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### **Towards an Economy of Encounters?**

#### **A critical study of affectual assemblages in coworking**

## **Abstract**

Coworking spaces have been established in great numbers around the globe over the past 10 years. Previous studies on coworking spaces argue that these spaces are designed to enable serendipitous encounters. Here we introduce the concept of an economy of encounters, arguing that both intended and unintended encounters have become a form of production in the knowledge-based new economy. This paper draws upon the critical analysis of three case studies of different coworking settings – two open coworking spaces and a corporate coworking office. Following Deleuze and Guattari, we see coworking spaces as affectual assemblages that create affects that push knowledge workers in flow and motion to enable the formation of new kinds of heterogeneous and constantly changing work communities, where serendipitous encounters become a force of production. We argue that this commodification of a social phenomenon, i.e. the intentional use of affectual assemblages of people, objects and ideas to create serendipitous opportunities, ignores the precariousness of contemporary work. **Keywords:** assemblage, affect, coworking, encounters, precariousness, space, work

## **Introduction**

In recent years, numerous coworking spaces have been established in particular in urban areas. Although the annual growth rate has according to the latest Global Coworking Survey declined from 88% in 2011 to 30% in 2016, the number of coworking spaces and members is growing steadily around the globe (Deskmag, 2017; Foertsch, 2017).

Coworking spaces are generally understood to be shared workspaces where freelancers and entrepreneurs can rent desk space for a membership fee (DeGuzman & Tang, 2011; Jones, Sunstead & Bacigalupo, 2009; Suarez, 2015). As an activity, coworking refers to people working alongside each other at a shared location, where people share not only an office space but also kitchens and lounges for both formal meetings and informal mingling. Thus, as an effect, coworking is claimed to produce unexpected encounters with strangers and these encounters are expected to eventually turn to fruitful ideas, concepts and solutions needed in the creative new economy (Hood, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2015). Similar ideas of coworking have been adopted in multipurpose office spaces in large corporations when refurbishing their office spaces into trendy open-plan spaces that include lounges, cafés, creative spaces and other amenities traditionally not associated with an ‘office’ (Saval, 2014). Hence, coworking spaces and coworking as a practice are at the centre of changing

post-industrial work, a manifestation of what is often called the new economy or the sharing economy.

Conceptualizing an emerging phenomenon such as coworking is challenging as different discourses around coworking are only developing (cf. Spinuzzi, 2012; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). The ideological discourse on coworking is based on an open coworking movement that highlights entrepreneurship and emphasizes how innovation is driven by collaborative practices. The Coworking Manifesto movement proposes coworking to become ‘a new economic engine composed of collaboration and community’ (cf. Coworking Wiki, n.d.; DeGuzman & Tang, 2011; Jones, Sundstedt & Bacigalupo, 2009). Another discourse on coworking is being produced by the coworking industry with its own conferences, software, and publications aimed at space owners and managers on how to grow their business and community (Gandini, 2015; Suarez, 2015). A third discourse, fed by corporate and real estate interests adapts parts of the ideology and movement that fit corporate interests (Bouncken et al., 2016; Garrett et al., 2017; Hood, 2015).

Coworking is attracting attention by academics in different fields. As a recent phenomenon, academic studies thereof have been mainly explorative in nature (see e.g. Spinuzzi, 2012;

[name omitted], 2015; Spreitzer, Bacevice & Garrett, 2015). Various sources provide different classifications of coworking. Potts & Waters-Lynch (2016) divide these into serviced offices, coworking and a mixed form; Kojo & Nenonen (2016) into public offices, third places, collaboration hubs, coworking hotels, incubators and shared studios; and [name omitted] (2015) into jellies, traditional coworking spaces, hubs for specific groups of professionals, accelerators for high-growth start-ups and office hotels. Beyond these typologies, there are coarser and finer approaches, such as Pearce-Neudorf's (2014) division between hackerspace, coworking space, makerspace, and innovation lab, and Kropp's (2017) nine forms of coworking that range between high-end full-service coworking and coffee shops and condominium lounges. A study by Bouncken et al. (2016) of coworking spaces in Asia, distinguishes between corporate coworking spaces (i.e. spaces within large corporations) and commercial coworking spaces (i.e. spaces provided by space managers and owners). The studies of coworking spaces so far show that the use and practices that construct these spaces can, therefore, be very different. However, it seems that space managers and users of coworking spaces strongly believe in this form of organizing in addressing contemporary needs of flexibility in knowledge work.

