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Fabio James Petani, Didier Chabanet and Damien Richard

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Les espaces de coworking, une forme nouvelle d'entrepreneuriat collectif ou socialisé ?

Coworking Spaces, a New Form of Collective or Socialized Entrepreneurship?

Los espacios de coworking ¿son una nueva forma de iniciativa empresarial colectiva o una forma de socialización?

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Article abstract

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## ABSTRACT

This paper studies the spatial mobility of around a thousand coworkers of three, mid-sized French cities to better understand coworking spaces. Our analysis, based on online available data on coworkers' career and education trajectories, and confirmed by selected interviews with the founder, managers and users of the three coworking spaces, reveals a community with purposefully reduced mobility. We provide insights into how coworking spaces, by pooling a diversity of local resources, foster dynamism and allow a reduced spatial mobility option for a less kinetic elite of highly educated workers. Coworking spaces allow coworkers to develop entrepreneurial capabilities whilst striking a balance with their private life. The studied coworking community collectively achieves its goals, with individuals engaging in little international mobility and an overall reduced spatial mobility.

Keywords: Coworking spaces, spatial mobility, international mobility, diversity

## Résumé

Ce papier étudie la mobilité spatiale d'environ mille coworkers de trois villes moyennes françaises. Notre analyse révèle que la communauté de travail ainsi constituée se caractérise par une mobilité délibérément réduite. Plus précisément, nos résultats montrent que les espaces de coworking étudiés regroupent une large diversité de ressources locales qui rend possible une mobilité spatiale limitée notamment à l'international. Les espaces de coworking permettent à des coworkers globalement hautement instruits non seulement de développer leurs capacités entrepreneuriales mais également de trouver un équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée.

Mots-Clés : espaces de coworking, mobilité spatiale, mobilité internationale, diversité

## Resumen

Este documento estudia la movilidad espacial alrededor de mil coworkers en tres ciudades medianas francesas para conocer mejor los espacios de coworking. Nuestro análisis revela una comunidad con una movilidad deliberadamente reducida. Ofrecemos perspectivas sobre como los espacios de coworking, aunando diferentes recursos locales, promueven dinamismo y permiten una opción de movilidad reducida para una élite menos cinética de trabajadores de alto nivel de educación. Los espacios de coworking permiten que los coworkers fomenten habilidades empresariales et consigan un equilibrio con la necesidades de la vida privada. La comunidad estudiada obtiene colectivamente sus objetivos, y los individuos ejercen una limitada movilidad internacional y una reducida movilidad espacial en general.

Palabras Clave: Espacios de coworking, movilidad espacial, movilidad internacional, diversidad

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This paper explores the spatial mobility of coworkers in mid-sized French cities. We studied *Now Coworking* (NC hereafter), an organization providing coworking spaces (CSs hereafter) in Lille, Lyon and Rouen<sup>1</sup>. We observed with qualitative methods the NC communities in these cities to analyze the mobility of about one thousand coworkers. In what follows, our research question addresses the mobility of coworkers, to explore how the intentional reduced spatial mobility we observed sheds light on CSs. To this end, the local, national and international mobility (IM hereafter) trajectories that led coworkers to join NC, and their everyday use of these spaces and mobility practices constitute different aspects of one object of study. Otherwise put, we shed light on the assumption that NC provides life and work resources to economic actors, who for different personal and professional reasons deliberately choose a strong territorial anchoring and a reduced mobility. We join ongoing debates on the innovative role of CSs (Flipo & Lejoux, 2020; Tremblay & Scaillerez, 2020), especially relating to a new spatial organization of work-related mobility (Krauss & Tremblay 2019; Lejoux *et al.*, 2019; Flipo, 2020).

Mobility is a “general principle of modernity” (Kesselring, 2006, p. 270), which some consider an indispensable freedom, almost a fundamental human right. Spatial mobility is key to grasp the contemporary organizing of work (Jeanes *et al.*, 2015; Sergot *et al.*, 2018), and is often argued to be a valuable, even necessary step in the education and career of economic elites (Costas, 2013). Organization studies have criticized the ambiguous attractiveness of mobility in the knowledge economy, when the personal and career projects of some actors misalign problematically (Loacker & Śliwa, 2016). In parallel, CSs are emerging as alternative co-constructions of work communities (Garrett *et al.*, 2017; Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020), on whose mobility practices we still know little. In particular, we know that CSs help to pool resources in sparse regions (Fuzi, 2015), but we remain uninformed on whether or how CSs organize a reduced mobility.

