extent to which the learning that occurs within the coworking is applied in the surrounding region. Additionally, to what extent individuals who do not use the coworking space can still benefit from those who do.

Administrative questions	
First question	**Sub question**
What is your function in the organization?	
	How long have you been working in the coworking space? (
Classification questions	
First question	**Sub questions**
How often are you present in the coworking space?	
Did you already work there when the company was founded?	
	If yes: Can you tell something about the design of the coworking space? If not: What do you know about the choices regarding the design that have been made when the company was founded?
Target questions	
First question	**Sub question**
What type of users mostly make use of the coworking space? (self-employed, companies (large or small), young adults etc…)	
What are the facilities this coworking space offers to the users?	
What are the main objectives of the coworking space?	
Do you have the idea that the users of the coworking	

space are in close contact with each other?	
	If yes: How do you notice? If not: Is that something you want to change and why or why not?
To what extent are you, as a provider of the coworking space, involved with the users of the coworking space?	
	Do you organize workshops and seminars for the users of coworking spaces?
	If yes: Are they also accessible to individuals outside the coworking space?
Do you have the feeling that you, as the provider of the coworking space, largely influence the users of the coworking space? (in their behaviour, the learning effect etc.)	
To what extent are the users of the coworking space involved in the architecture of the place?	
Do you have the objective to make a contribution to the learning effects outside the coworking space?	
	If yes: What are the objectives and how do you want to achieve them? If not: Do you have the idea that you make a contribute to the learning effect outside the coworking space, besides the fact that it is not an objective?
What is de influence of Covid-19 on the coworking space? Do you have anything you want to say or add to the answers?	
Do you have anything you want to say or add to the answers?	

Appendix B: Interview Guide Users

Thank you for participating in my research. Your contribution will help me complete my master's thesis in Economic Geography at the University of Groningen.

> How do the learning effects inside as well as outside a coworking space, primarily used by self-employed people, take place and how does this contribute to the feeling of entrepreneurial success among self-employed people?

The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. You are free to stop filling out the survey at any time. Participation is entirely voluntary. By submitting the form, you consent to your responses being used in my research. If you use other coworking spaces in addition to this one, please focus your response primarily on this coworking space. If your response pertains to another coworking space, please indicate this accordingly.

Administrative questions	
First question	**Answer**
What is your function?	Self-employed / student / employee of a small firm (<50 employees) / employee of a medium firm (49-249 employees) / employee of a large firm (>250) / other, namely
How long ago did you start visiting the coworking space?	
How often do you visit the coworking space in a month?	
Classification questions	
First question	**Answer**
How do you identify yourself	Man / woman / I'd rather not say
What is your age	
Target questions	
First question	**Answer**
How did you find this coworking space?	
Why do you make use of this coworking space? (multiple answers possible)	
Are you satisfied with the amount of interaction you have with other users?	Yes, relatively much, and I like that. Yes, relatively less, and I like that. No, relatively much, but I prefer less. No, relatively less, but I prefer more. Other, namely…
When (and where) do you have interaction with other coworkers?	
What have you learned while working at this coworking space?	
What did you hope to learn when visiting the coworking space for the first time / What do you hope to learn?	

Do you have the idea that there are barriers that lead to resistance to interact with other coworkers?	
On a scale of 1 to 5 do you trust the other coworkers?	1 (not at all), 2 (sometimes) 3 (neutral) 4 (often), 5 (Always), don't know /not relevant
Do you find 'trust' in coworking spaces important on a scale of 1 to 5?	1 (not at all), 2 (sometimes) 3 (neutral) 4 (often), 5 (Always), don't know /not relevant
What do you like about the work environment and how is this influencing the learning in this coworking space?	
What don't you like about the work environment and how is this influencing the learning in this coworking space?	
To what extent does the coworking space contribute to the success of your business?	
How do you measure the success of your business or how do you define success? (multiple answers possible)	Self-attributed / growth in employees / increasing profit / increasing revenues / the learning itself / other namely, …
Did Covid-19 influence the learning in the coworking space?	Yes, negatively (less learning) Ja, positively (more learning) No I don't know, not applicable
Do you want to add something to your answers or leave a comment?	