The ideology of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship that is embedded in the coworking discourse, also highlights its more critical features. The real driving force of coworking and the perceived value of coworking spaces is seen in the new organization of work that brings together individual and heterogeneous workers in the same space, which eventually is said to lead to the formation of new kinds of changing and living communities. The precariousness (e.g. Gill & Pratt, 2008; Sennett, 2006; Standing, 2011) and mobility (Jeanes et al., 2015; Küpers, 2015; Rodda, 2015) of knowledge workers is also seen to be at the centre of this need for opportunities and creating work communities and collaboration (Capdevila, 2013; Merkel, 2015; Garrett et al. 2017).

In this paper, we critically examine the nature of encounters in coworking and this ideology of coworking through the concept of an economy of encounters. With this concept we aim to bind together several different discourses and conceptualizations related to coworking, which argue that encounters have become a form of production in the knowledge-based new economy, as the new economy demands constantly new ideas, concepts, solutions, knowledge and other immaterial artefacts based on creative work, which can be created only through the social interaction and communities. Empirically, we have studied three different coworking spaces - an open plan coworking space, an activity-based office within

a large corporation, and an office hotel and coworking space with both private and shared offices - which we see to represent the different types of coworking spaces.

We approach this economy of encounters in coworking spaces as affective assemblages. With these Deleuze-Guattarian (1980/1987) concepts, we can recognize the work done for and in the economy of encounters. Affectual assemblages offer us a way to follow how these coworking spaces create affects that push heterogeneous and precarious knowledge workers in flow and motion, and why on the other hand people do not engage or seek encounters. Thus, by analysing coworking spaces as affectual assemblages consisting of space, people, machines etc. we are able to compare how different coworking spaces really produce and enable encounters, and also to see how far the encounters are taking place in the living reality of these affectual assemblages. In short, we have studied how encounters appear and are talked about in the everyday practice of coworking.

### **Precarious knowledge work and serendipitous encounters**

The increase in mobile, virtual, precarious, self-organizing and self-controlling work has influenced and continues to influence how work is organised and controlled in post-industrial societies. Office work and office design have adapted to the technological

changes through the move from cellular offices to open plan offices with more flexible and versatile office arrangements such as activity-based offices referred as ‘the activity-settings approach’ (Stone & Luchetti, 1985), ‘club offices’ (Duffy, 1997) or ‘collective offices’ (Felstead et al., 2005; see also Halford, 2005; Halford & Leonard, 2005; Hislop & Axtell, 2007, 2009; Laing, 1997; Saval, 2014).

Within the coworking movement, coworking is seen as a profoundly new way of solving the problem of precarious work and private enterprising in the new economy or post-office knowledge economy (see for example Spinuzzi, 2012; Avdikos & Kalogeresis, 2017). The number of people doing knowledge work alone from their homes is increasing and more and more people find themselves in a precarious position, where the ideals of the new economy seem to be fulfilled only partly, if at all (Bresson, 2007; Cicolani, 2005; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Pennel, 2013). The coworking literature emphasizes how coworking spaces can solve the problems of the contemporary precarious workforce by offering an office space, which brings those who are working alone to work alone together. Coworking spaces function as hubs for chance encounters and community building, bringing people with different backgrounds together and offering chances for exchange (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Lumley, 2014; Merkel, 2015; Spreitzer et al., 2015).

Current research argues that the key tenet and *raison d'être* of coworking is social interactions and encounters (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016; Spinuzzi, 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2015): coworking is considered as a site for knowledge exchange clusters and hubs (Capdevila, 2013; Pearce-Neudorf, 2014). Further, essentially to counter isolation of working from home, it is seen as a site of social learning (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016), social support (Gerdenitsch, 2016), situated and unexpected encounters (Fabbri, 2016), and providing grounds for voluntary-based community-building (Garrett et al., 2016). It also functions as a focal (Schelling) point 'for finding people, ideas and other resources when workers lack the information necessary for coordination.' (Potts & Waters-Lynch, 2016) The value of coworking spaces is thus seen not only in the desk space they offer but in a new kind of open workspace that is based on a community of heterogeneous people encountering each other serendipitously.

There are only very few critical reviews of the coworking to date (Gandini, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Karppi et al. (2016) argue that in affective capitalism 'encounters and the relations that emerge are surrounded by a vast array of technologies that produce, capture, valorise, commodify and eventually attempt to transform them into different

modes of capital' (p. 10). These ideas of community and serendipitous encounters in the organization of coworking capture the tension between the planned and the designed workspace on one hand, and the free and individualist worker or entrepreneur on the other.