This occurred to us during interviews with Pascal, one of the two founders of NC, who told us that coworkers’ homes were often only a 10-minute bike ride away from NC’s spaces. Pascal wanted NC to be “a village in the city”,

1. These cities are qualified as mid-sized quantitatively (between 50.000 and 500.000 people, see Jamal, 2018) but also qualitatively as relatively dynamic cities, which constitute regional economic centers. As such, in terms of resources they are distinguished both from small and global cities (Sassen, 2005).

insisting on the comfort of a domestic quality of life at work, a sense of familiar, homely rootedness, which the workspaces reflect. When we first visited NC Lyon, spending hours in its cozy premises, we heard no one speak English or any other foreign language. We found no map of the world on the walls, no travel books on the shelves. Informal conversations with coworkers on their mobility experiences revealed they knew the city well, but professional experiences in a foreign country seldom emerged. At the same time, the coworkers’ online CVs suggested they had the significant cultural, cognitive and social resources one would expect among the global professionals, entrepreneurs and managers qualified as the “kinetic elite” (Costas, 2013). Most coworkers were young, educated, and well integrated in the labor market. To make sense of these impressions, we conducted a systematic inquiry. First, it was important to understand the identity and spatial mobility of the NC community; secondly, we wished to explain how mobile NC coworkers had been and still were at both the local and international level. To explore how the diverse or homogeneous spatial mobility trajectories of urban coworking communities may shed light on CSs, we asked: How can coworkers’ spatial mobility help us to better understand coworking spaces? Accordingly, the paper first selectively reviews research on spatial mobility and CSs; a second section then presents the study’s methods and empirical setting; a third section reports our findings, while a concluding discussion outlines the paper’s contributions and limitations.

## Literature Review

### Spatial mobility and coworking spaces: An unclear relationship ripe for study in mid-sized cities

The emergence of alternative locations of work and the reduction of work-related commuting revealed the intricate relations between spatial mobility and organizational dynamics well before the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the neglected spatial reorganization engendered by telework (Hislop & Axtell, 2007; Sergot *et al.*, 2018). A global phenomenon that embodies this change in the spatial organization of work is the rise of CSs. To avoid feelings of social alienation, many workers, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, gathered in urban CSs (Merkel, 2015), moving to workspaces alternative to both home and office (Kingma, 2016).

The development of CSs, however, soon acquired a broader economic relevance, as they represented strategic workplaces not only for freelance or self-employed professionals, but also for entrepreneurs and employees. In particular, we now know that in less densely agglomerated cities or regions, CSs hold the potential to drive local development (Fuzi, 2015; Jamal, 2018; Le Nadant *et al.*, 2019). Collaborative dynamics in CSs benefit from multiple proximities (spatial, cognitive, organizational, social, institutional and technological), which contribute to collective innovation (Le Nadant *et al.*, 2018) and entrepreneurial processes (Dossou-Yovo *et al.*, 2019). These affordances result from a non-hierarchical sense of community (Garrett *et al.*, 2017; Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019; Spinuzzi *et al.*, 2019), and by potentially enabling users to articulate an alternative economic diversity (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020), a characteristic of CSs we explore further starting from coworkers' spatial mobility. Extant research shows how CSs are localized micro-clusters, where processes of knowledge sharing (Parrino, 2015), open innovation and inter-organizational collaboration take place (Capdevila, 2015; Fabbri & Charue-Duboc, 2016), as the physical environment and supporting services enhance interaction among entrepreneurs (Fabbri & Charue-Duboc, 2013). The literature on CSs suggests that diverse resources agglomerate in these spaces, reducing the mobility cost of sourcing and combining them from different locations (Flipo & Lejoux, 2020). Before the pandemic, many took for granted the value of IM for highly educated young workers. Critical understandings had questioned whether such mobility was desired or coerced, and how it related to the immobility of others (Jeanes *et al.*, 2015; Presskorn-Thygesen, 2015; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016), but the value of IM experiences in career or education went largely unchallenged.

