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Addressing work-from-home challenges through rural coworking

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Public employees request a hybrid workplace solution. However, to some employees, working from home poses challenges such as a lack of an office infrastructure and feelings of loneliness. To overcome these challenges and secure decent work conditions during remote work, the private sector, and freelancers have used local coworking spaces (CWSs). With the increase of hybrid work arrangements, the public sector needs to ensure that employees have decent onsite and remote working conditions, in which CWSs could function as an alternative to home-based work. Through a 1-year qualitative evaluation project, 15 public employees tested hybrid work in which they combined work at the centralized office, from home, and at a local CWS. Data were collected through surveys with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. The results from the content analysis show a diverse picture of participants' perceptions regarding the use of CWSs. When there was a lack of users and a decent physical work environment, public employees preferred to work from home. On the contrary, when adequately designed, CWSs provided employees with social interactions and became an integral part of the local community. These findings suggest that introducing local CWSs can promote sustainable work if they align with employees' needs.

KEYWORDS

sustainable work, rural coworking, public sector, work-life balance, wellbeing

1 Addressing work-from-home challenges through rural coworking

Most knowledge workers are requesting a hybrid work model (Lund et al., 2020; McKinsey and Lean In, 2023; Mitchell, 2024) for spatial flexibility (i.e., work from the office, home, or elsewhere: Halford, 2005; Vartiainen and Vanharanta, 2024). Working partially remotely saves several hours of commuting each week, which employees spend on work performance (i.e., behaviors that support fulfilling organizational goals: Grant et al., 2007) and their wellbeing (Williams and Shaw, 2024). However, for employees who thrive on social interaction, working from home can lead to feelings of loneliness and negatively impact mental wellbeing (Langvik et al., 2021). Additionally, due to family situations (e.g., sick relatives or children at home) or socioeconomic factors (e.g., lack of adequate Wi-Fi and workspace), not all employees have a supportive work environment at home (Gurstein, 2023).

To maintain the benefits of working locally and address work-from-home challenges, freelancers, and private sector employees have been using coworking spaces (hereafter CWSs) for shared office infrastructure (e.g., workstations, meeting rooms, and lunch facilities), and social interactions (Spinuzzi, 2012). CWSs are office environments where individuals, teams, or organizations work side by side, benefiting from social interactions

within their cross-organizational work community (Johns et al., 2024). Thus, a CWS is distinct from home-based work and traditional office environments (Bouncken and Reuschl, 2018; Spinuzzi et al., 2019). However, within the public sector, there are variations in the use of CWSs. For example, in Australia, a country with extensive rural areas, ~50% of the public workforce has adopted the hybrid work model, which, to many, involves utilizing CWSs (Houghton et al., 2018). In Scandinavia, there are examples of public actors also using CWSs (Di Marino et al., 2018). However, in Sweden, the public sector largely lacks coworking experience, thereby overlooking this workplace solution when planning for the remote part of hybrid work (Rex and Westlund, 2024). Worldwide, most CWSs are in urban and metropolitan areas (Statista, 2023), but in Sweden, the highest concentration of CWSs per capita is in rural tourism regions (Rex and Westlund, 2024).

Jämtland Härjedalen, one of the Swedish tourism regions, is in northwest Sweden, bordering Norway. It covers an area of 50,000 km² and has a population of ~132,000 inhabitants (Regionfakta, 2023). The region's natural resources, numerous outdoor activities, and the rise of remote and hybrid work have made it a desirable location for lifestyle migration (Business Region MidSweden, 2025). Despite this, public actors in the region face challenges in attracting and retaining highly skilled workers while also aiming to create a vibrant countryside beyond the ski resorts and the city of Östersund. Subsequently, one of the public actors in Jämtland Härjedalen sought to evaluate whether providing a third workspace, a local CWS near employees' homes, could enhance employer attractiveness, maintain the benefits of remote work, and reduce the challenges associated with home-based work (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021, 2022, 2023).

As the perspective on where to work has changed, researchers have examined the advantages (e.g., improved work-life balance: WLB) and disadvantages (e.g., increased loneliness) of hybrid work arrangements (e.g., Eng et al., 2024; Ferreira et al., 2021; Gurstein, 2023; Itam and Warriar, 2024). One way to improve the hybrid work model is to explore how to maintain its benefits and limit its challenges. Similar to the positive experiences seen with CWSs in Australia, particularly in rural and non-metropolitan areas (Houghton et al., 2018), this aspect is important to consider when investigating ways to ensure decent hybrid work conditions in rural regions of other countries (Nordregio, 2024; Rex and Westlund, 2024). Therefore, this study qualitatively explored the perceptions of public employees in a rural region of Northern Sweden regarding their work conditions and outcomes when given the option to combine work at the centralized office, from home, and at a local CWS.