In recent literature, the phenomenon of encounters in coworking spaces has been conceptualized as serendipity or accelerated serendipity (DeGuzman & Tang 2011; Spinuzzi 2015; cf. Dew, 2009). Serendipity can be seen as unpredictable by definition, and thus unmanageable. However, according to Cunha et al. (2010), there are different views on whether serendipity can be managed. By systematically tapping into various kinds of knowledge and managing an 'innovation pipeline', serendipity can be deliberately constructed. Serendipity can be also seen as a combination of planned and unplanned activities:

...[M]anagers may need to accept that learning and discovery may be programmed but also, in some cases, non-programmed. (...) managers may facilitate strange connections, mix networks that normally do not blend and assume that organizing is as much about freeing than it is about controlling. (Cunha et al., 2010, 328)

The phenomenon where chance encounters create added professional, personal and economic value has, in the context of coworking, also been called ‘asynchronous reciprocity’ (Olma, 2013, p. 19). In Spinuzzi’s (2015) framework, this kind of flexible organizing and ability to react to emergent issues is the basic principle of all edge adhocracies, organizations that are able to react to real-time changes in the business environment or in client behaviour.

All these descriptions imply that enabling encounters are the *raison d’être* of coworking. In this respect, encounters can be understood as commodities, particularly located in regulated spaces, such as activity-based offices and coworking spaces where the contemporary precarious workforce operates. Thus, we suggest that these aforementioned ideas of enabling, creating and producing encounters in coworking can be conceptualized as an *economy of encounters*. Using the concept of an economy of encounters helps us to draw together several discussions on coworking and the new economy as it conceptualizes workspace as an organization that is constantly in the stage of becoming, as a dynamic instance of spacing (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012). The economy of encounters can be also seen as a rhizomic form of organizing, the way Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) describe it, where any point of the rhizome is connected to any other point. The rhizomic organization

connects also very different things, in a similar fashion than a wasp and orchid need and feed each other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987: 10). An economy of encounters also shifts the focus from physical space (that coworking regularly is associated with) to the multitude of moving and changing relationships between people, systems, and objects, thus helping us to concentrate on the study of exchange and interaction of the spaces and people, that is, to the activity and practice of coworking.

### *Affectual assemblages*

Similar to Munro & Jordan (2013) who work on spatial tactics and the politics of smooth space, we study the motions and flows of people and things across various kinds of workspaces. In order to understand these motions and flux in the economy of encounters, we draw upon Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the relation between affect and space, which gives us a way of understanding physical and social space, and human interaction (Colebrook, 2005).

In his theory of affects, Deleuze (2006, 68-72; see also Gregg & Seigworth 2010) defines affects, contrary to personal emotions, as pre-personal sentiments and sensations caused by the motions of the external bodies on a subject's body. Thus, with affects we understand

material motions (or lack of them) coming from the outside such as the warmth of the sun, sound, and light. These motions have an effect on us and they cause sensations, feelings and eventually also emotions or passions, but only after they have been interpreted individually and socially. However, before entering our conscience and before naming these motions with the codes given by our culture and language, we sense these motions as affects that basically cause two kinds of motions in us: we either go towards those things that cause pleasant affects in us, or we try to avoid and move away (aversion) from those things that cause bad affects (see also Spinoza, 1996). In our research, we observed how space design and work organization caused affects and motion in coworking spaces, and also how people told about their feelings and emotions related to coworking and encounters.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages are made out of multiplicities in motion. They are unique and temporal, while at the same time related to and dependent on other assemblages, movements, and multiplicities. Assemblages are always made out of materiality and expression (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 54, p. 632-634). DeLanda, elaborating on the theory of assemblage, argues that assemblages are not closed, but instead connect and relate through exteriority. This means that one can always disconnect one

component of an assemblage and reassemble it in another assemblage. The component part adapts and learns; it does not break down or become dysfunctional when it faces a change (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 92-94; DeLanda, 2006, p. 22-23). Assemblages are always in the state of becoming, and full of potentialities, but they are also possibly vanishing, changing and collapsing temporary (un)organizations (see also Linstead & Thanem, 2007).

Following Deleuze (1977), Deleuze & Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, p. 629-630) and DeLanda (2005) we use the term *affectual assemblages* for these unique combinations of relationships that form an individualized workspace. Affectual assemblages can function as a description of unique constellations taking place in different coworking spaces that include spaces, social groups, individuals and tools in constant change and motion. This way affectual assemblage provides a conceptual framework for analysing our empirical data. With the concept of affectual assemblage, we want to grasp the temporal and contingent situation that draws people to encounters or hinders them from taking part inside different coworking spaces.