Coworking seems to organize the extreme opposite of an individualistic, cosmopolitan elite, with business people "lost in transition", adrift in non-places (Augé, 1992), which fall outside and between the control of human and digital organization of flows (Knox *et al.*, 2008). No matter how "smart" IT-enabled work practices are, "establishing and maintaining ties ... [is] far from cost-free, due to the importance and complexities of travel, a word originating from the French word *travail*, or work" (Elliott & Urry, 2010, p.51). An entire organizational research agenda has suggested the following question: "Can individual spatial mobilities be at the origin of an organization's creation, and

if so, under what conditions and how?" (Sergot *et al.*, 2018, p. 58). A positive answer would suggest that spatial mobility leads to entrepreneurial ventures, which is in keeping with discussions of "motility", where mobility is a form of potential capital (Kaufmann, *et al.*, 2004). However, another interesting question asks: "What does it mean when people react to the mobility imperative of modern society by refusing movement? Is the future of mobility a culture of immobility, of nonmovement?" (Kesselring, 2006, p. 296).

We still do not know if and how *an absence* of international mobility (IM) or other reduced experiences of spatial mobility hinder the creation of organizations (Sergot *et al.*, 2018), and how less mobile actors acquire entrepreneurial capital. This puzzle is relevant to understand the affordances of CSs across territories. For instance, local development policies have funded French CSs, and research is assessing whether CSs are a sustainable "immobility solution" (Lejoux *et al.*, 2019). At a time, when qualified workers leave big cities, both in Europe and North America (Krauss & Tremblay 2019, p. 7), and suburban villages experience a revival, which calls traditional boundaries between rural and urban areas into question (Charmes, 2019), we should learn more about where coworkers come from. Our research question targets this knowledge to understand CSs better. Moreover, since the CS literature has focused mostly on self-employed workers (Avdikos & Kalogerisis, 2017), and often within big, already vibrant cities, we need to focus also on entrepreneurs and other coworkers in mid-sized cities. Some research on CSs suggests that entrepreneurs "are found more in small cities and villages, less in large cities, which mainly host the self-employed" (Tremblay & Scaillerez, 2020, p. 39), while others suggest that coworkers based in rural areas have an intensely mobile history of professional experiences abroad (Flipo, 2020, p. 13). Our study contributes to grasp the undertheorized spatial mobility of coworkers (Lejoux *et al.*, 2019). To learn if coworkers have local or global mobility paths, we analyze coworkers' mobility as constitutive of the organizational spaces and places, which CSs also represent as firms in their own right. Beyond the positive effects these places have for their users, the success of CSs as enterprises is a trend, which in France promises to survive the current crisis (Xerfi, 2020).

## Methodology

NC is a for-profit organization founded in 2015, with a strategy of opening generalist CSs (Fabbri & Charue-Dubos, 2016) investing in premium, large spaces located in heritage buildings of historical city centers<sup>2</sup>. In December 2019, NC had three sites: Rouen, Lyon and Lille (see Table 1), so we took the entire NC community as one case study, the idea being to study “one case (or a small number of cases) [...] in detail [...] to develop as full an understanding of that case as possible” (Punch, 1998, p. 150). Targeting spatial mobility of NC coworkers allowed us to compare empirical evidence across different locations, while considering the whole population of coworkers of one CS provider. As exploratory fieldwork, we interviewed Pascal, one of the two cofounders.

The demographic composition of the three sites was partially disclosed to outsiders, but one researcher temporarily joined the community, not to engage in participant observation proper, but to gain full access to the entire NC network across the three spaces. We collected the public LinkedIn profiles of NC members and interviewed the NC site managers, who expanded at length on coworkers’ IM experiences.

Several initial questions oriented our research: are coworkers diverse or similar? Do they come from diverse organizations (in terms of size and sector)? Do they represent a range of age groups? What is the distribution of freelance, employees or entrepreneurs? Focusing on their mobility, we inquired if coworkers came mostly from the region and if their careers included significant spatial mobility experiences.