2 Method

In this one-year evaluation project, 15 (out of 17) public employees participated (i.e., convenience sampling was used). The participants were aged 37 to 64 years ($M = 51$ years), with 11 identifying as women and four as men. To protect participant integrity, age is not displayed at the gender level, nor are their roles or occupations within the organization. All participants lived and worked in a geographically vast rural area of northwest Sweden. Their typical one-way commute was 100 to 200 km to their office

in Östersund (hereafter referred to as the centralized office), often by car due to limited public transportation options. In this project, participants combined work from the centralized office, home, and a local workspace. The local workspaces were either established CWSs or, in a few cases, newly created office spaces for the project. All CWSs were in municipalities near the participants' homes. The local Research Ethics Committee of Mid Sweden University raised no objections from an ethical perspective. Participants consented actively after being informed about the study, their participation, data storage, and data processing.

Interviews and surveys were used to provide in-depth insights into employee perceptions. There were three occasions of data collection: (i) a pre-measure through an online survey ($n = 11$) with open-ended questions about perceptions of hybrid work and expectations of local coworking, (ii) semi-structured interviews ($n = 7$) focusing on the pre-/onboarding process, initial experiences of work environmental conditions, and work outcomes, and (iii) a post-measure via an online survey ($n = 15$) with open-ended questions concerning work environment conditions, performance, and wellbeing.

The data were analyzed using a manifest summative content analysis (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) with pre-defined areas (Rivas, 2012) related to: (1) Perceptions of work conditions and (2) Perceptions of work outcomes. Using qualitative content analysis, abstraction, and interpretation occur during data condensation and coding, as well as categorization and thematization (Lindgren et al., 2020). Abstraction involves reorganizing the content, moving it apart and together (e.g., through coding and categorization), whereas interpretation (when adopting a manifest approach) focuses on participants' voices being heard through the researcher's understanding of the informant and the available data (Graneheim et al., 2017). Within the results, "a few" represents one to three respondents or CWS(s).

3 Result

Two themes were created for each pre-defined area. The first pre-defined area was (1) Perceptions of work conditions, which included: 1.1. Introduction and physical work premises affect perceptions and use of the CWS; and 1.2. A critical mass of CWS users is needed for an enriching social environment. The second pre-defined area was (2) Perceptions of outcomes, which included: 2.1. Work at CWS improved services to the citizens and employer branding; and 2.2. WLB and wellbeing were supported when working locally.

3.1 Perceptions of work conditions

Respondents requested an adequate introduction and decent physical and social prerequisites at the CWS to reduce work-from-home challenges, thus adding extra value. Most participants reported spending around 40% of their work hours at the CWSs. They expressed that a 50/50 distribution between working locally and at the centralized office brings out the best in their three workplaces. The distribution between workplaces was influenced by various aspects such as: (a) organizational-driven,

with designated in-office days; (b) task-driven, with specific tasks better suited to conduct at a particular workplace; (c) CWS-driven, due to specific activities at their CWS; and (d) wellbeing driven, related to what was offering best recovery and work-life balance.

3.1.1 Introduction and physical work premises affect perceptions and use of CWS

Respondents expressed how the initial guidance from the employer, the introductory visit at the CWS, and having a CWS manager available for information about rules, routines, keys, and codes for alarms played a vital role in fostering a positive start and enriching ongoing experiences within the CWS. Respondents with high expectations for coworking and effective pre-boarding and onboarding processes maintained a positive attitude toward their CWS and used it frequently. Those who expressed skepticism toward coworking and did not receive a proper introduction noted that the absence of clear communication resulted in a rocky start and diminished their enthusiasm for working from the CWS, even over an extended period.

Respondents indicated that CWSs prioritizing comfort and tranquility—featuring adjustable desks, quiet rooms, and designated spaces for meetings and conversations—provided supportive physical work conditions. These environments allowed individuals to engage in discussions without interference from disruptive noise or interruptions. Conversely, in CWSs where respondents felt either disturbed by their surroundings or distracted by their fellow members, physical work conditions were considered as limiting. For example, in these CWSs, respondents moved tasks requiring deep concentration or lengthy digital meetings to their home settings. Respondents emphasized the importance of adhering to established standards for the physical work environment when procuring rural CWSs, as it directly influenced their performance and satisfaction.