## **Methodology**

Following the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of affectual assemblage, we have studied three different workspaces with the aim of understanding the motion, encounters and disruptions of people, things, and technologies. Although Taylor and Spicer (2007) and Hirst and Humphreys (2013) criticize the contemporary studies of organizational spaces as focusing too much on the micro-practices within the ‘four walls’ of organizations, we argue that for our purposes concentrating on situated micro-practices is a legitimate choice: it is only through the focus on specific places that the complex networks and organizing of contemporary work can become visible (cf. Halford, 2005; Wapshott & Mallett, 2012). Taking a performative approach to space, or ‘spacing organization’ as proposed by Beyes and Steyaert (2012), we approached these research sites ‘attuned to the material, embodied, affective, and multiple sides and sites of organizing’ (p. 53), aiming to acknowledge the performative nature of the production of space and ‘everyday spatial becoming’ (p. 47).

Accordingly, our aim was to follow the motions and interaction of people and things across different coworking spaces in order to understand how contemporary assemblages of coworking are created. We see that encounters were rarely happening in special moments of coworking, which we studied in order to understand where and how the social interaction and formation of the community took place.

The empirical data was collected in a collaborative and interdisciplinary research project on changing workspaces. We had the opportunity to collect data from three different workspaces in three different countries. A criterion for selection was that the spaces explicitly promoted cooperation and subscribed to trends in coworking. The first site, here called Strawberry Fields (SF), described itself as an office hotel and a coworking space. SF is located outside the immediate centre of a major European city and it was chosen primarily as the building in which it is housed was being transformed from traditional high-tech knowledge work in the 1970s to a space for creativity and innovation. The firms operating in SF were primarily in the creative industries, but other industries were also represented. The second site was the local office of GlobalTech in another major European city. This space was chosen as it had often been presented as the state-of-the-art office space in the country. The space was designed as an activity-based office in order to support flexible work arrangements, i.e. it could be described as a coworking space within a corporation. The people working in the space worked with marketing and sales within an IT firm. The third case study focused on Bird Cage, a coworking space in a major city in the USA, where local freelancers and entrepreneurs rented temporary workspace. Bird Cage

was chosen as one of the researchers in the project already worked in this space. Bird Cage also represented a typical example of the open coworking model.

The fieldwork at all sites included interviews and observations of both social and material interactions. In SF, author 4 and another researcher from the group were provided desks for a few consecutive days. Originally, shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007) was to be conducted at SF, but for reasons of access and the constraints of the material space, the shadowing focused on specific spaces rather than people. Some of the days both observers were present, but in different parts of the space. Together the two observers made extensive field notes of 10 days from morning until members left the space around four o'clock in the afternoon. Altogether 35 different members of SF were also interviewed, and the interviews lasted between 30 min and an hour. In GlobalTech, the choice was made to make observations of a team in order to see how they used the space. Five employees of a team were followed for one working day each. Again, extensive field notes were taken from early morning until late afternoon each day. Both these five employees and an additional four other members of the team were interviewed. Even though the interviews were guided by the topics of the research project, they were tailored by taking the setting, the interviewee, and the observations into account. In total, the data gathered by author 4 at GlobalTech included interviews with 9 different employees and 5 days of observations. In

Bird Cage, author 3 worked from the space 2-3 days a week on various weekdays for a period of a year and wrote research diary. Other empirical materials included interviewing 15 members plus numerous informal, one-on-one conversations. The data sets from all cases also included websites and print material about the spaces and organizations. Although there are differences in the data sets regarding the observations, the data collection was guided by the same questions and made by researchers working on the same project. The interviews at each site were also used to validate the observations made in each site.

The writing up of our data follows Beyes and Steyaert's (2012) idea of spacing organization, which implies a 'performative practice or research writing that takes on experiments in its attempts to perform situated, embedded and sensuous figurations and that considers its own research performances as a practice of minor politics' (p. 56). We have chosen to present the data in the form of three narratives (cf. Czarniawska, 2008; see also Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011), one for each site, showing the discourses, practices, material culture and meanings of each research site. Stewart writes: 'I write not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter' (Stewart, 2007, p. 5). As it is impossible to give a

comprehensive view of any one site, we have instead aimed to narrate and embody the spaces through glimpses of the situated practices of each locale. Each narrative is written through the voice of the researcher in the field. In the narratives, we have indicated who of the authors was in the field and wrote the original narration. The narratives have been collectively analysed and edited for this publication. The narratives focus on the material culture, meanings and social relations that are performed in and through each space, highlighting both similarities and differences, while maintaining the perspective of a curious, ambiguous and intrigued researcher. The current re-telling is organized around the theoretical framework of affective assemblages. The challenge has been to maintain the detailed thick descriptions, while focusing on similarities and differences in the motion and flow of people, objects, and ideas in the different spaces.