To address these issues, we coded any relevant data in their LinkedIn profiles. Although LinkedIn constitutes the most complete social media platform of professionals in the world today, like all databases, it presents limitations. First of all, spatial mobility data of LinkedIn profiles does not capture everyday mobility patterns: coworkers could be travelling all around the world on a weekly basis, without this showing on their profiles. In addition, LinkedIn presents professional and educational paths, overlooking forms of socialization in international networks, which occur during childhood, often within the family sphere. Finally, Internet data are self-reported by the subjects, who have a strategic interest in publishing

2. See Appendix 1 for a complete presentation.

TABLE 1

Sampled coworking spaces of NC by location, history and socio-spatial size

NC CSs	Rouen	Lyon	Lille
Space Size	1200 m <sup>2</sup>	3000 m <sup>2</sup>	3200 m <sup>2</sup>
Since	October 2015	November 2016	November 2017
Community Size	232	363	413
Total	1008		

them. It is therefore crucial to grasp how these personal truths are staged (Hoblingre Klein, 2018). Aware of the problems LinkedIn data presented, we nevertheless trusted their reliability, as have other researchers, who have used them to reconstruct professional mobility between countries over time (García-Peñalosa & Wasmer, 2016). In the absence of systematic data on the phenomena of fraud and overselling (Ibid., p. 231), the main risk identified is that of a profusion of information with little hierarchy (Ibid.). To avoid entering into an uncertain interpretation of scattered elements, which could “suggest” a possible desire for international mobility (foreign language skills or some very personal details on each profile), we stick to traceable mobility criteria, which are materialized on LinkedIn by a clearly indicated change of location. Finally, each time we interviewed a coworker, we commented their LinkedIn profile to verify the accuracy of its content. Table 2 shows mobility data coded for 995 coworkers, based on their LinkedIn profiles. Only 13 did not have a LinkedIn profile.

TABLE 2

Mobility data coded for each coworker based on published LinkedIn profiles

International mobility							National, regional mobility		
None	<1 year	>1 year	>3 years	Nr of moves	Countries	Cities	None	Nr of moves	Cities

We coded spatial mobility as follows: job moves or multiple education experiences in the same foreign city (“Nr of moves” in Table 2) were considered as separate international experiences, and only job moves or multiple education experiences outside the CS’s *departement* were considered national-level mobility experiences, also listing, however, infra-regional moves, which enabled us to trace coworkers’ local mobility. No discrimination was made between French and foreign coworkers, the identification of whom could sometimes prove difficult. This homogeneous coding attempted to capture the diversity or similarity of mobility patterns, independently of the origins and cultural backgrounds of coworkers, although we controlled for clearly recognizable (i.e. self-declared) foreign coworkers. For all coworkers, data concerning their job title, company size, sector and location of headquarters was collected and coded. We deduced gender and approximate age (based on the graduation year of high school, or other available dates). As LinkedIn company size information includes the 0–1 type, self-employed individuals can be reliably distinguished from employees, and we identified entrepreneurs based on their job title (e.g. founder, owner). All three authors coded the same volume of profiles for the three cities. Iterated checks on inter-coder consistency ensured data coding was reliable (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). In all of the results, percentages offer a mere descriptive indication of subpopulations and do not intend to mislead as to any statistical relevance of findings. We anonymize all subjects.

As interesting as LinkedIn data on coworkers’ mobility are, they do not explain these migratory trajectories, so we extended our qualitative analysis. During a second phase of the study, in January 2021, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with as many coworkers, including NC managers from each site. The Covid crisis imposed that some interviews with coworkers in Lyon and Lille had to be conducted via video-conference tools, but two of the authors spent 3 full days at NC Rouen, where they interviewed 9 coworkers face-to-face, and conducted a 3-hour focus group with 8 coworkers, including the founder Pascal. The focus group enabled coworkers to specify their professional paths in relation to others, revealing the importance of the CS as a place for career and personal life choices. Individually or in group, we have thus interviewed a total of 30 coworkers and NC Managers, some of whom more than once. We adopted the same guidelines for all the interviews, with questions on the spatial mobility of the coworkers’ careers, as well as their work-related mobility practices and use of CSs. The individual interviews lasted 1 hour on average. We recorded, transcribed and analyzed all interviews. The purpose of this second phase was not only to