3.1.2 A critical mass of CWS users is needed for an enriching social environment

Respondents at well-established CWSs with many users described the psychosocial climate as characterized by openness, curiosity, and inclusion. In CWSs, where there is a critical mass of members, social interactions are seen as inspiring, developing, and rewarding, as all users engage with one another, regardless of their role, work tasks, or organizational affiliation. By using their CWS, several respondents formed new thin ties with members within and outside their organization, thus learning more about their and others' work. However, member utilization was low or non-existent at some of the project's newly established CWSs, which was not a concern for those using the CWS to create a boundary between work and leisure time. In contrast, others felt that the lack of social interactions diminished the purpose of local coworking, leading them to prefer working from home. Additionally, in one CWS, the respondent perceived that both physical and social working conditions were unsatisfactory and, therefore, did not use the CWS at all.

Concerns were raised about the risk of alienation from colleagues if some used the centralized office more than

others. There were also concerns about reduced access to vital information and networks, along with potential bias from managers toward onsite workers compared to those using a hybrid model.

3.2 Perceptions of outcomes

The respondents expressed that the remote part of hybrid work reduced commuting times and alleviated stress, resulting in heightened energy levels, improved work performance, and overall health.

3.2.1 Work at CWSs improved services to the citizens and employer branding

Respondents described that through rural coworking, the organization became more visible to the local citizens and anchored the services throughout the region. They explained how interacting with CWS members deepened their understanding of local needs, giving them invaluable insights for enhancing their services. Respondents also pointed out that working locally (i.e., CWS and from home) enabled them to support surrounding businesses and boost the economy of their communities. A few respondents expressed that maintaining a local presence by meeting CWS members from different organizations provided distinct advantages compared to working from the centralized office and home; these individuals envisioned a future where they could work remotely between 60 and 100% of the time. Additionally, since many respondents could use bicycles, walk, or take local buses to the CWSs, rural coworking offered economic and societal climate benefits, such as lowered commute costs and reduced CO₂ emissions from car travel. Respondents agreed that rural coworking's societal, economic, and climate advantages benefit the organization since it bolsters its reputation as a sustainable and appealing employer. Therefore, individuals who experienced CWSs in supportive environments expressed a wish for the organization to establish rural coworking as a permanent option, suggesting that it would help them retain and attract highly skilled talent employees.

When the CWSs did not provide quiet areas, it sometimes led to performance deficiencies, though this was not always the case. To address this, some respondents worked from home to maintain productivity, while others could work effectively at their CWS regardless of the noisy environment. Despite the positive remote work experiences, most respondents emphasized the importance of onsite work since fostering team spirit and spontaneous interactions with colleagues occurs more effortlessly. Additionally, a few respondents felt more energized and strengthened in their organizational commitment when they met colleagues in person. On the other hand, respondents also reported having satisfied digital interactions with their colleagues, thus feeling a sense of belonging and support in their team performance during remote work. Although onsite work had advantages, commuting to the centralized office was perceived as costly in terms of time, money, and wellbeing, all outweighing more than 50% of onsite work.

3.2.2 WLB and wellbeing were supported when working locally

Rural coworking was seen to support sustainable work conditions for respondents whose home environments were unsuitable or who needed clear physical and mental boundaries between work and non-work activities. Therefore, while working from the local CWS, they experienced satisfying work conditions and clear boundaries between their work and leisure time. However, for most respondents, shorter commutes (i.e., working from home and the CWS) were the most important aspect of improving their WLB and overall health. They expressed that the time saved from shorter commutes alleviated stress and increased their energy for professional and personal activities. The remote part of hybrid work enabled them to allocate time to health-promoting activities. On remote days, whether working at the CWS or from home, respondents report effectively utilizing wellness time, taking walks during lunch breaks, enjoying longer mornings, having energy for exercise after work, and spending quality time with family and friends—activities they expressed as crucial for maintaining health and wellbeing. The participants expressed that increased WLB and health benefit both themselves and their employers; therefore, adopting a hybrid work model was perceived to foster a sustainable work experience. Several respondents argued that rural coworking has become necessary for them to avoid resigning from the organization.

4 Discussion

This study explored how public employees in a rural area of Sweden perceived the work conditions and outcomes when combining work in the centralized office, from home, and a local CWS. The results indicate that respondents with high expectations and a satisfying pre- and onboarding process perceived positive feelings toward their CWS and used it more frequently compared to those with low expectations and an insufficient introduction.