### **Stories of coworking**

Affectual assemblages can help us understand why people seek – and avoid – encounters as part of their everyday activity in coworking spaces and why coworking spaces are designed in a way that strongly supports these encounters. Hence, by studying the affectual assemblage, i.e. the changing physical and social constellations in the three different

coworking spaces, we can show the multiplicity of encounters in co-working. In the following, we will discuss the encounters and affectual assemblages that the different spaces produced.

*Strawberry Fields – co-working over coffee (Author 4)*

The coworking space Strawberry Fields (SF) was established in 2008 as ‘a design office and a creative collective’. Occupying 300 square metres and made up of eight companies, SF began as a place where (creative) companies could inspire each other and cooperate in bigger projects, ultimately forming ‘a project office’. SF has since grown into an office hotel and a ‘coworking space’ with 80 companies covering over 2000 square metres over three separate floors. The initial tenants were from the creative industries, but by 2014, SF provided space for companies ranging from graphic design to municipal engineering. SF itself employed two people, the proprietor, and his assistant.

SF resided in parts of an office complex originally built for a high-tech company and the offices largely resembled an IT company from the 1980’s: a row of offices on each side of a long corridor on each floor. Most of these offices were now being rented as designated

offices, but some consisted of shared rooms for two to four people, and one was a 'drop-in room' with six hot-desking spots for freelancers.

The long corridors posed a challenge for interaction between people in the space. However, the glass windows made the rooms 'feel less like a closet' (Carl), and created a feeling of movement and activity for those staying in the office and working, making 'one feel more as a part of something else' (Philip) as 'you see each other all the time' (Henry) even though you did not speak to them. The different floors were connected by a 'very slow' elevator and the tenants seldom had reason to move between the floors. 'It was a nice place to work when it was two floors and the people that ran it were sitting in the same area' (Helen). People also tended to use the nearest kitchen, creating two separate zones on the first floor, connected by a corridor that was 'pretty long and narrow, so you're aware of the ones who are on this end but not really the ones at the other end' (Joanna).

In order to observe moments of encounters, I ventured to the kitchen. While the corridors were rather bleak in colour, the kitchen areas offered a mellower feel with bright yellow accent walls. Once in a while, somebody entered the kitchen, but that seldom led to any communication. During my observations, on some days around lunch or during an

afternoon coffee break, the emptiness was replaced by lively discussions on, for example, local politics or stories from daycare. Those who did not want to get involved quickly grabbed their packed lunch from the fridge and returned to their office.

When I asked about these informal social gatherings, some declared the value of social aspect, enjoying interesting discussions, especially with people in similar lines of work, and thereby being inspired by others or being able ‘to get perspectives on things’ (Lucas). Some appreciated being able to share the concerns of a small business owner. In practice, many of the tenants were curious about each other and presented themselves and their companies when meeting new people in the kitchen. ‘Not that I would bump into everybody and have a chat for 15 minutes with every single one of them every single day. That’s really not the way it works. But sometimes if you are in the kitchen and there is someone else, it’s easier to have a conversation.’ (Ben)

The proprietor wanted to develop SF to a ‘cross-innovation platform’ and ‘a meeting place’, where meetings would lead to collaborative projects between the companies. The role of the ‘space manager’ was taken thus by the owner and his assistant. One initiative with this aim was the Wednesday coffee break organized by the hosting tenant company. However, attendance had dropped drastically during the past few years and there had been

long breaks with no hosting schedule and hence no shared coffee break. Many referred to the lack of time as the reason for not meeting other members in SF:

I don't have time to prioritize sitting and having a coffee break downstairs 1-2 hours per week...

You will always prioritize your own work before you start coming up with things to do with other people because that's what you have to do. (Sara)

The main motivation for the co-workers at SF to join the space seemed to be simply that 'I didn't want to sit alone in the small space' (Sara) and to be part of a social context (e.g. Sara, Carl), not the explicit need for co-operation and knowledge sharing, although the wish for such interaction did exist (e.g. Jonathan, Ben, Paula). As Spinuzzi (2015) notes, this is not uncommon in coworking spaces. Thus, at SF, the members were not really able to grasp the important moments of encounters and the office space did not push people to meet each other. Instead, most of the work at SF clearly took place individually in silence, a feature underlined by Spinuzzi's phrase of coworking as 'working alone together'.