verify the findings from our LinkedIn spatial mobility data; it also allowed us to triangulate between qualitative data sources, checking our emerging insights. Even if coming from actors of different status within the observed CSs, the collected interviews constitute a consistent body of data on the topic of coworkers’ spatial mobility and use of NC spaces. In this respect, the information collected via NC managers is precious and complements insights derived from interviews with coworkers, since they knew their communities better than any coworker. We selected which coworkers to interview starting from LinkedIn data, to identify the types of spatial mobility at the international, national and regional level – and the organizational status (e.g. entrepreneur, freelance, employee) – and compared our immobility findings across different users. We thus contacted a varied sample of coworkers, in terms of age, gender and seniority, with a wide range of roles from CEO to employee. The size of our sample was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation, which suggests stopping qualitative inquiries when interviews do not add significant insights into a given research question, which management literature estimates to occur often between 20 and 40 interviews (Thiétart, 2014, p. 252–253). In our case, we stopped when we realized that more interviews were not adding insights on the spatial mobility trends discovered with LinkedIn data, and on how NC constituted a resourceful space for an overall community with a reduced mobility.

## Findings

Our comparative overview of the 3 NC CSs includes an analysis of company size and sector (see Appendix 2). We here focus on the spatial mobility of coworkers. In the first two subsections, LinkedIn data helps us to compare the degree of IM of our coworkers’ careers. The following four subsections complement these results with findings selected from interviews.

### Where and for How Long Did Coworkers Go Abroad?

In comparing the coworkers’ IM we found that CSs set in larger, more densely populated cities (i.e. Lille and Lyon), show a more internationally mobile community compared to Rouen (see Table 5). A large majority (≈ 80%) of the Rouen coworkers shows no sign of IM on LinkedIn. Interestingly, the percentage of “*internationally immobile*” people decreases in proportion with the growth in size of the city: in Lille, coworkers with no IM (two thirds) are still the majority, and in Lyon, these profiles make up just over half (≈ 56%) of the community.



**TABLE 3**  
**Semi-structured individual interviews**

Date	Company	City	First name	Role	Duration in minutes
Jan 2021	C2RP	Lille	Karima	Consultant in personal skills assessment	67
Jan 2021	NOW COWORKING	Lille	Nisrine	Community Builder	64
Jan 2021	SOCRATE EDUCATION	Lille	Haikel	Chief Operating Officer	51
Jan 2021	SOCRATE EDUCATION	Lille	Vincent	Chief Marketing Officer	50
Jan 2021	AZNETWORK	Lyon	Christophe	Associate Consultant	48
Jan 2021	BEAVERS DESIGN	Lyon	Lofty	Designer / Manager	55
Jan 2021	CCI LYON	Lyon	Romarc	Project Manager	48
Jan 2021	ISATIS	Lyon	Matthieu	Chief Executive Officer	58
Jan 2021	MANAGEMENT GROUPAL	Lyon	Pascale	CEO & Coach	76
Jan 2021	NOVODEV	Lyon	Ahmed	CEO	49
Jan 2021	NOW COWORKING	Lyon	Anne-Laure	Community Builder	59
Jan 2021	NOW COWORKING	Lyon	Julie	Community Builder	59
Jan 2021	NOW COWORKING	Lyon	Thomas	Community Builder	66
Jan 2021	ACTIONS & TERRITOIRE	Rouen	Fabienne	Freelance consultant	52
Jan 2021	CPMN	Rouen	Maguy	Employee	48
Jan 2021	FBSD	Rouen	François	CEO & Graphic Designer	44
Jan 2021	JOSLI	Rouen	Camille	Director	43
Jan 2021	NOW COWORKING	Rouen	Vanessa	Community builder	47
Jan 2021	NOW COWORKING	Rouen	Pascal	Founder & CEO	99
Jan 2021	OVERSPEED	Rouen	Annie	Director & CEO	40
Jan 2021	TAMMARFIT	Rouen	Adnan	Sports Coach	63
Jan 2021	SYSTEM PLUS	Rouen	Laurence	Employee	63

**TABLE 4**  
**Focus group (12 January 2021)**

Company	City	First Name	Role
OVERSPEED	Rouen	Annie	Executive Manager & CEO
NOW COWORKING	Rouen	Pascal	Founder
JULIEN TRAGIN	Rouen	Julien	Photographer
AGENCE DIGITALE YMJ	Rouen	Yann	Founder, Website Creator
ITG	Rouen	Sylvie	Employee, Regional Delegate
HYGIE PATRIMOINE	Rouen	Michel	Wealth Management and Investment Consultant
SYSTEM PLUS	Rouen	Laurence	Employee
ATELIER API	Rouen	Yohann	Freelance