4.1 The role of rural coworking within the hybrid work model

For some employees, working from home does not offer adequate physical and/or social working conditions (Gurstein, 2023; Langvik et al., 2021). Thus, to preserve the advantages of working locally and overcome work-from-home challenges, CWSs were used, as in previous studies (e.g., Bouncken and Reuschl, 2018; Johns et al., 2024; Spinuzzi, 2012; Spinuzzi et al., 2019), to provide office infrastructure and a work community. The respondents held that, during remote work, local CWSs were a good option when they needed office infrastructure, a clear boundary between work and leisure time, and/or people to interact with. However, within the CWSs with inadequate physical work conditions and a lack of users, respondents did not use the CWS regularly since it was not perceived as a better option than home-based work. These differences in perceptions and the use of CWSs may be attributed to the physical and social conditions not fully developed in newly initiated CWSs, which hindered performance and wellbeing. However, some participants at established CWSs

primarily utilized them for social interaction but worked from home (in a quieter environment) when doing tasks including deep analysis, writing, and lengthy digital meetings. Furthermore, many public actors discussed return-to-the-office policies while planning the evaluation project. Therefore, some participants may have applied to the project to avoid a full-time return to the office. This could explain differences in perceptions and use of the CWSs since a few respondents just wanted to keep the remote work benefits without “needing” a CWS. In sum, local CWSs can be beneficial. However, since different reasons, perceptions, and uses can exist, the design of the CWS and individual needs should be evaluated before providing one.

Beyond perceptions of work conditions, outcomes were reported as well. A frequently reported outcome was that respondents experienced tremendously decreased commuting time when working at a local CWS compared to the centralized office. In line with previous research (e.g., Williams and Shaw, 2024), time-saving was related to reduced stress levels, increased energy, better work performance, and improved wellbeing. Therefore, working locally seems to support both performance and wellbeing. Additionally, in rural areas of northern Sweden, winter can lead to traffic hazards, and there may be no public transport options or only one available daily in each direction. This situation can make it stressful for someone needing to leave home later or return earlier, such as when a child gets sick. Therefore, working from home or nearby mitigates the challenges of inadequate public transportation and long travel time. Accordingly, local CWSs could be effective when striving for sustainable work in regions with long distances and scarce public transport options. Yet, for some employees, work-from-home can be as well.

Moreover, while working at the CWSs, participants established new networks, and their interactions with CWS members deepened their understanding of their own and others' organizations. This resulted in insights into members' driving forces, entrepreneurial spirit, and how a cross-organizational community can be supportive in times of change. With a public sector lacking natural bridges between the public actors and citizens struggling with service deficiencies (Ek et al., 2017; Larsson, 2011; Matscheck and Piuva, 2022), these findings indicate something interesting and important. Could CWSs be an arena where public actors can meet and collaborate?

Furthermore, participants also believed that rural coworking helped create a lively countryside by connecting with the local citizens they serve and using nearby services. These perceptions indicate that the migration trend from cities to rural areas (Business Region MidSweden, 2025) could be supported by including rural CWSs in the hybrid work model. In addition, respondents indicated that retaining and attracting highly skilled workers (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021, 2022, 2023) can be supported when employees have the freedom to live where they choose.

4.2 Implications

With the implementation of the hybrid work model growing exponentially, employers' responsibility extends to

include both onsite and remote work conditions. In this case, the public sector can learn from freelancers and the private sector, which utilize CWSs or office hubs to ensure supportive remote work conditions. CWSs can be especially useful since they transformed from shared office spaces into centers for community building. Consistent with previous research, the findings indicate that rural coworking can encourage social interaction and collaboration. However, providing a local CWS does not guarantee added value to all employees; assignment content and prerequisites related to perceived work-from-home challenges are required. Inadequate onboarding, insufficient facilities, and a limited number of users can negatively impact user experiences. In addition, the CWSs must have regular users and offer different areas supporting various tasks to achieve positive outcomes and value for the money. Therefore, before providing a local CWS, employers must examine whether adding a third workplace will enhance employees' performance, WLB, and wellbeing, and if so, whether the optional CWSs fulfill employees' requests and needs.

4.3 Limitations and future research

Since this one-year qualitative evaluation project was limited to 17 employees from one public organization, results, albeit promising, should be used cautiously. For generalizability, a future direction is to use quantitative measures with larger samples of employees from different public actors. Furthermore, exploring rural coworking in the light of different demographics could yield important insights for developing supportive hybrid work policies. Additionally, CWS illustrates a shift in how work can be organized and the potential for increased employee satisfaction when their needs are thoughtfully addressed. Therefore, since public employees' interactions with CWS users were perceived to enhance their services, another direction is to explore whether coworking (as a concept) can facilitate cross-organizational collaborations within the public sector, thereby connecting services among various actors.

5 Conclusion

This study contributes to the landscape of hybrid work by suggesting that integrating quality CWSs into a hybrid work model could maintain the benefits of remote work while mitigating the challenges of home-based work. Also, allowing multiple workspaces reflects broader societal changes in which hybrid work can vitalize small communities in the countryside. Since CWSs, when requested and adequately designed, seem to address work-from-home challenges, a future direction is to deepen our understanding of how local coworking can promote sustainable work across different contexts.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethical Review Board of Mid Sweden University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MT: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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