The proprietor wanted SF to be a co-working space similar to how Spreitzer et al. (2015) see these spaces, as a productive nest of motivated and innovative workers sharing their knowledge. However, the material space affectively limited serendipitous encounters to the

coffee rooms. As Sara pointed out, coffee rooms were important spaces for socialising, the interactions were experienced primarily as a social context rather than as important moments for developing connections (cf. Fayard & Weeks, 2007). Or as Alex explains: ‘I needed just a comfortable place where hopefully there’s coffee and there’s some people to chat with maybe, and I can have a desk where I can get some work done.’ The precariousness of many of the tenants and their very diverse backgrounds also seemed to make them prioritize their work at hand (e.g. Sara, Alex, Paula and Diana), similarly as in the study of Potts and Waters-Lynch (2016). However, encounters in SF can also be understood through an appreciation of and desire for proximity as demonstrated in the quotes above; an appreciation and recognition of other people in similar circumstances providing the possibility of engagement in encounters that can be realised later.

*GlobalTech – always available online (Author 4)*

Since 2011 the regional sales and marketing office of GlobalTech, an international IT corporation with a staff of 250, had followed the flexible work principles established within the company. The office space had recently been remodelled from open-plan to an activity-based office with big open spaces, phone booths, meeting rooms with frosted glass walls,

and varying décor to create different kinds of office ambiances. Though the redesign of the office at GlobalTech was partly motivated by a need to reduce costs, it was also intended to enable more flexible and individual work arrangements, and create a flexible, partly virtual workplace community. According to promotional materials about this initiative, the company adopted flexible work arrangements in order for work to be more ‘inspirational and fun’, and to ‘increase innovation, cooperation, efficiency and wellbeing at work’.

I watched people at work in the office by sitting in a corner of a coffee-shop-like area on the first floor. On that particular day groups of two to four people sat on broad bar stools around white square-shaped desks, discussing with their laptops open. People seemed to proceed with a sense of purpose as they got up in order to go to a privacy booth to take a call, to the toilet, to talk to a co-worker, to grab a cup of coffee, or to leave the office with outerwear on. Sometimes they would stop by a desk in order to ask something or their progression was interrupted by the sitters-by. Many also sat by a desk, looking at the external screen connected to their laptop, and tapped away their chores.

The spatial organization of GlobalTech intentionally tried to create motion inside the office. As people would not have a designated desk, they would every day seek a spot that would

suit their needs for the particular work at hand. They would also seek out the people they needed to work with.

Based on the flexible work principles, the office was designed as a meeting place where discussions and meetings would come about spontaneously. The narrow space between the kitchen island and the cabinets tended to become a popular chatting spot, especially during what could be referred to as the coffee rush hours. People sitting at the tables in the coffee shop area, or even working at the white desks in front of a laptop and an external display, would stop passers-by or the other way around. Once a couple of people started to chat, others would often be attracted to join in. Harry – who lived 90 miles from the office – valued these impromptu chats and liked to be

away from the meeting rooms and rather to be in the coffee house areas or other were people who you have not met in a long time pass by. You can then have a word with them. (Harry)

For the interviewees, ‘being at work’ was understood as ‘being available to work’ (Karen) or being ‘responsive’ (Harry), experienced through an open laptop, answering the phone or making calls, being at or commuting to the office, but foremost through the instant messaging system. The presence status in the instant messaging system was also what

marked one's availability to other people, mostly as 'green' ('free to be made contact with') or 'red' ('busy').

The days in the office seemed to be intensive but quite fragmentary, with a list of planned tasks, but with many unplanned interruptions. The work was also fragmented by the multitude of on-going projects, and the need to switch between various tools for different tasks, especially when fetching information provided by others. Their work was regularly interrupted by the ping of the company's instant messaging software, and they would answer short inquiries or make these inquiries themselves. 'Shouts' in the instant messaging software were a method of asking quick questions or set up quick meetings, still, physical meetings were preferred to purely virtual communication:

One of the worst parts of this job is [...] that interacting with people is so mechanical, that those daily kinds of encounters are missing. You don't meet people in the same way [when you are] on the net. (Iris)

...if you work someplace else [than the physical office], you don't have those spontaneous physical meetings, and they don't happen virtually either because you don't chat with anyone spontaneously virtually. That in a way, if you see somebody at the office, you can spontaneously speak with them. (Karen)

While sitting in an open-plan office can easily be distracting, to Anne communication through instant messaging, e-mail, teleconferencing and the like enabled more focused work. The flip side of flexible work and virtual communication was that the sense of community had somewhat deteriorated. All this gave a rather different context to several company slogans written on the wall, which celebrated the power and importance of the community.

Unexpected encounters took place primarily in the cafeteria space at GlobalTech. These encounters were embraced, but the employees were guided by managerial imperatives rather than individual choice as they worked for the same employer and towards shared goals. In the organization, there were people dedicated to the process of developing the space and enabling serendipity. Encounters at GlobalTech could also heavily rely on people getting connected through shared systems and the intranet. Being constantly available, fragmented their workday with constant interruptions. These virtual encounters would take place strictly around shared tasks and be initiated by alerts from software. It also made some of them longing for personal encounters. While the workspace gave an illusion of a level of freedom of how to engage in encounters – not dissimilar from that of an

entrepreneur and freelancer, individual employees were bound by the obvious expectations and limitations of a large corporation and its agenda.