**TABLE 5**  
International mobility data in our sampled coworking space populations

IM (%) Average age = (aa) Men = M: Nr (aa) Women = W: Nr (aa)	Rouen (226)*	Lille (409)**	Lyon (360)***
No experience (%)	<b>182 (80,53 %)</b> M: 107 (39,33) W: 75 (37,44)	<b>273 (66,74 %)</b> M: 176 (34,38) W: 97 (33,39)	<b>203 (56,38 %)</b> M: 132 (33,41) W: 71 (32,86)
< than 1 year (%)	<b>22 (9,73 %)</b> M: 15 (32,78) W: 7 (35,85)	<b>72 (17,6 %)</b> M: 47 (29,41) W: 25 (28,9)	<b>75 (20,83 %)</b> M: 43 (33,02) W: 32 (29,66)
> than 1 year (%)	<b>9 (3,98 %)</b> M: 6 (36,5) W: 3 (39,33)	<b>33 (8,06 %)</b> M: 20 (34,86) W: 13 (28,9)	<b>45 (12,5 %)</b> M: 29 (31,11) W: 16 (30,64)
> than 3 years (%)	<b>13 (5,75 %)</b> M: 9 (44,55) W: 4 (44,4)	<b>31 (7,57 %)</b> M: 25 (36,12) W: 6 (33,75)	<b>37 (10,27 %)</b> M: 25 (38,23) W: 12 (38,33)

**NB:** gap with total (6 for Rouen\*, 4 for Lille\*\* and 3 for Lyon\*\*\*) depends on missing or incomplete LinkedIn profiles, not allowing a consistent data collection for age and mobility

We explored whether we could explain the IM behaviors with a greater age disparity between immobile profiles and profiles with long mobility experiences. However, across the CSs—and independently of gender—the average age of coworkers with no IM was not significantly lower than those with more than 3 years of experience abroad. The internationally mobile people in Rouen were just 5 years older than their immobile coworkers, while in Lille the mobile coworkers were no more than 2 years older than the immobile ones. In terms of *where* they went, the coworkers moved, in IM of short, medium and long durations, predominantly to “nearby” destinations, with the exception of Shanghai for NC Lille (see Table 6).

**TABLE 6**  
International mobility destinations and number of diverse cities per CS

CSs	Rouen	Lille	Lyon
Total nr of IM experiences <sup>3</sup>	54	225	243
Nr of IM destinations	42	120	134
Top 5 IM destinations (by nr of experiences)	London (4) Montreal (4) Brussels (3) Budapest (3) Karlsruhe (2) Washington (2)	London (20) Brussels (16) Montreal (9) Shanghai (7) New York City (6)	London (16) Montreal (13) Brussels (6) Geneva (5) San Francisco (5)

\* As detailed in methodology, we counted all international moves, so there can be multiple experiences for each coworker.

For the rare long-term IM experiences (longer than three years), we controlled for members who self-described themselves on LinkedIn as foreign, had frequented a non-French high school, or still resided partially abroad. This indirectly grasped an inverse IM, in terms of the CSs’ openness to a diversity of foreigners, re-contextualizing the results of Table 5. In Rouen, we identified only 1 foreign member. The same search in Lille and Lyon yielded respectively 13 and 16 foreign coworkers (of which 4 Swiss and 4 Belgian). The 81 coworkers presenting long-term IM, once controlled for foreign (i.e. non-French) coworkers, drop to 51 (≈ 5% of all coworkers). This demonstrates how our French CS community gains in internationality more through its welcoming of foreign workers than through the IM that French members bring back from abroad. Moreover, the disparity between the low long-term IM of Rouen coworkers compared to Lille and Lyon (5.75% vs 7.57% and 10.27%, see Table 4) becomes negligible (12=5.3% vs 18=4.4% and 21=5.83%) if we consider only French coworkers.

3. As detailed in methodology, we counted all international moves, so there can be multiple experiences for each coworker.



### International, National/Regional Mobility of Entrepreneurs and Managers in NC Rouen

Of the 26 coworkers coded as entrepreneurs and managers (from LinkedIn data selected with keywords like founder, co-founder, president, CEO etc., and excluding the self-employed), in the NC of Rouen, 22 did not publish any IM experience.