*Bird Cage – entrepreneurial encounters (Author 3)*

The coworking space Bird Cage was founded in 2012, and at the time of the study, it housed 30 seats for around 80 members. Due to part-time memberships and daily passes, there were typically some 20-25 people present. The members were typically entrepreneurs, freelancers or small business owners. The open-plan space comprised of five large groupings of tables, and people chose their spot anew every day. Whereas open-plan offices are regularly found to create a noisy and visually restless work environment (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007), this was not an issue at Bird Cage – many members said that the atmosphere reminded them of a library, to a degree that some would have preferred more social interaction. The basic rule in the shared workspace was to keep the noise to a minimum, so phone calls should be made elsewhere (kitchen, upstairs meeting rooms, backyard). Any encounter, while potentially creating value, was also seen also possible interruptions of individual workflows.

There was usually quite a bit of movement in the space, as people were entering, leaving, walking or turning to each other, going to the kitchen or restroom. Occasionally you could find a dog sniffing at your sneakers. Most of the time the space would be fairly quiet as members would focus on their individual work at hand. Despite the silence, everybody was actively communicating as all of the members had several external networks and connections that they worked with. The space-internal social connections resembled that of a regular office: people talking about the weekend and local happenings, spending time together during lunch, going for an after-work drink, and sometimes falling into relationships.

In comparison to the coworking cases described above, Bird Cage represents an ‘open’ form of coworking: there were neither designated workplaces as at SF nor was there a business organization or managed community either as at GlobalTech. One of the few rules of Bird Cage was that you had to choose your space daily, which forced people into motion. Most of the socializing took place in the kitchen, and in the summer, the backyard served the same function. A community had formed around lunch in the upstairs kitchen, a welcome opportunity to chat with others. The weekly social hour on Thursday evenings from 6 to 7 enabled those attending to get to know each other better. Usually the co-owners,

and sometimes receptionist introduced people to each other. In the interviews, the social aspect of not wanting to work alone was given as the main reason for choosing coworking over working at home or in a coffee shop.

Bird Cage did explicitly promote chance encounters (on web pages or when introducing the space), and though this was not visible in any form in the space itself, many co-workers mentioned how attracting it was to meet all these people with different backgrounds and professions. Serendipity was expressed in various terms:

I call it coincidental opportunity. By that, I mean a chance for people to bump into each other. (Jim)

Members also saw that bringing different skills together could lead to a ‘cross-fertilization’ of ideas and ‘people do different works’ that provided ‘a chance to ask questions’ (Jim).

If you choose coworking you don’t want to work alone. Other people might find [working alone] productive, but I need human interaction. We can talk, we can meet other people. (Susan)

There were a number of examples from Bird Cage where the intention of cross-pollination of ideas and chance encounters really led to practical cooperation and business between people who did not know each other previously.

The encounters within Bird Cage primarily took place at social events or during coffee or lunch breaks. Established co-working practices had here been adopted (cf. Spinuzzi, 2012; Aranda, 2015; Garrett et al., 2017) to encourage interaction among members. Therefore, becoming a member of the co-working space came with an expectation to contribute to the space. However, the precariousness of the members also made them more focused on their own work at the expense of building relationships (John). Members could also abruptly leave the space as their circumstances would change (Nora and Robert). This possible decoupling of connection was on the other hand recognised as natural among freelancers.

### **Discussion - designing serendipitous encounters**

We have approached encounters in coworking spaces through the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of affectual assemblages, focusing on the everyday interactions and people's accounts thereof. In what follows, we will discuss our findings by analyzing the similarities

and differences concerning the formation of the affectual assemblages and how they produced encounters in three different coworking spaces according to our case studies.

Our cases all indicate in different ways deliberate attempts to construct affective assemblages of material spaces and people to enable serendipitous encounters. Social encounters require that people need to be pushed in *motion*. All the workspaces we studied attempted to create motion – towards a coffee machine or a place, a lobby, a shared common space, or a motion towards shared goals (see also Fleming & Spicer, 2004; Felstead et al., 2005). By creating motion in and through the workspace, both physically and virtually, opportunities are created for encounters. Thus, we see that the ideology of creativity, innovation and knowledge sharing was indeed embedded into the workspaces. This ideology relied on people to engage, in order to create affectual assemblages, where individuals could take advantage of these constellations.

According to our research, it was obvious that the co-working spaces which were designed as open spaces, i.e. Bird Case and Global Tech, did indeed push people to move and encounter each other. In Strawberry Fields, the architecture of the building limited the way that people moved and encountered each other. However, it seems that affectual

assemblages are not an automatic outcome of space design in coworking spaces, but instead a more curated result, produced usually by the people managing or otherwise strongly engaging in a particular coworking space. The specific norms, restrictions, and expectations in each space made different assemblages possible.

Intentional spatial design and curation of a space do not in themselves make encounters happen. Encounters also rely on the individual choices of members and their needs and wishes. Hence, despite explicit aims for creating an economy of encounters, all possible encounters can never be realised. The ideology of encounters is embedded in the spaces and the different power relations in the spaces both force members to engage in encounters but also sometimes gives the possibility to opt out. Our case studies show that the primary focus of the members of the coworking spaces was always their own work and livelihood. When members were busy with their own work, they would not participate and therefore they would create neither motion nor encounters. All of our cases show that a precarious workforce – that is often paid by output, not by the hour – does not necessarily have enough time for or interest in sharing and buzzing. Many interviewees expressed a contradiction between the expectation of engaging in a social activity, where the serendipitous encounters might be valuable for their work in the future, and their current work at hand. Hence,

although the ideology of economy of encounters is embedded in different types of coworking spaces, each space had different challenges in bringing these ideas into practice. Paradoxically, it was particularly members need to be online, a crucial aspect of precarious or otherwise fragmented and technology-mediated work, which seemed to limit their participation in 'real' encounters. A crucial aspect of the affectual assemblages in coworking is thus the melange of participating and not participating, of working together and reserving a possibility for encounters but still avoiding them to get the job done.

The nature of the heterogeneous coworking community is also of great importance. Previous studies argue that co-workers may share the same understanding and vision of contemporary work (DeGuzman & Tang, 2011; Saval 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012), but our findings suggest that their relation to each other are in fact more ambivalent and precarious. Not all coworking spaces are able to leverage the feeling of community or shared work. In our study GlobalTech seemed to come closest to the 'ideal' of serendipitous encounters. However, in a large multinational company, the work is also less precarious than for a freelancer. The corporation also lacks a key element of 'open' coworking: free choice to join or become a member in the space. Whereas corporations intend to increase cooperation by bringing people together, coworking spaces emphasize the community aspect and

voluntary nature of these interactions - which can, however, be caused by precarious conditions.

In the coworking literature, knowledge sharing is treated as a productive, value-adding form of work and thus both intended and unintended encounters are seen as important forms of production in the knowledge-based new economy. In this article, we have seen that even though the aim of the economy of encounters is not reached in practice, it is obvious that in different kinds of coworking spaces the economy of encounters is an outspoken aim. The affectual charm of coworking lies in the fact that encounters are possible and they might add something highly valuable to people's work and life. However, critically viewed, this commodifies the idea of community and encounters. We can question whether basic human needs, affects and practices should indeed be curated. All spatial configurations relate to power structures (Dale and Burrell, 2008), and as our research suggests some of these spatial norms remain invisible for the members of the space, although the instrumental space design strongly influences how encounters take place. However, members can to some extent opt out of these affectual assemblages.

It is also worthwhile to note how the economy of encounters operates in two very distinct ways in these spaces. In the context of a corporation, the workspace is a more intentional attempt to make encounters matter businesswise. In an open coworking space, the direct benefits go to the co-workers and their businesses, whereas the space itself receives secondary gains for encounters as these enhance the value of the space indirectly. These are also questions that may limit the active participation of the coworking space members to encounters.

## **Conclusion**

Our aim in this paper has been to analyze how far the so-called economy of encounters in coworking spaces is realized. We argued that both the professional and academic literature on coworking idealized how different encounters have become a central feature in coworking spaces. Our research shows, that even though these spaces are designed and the communities are curated to intentionally increase the number of serendipitous encounters, encounters do not necessarily take place. By studying coworking as affectual assemblages, we were able to show how the potentiality of encounters is a special feature of coworking spaces. Encounters are anticipated and expected by the owners and managers of the coworking spaces, and to a certain extent also by the precarious workforce. On the other

hand, we also noticed how encounters are avoided and even neglected by precarious workers since their primary interest is always on their own work.

Our findings suggest that studying coworking as affectual assemblages that are designed and curated to produce the economy of encounters offers a chance for organizational scholars and sociologists of work, first, to understand current ways of organizing work, and second, to challenge some previous findings on office space design, cooperation and community building. While encounters can add value to work, substantial work is done in-between encounters. Encounters, however, provide the knowledge economy with its decisive feature: the production of added value through social interactions.

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