TABLE 7 Mobility data typology of the entrepreneurs and managers at the Rouen CS		
Mobility typology of entrepreneurs and managers	Women (average age)	Men (average age)
<b>Immobile</b>	3 (46)	3 (43)
<b>Infraregionally mobile</b>	3 (44)	4 (41)
<b>Paris-dependent</b>	3 (45)	6 (42)
<b>Internationally mobile</b>	1 (48)	3 (33)
<b>Total</b>	10 (45)	16 (40)
	26 (42,23)	
<b>IM overview</b>	<b>No experience = 22 (43,2)</b> <b>&lt; 1 year = 3 (37,65)</b> <b>&gt;3 years = 1 (34,5)</b>	

Table 7 confirms that entrepreneurs and managers in our mid-size city CS are not more mobile, so they are no exception in comparison to the low level of IM observed in NC Rouen (cp. Table 5). A large majority (22 of 26) showed no IM. Based on their national and regional movements, we could outline a mobility-based typology of entrepreneurs and managers. The *immobile* entrepreneurs appear to have always remained in Rouen. The *infra-regionally mobile* constitute a set of entrepreneurs/coworkers, who mostly engaged in

Normandy-bound mobility; perhaps with an exceptional short course or internship beyond Normandy (usually Paris, never in other French regions). These first two types make up around half of the subset of managers and entrepreneurs. They mostly represent start-ups of companies with a maximum of 10 employees, but also include the Europe-division CEO of an Asian multinational company. The *Paris-dependent* are entrepreneurs or managers, whose careers were marked by significant Parisian experiences, but who either chose to go back to their city of origin, or sought to move away from the capital. The founders of NC both belong to this type of entrepreneur profile: their spatial trajectories began in Rouen, and they are among the rare coworkers with diverse national mobility experiences, but their LinkedIn profiles show a strong professional link to Paris. One aspect that Rouen's NC space community shares to a minor degree with Lille and Lyon, is that coworkers come from the region, often from the city itself or its immediate suburbs. This is particularly visible in the entrepreneurs' presented profiles, but the finding holds true for NC populations in general. The few individuals, who distinguished themselves from the general IM of Rouen, were classified as *internationally mobile* (see Tables 5 and 6). This group comprised three men, who founded small firms with up to 10 employees in sectors like TV production, Internet and Real Estate, and whose mobility experiences took them to diverse locations in Spain, Scotland and The Middle East. These coworkers are younger than the average male entrepreneurs and managers of Rouen (33 vs 41, see Table 6), and notably younger than the male population of Rouen with long-term IM (33 vs 44.5, see Table 4). By contrast, the only internationally mobile woman is older than the average female population of Rouen's NC space (37.77, see Table 3). This 48-year-old NC coworker is the only entrepreneur in Rouen with a short-term study experience in the US, and founded, over 15-years ago, a now well-established firm in the Electronic Manufacturing sector, currently counting between 11 and 50 employees (on whom more information is given below in the interview data).

To extend the analysis, we now turn to select findings from the semi-structured interviews, to provide insights into what mobility characterize coworkers (and led them to a CS).

### When “Local” is More Attractive than “International”

To explore the spatial mobility practices of NC coworkers, we now look at the regional, national and international territories they moved to, what this meant to them, and how they use CSs.

#### A Short Experience Abroad no one Dreams of

As Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon) explains, those coworkers with a significant past experience abroad “are a notable minority”. While IM is generally low, this varies across urban NC locations and, in the case of Lyon, NC has a partnership with the Public Agency for Local Development, which relies on NC to welcome economic actors who arrive from abroad. Julie (NC Manager Lyon), mentions a firm from Thailand looking to establish itself in Lyon: “They phone us, wire us the money, and the next week they move into the office. If after six months it does not work, they just send us an email to say it’s over, and that’s it”. In other cases, “it is individuals, usually freelance, who arrive in a new country and need a workspace at all costs” (Anne-Laure). We can also mention coworkers of foreign origin, who came to work in France a long time ago, and still consider possible a return to their home country or moving elsewhere. Haikel for instance lives in the suburbs of Lille without having any particular roots in the city. He declares himself “internationally mobile. I am interested in Anglo-Saxon countries, maybe Australia, potentially the US or Canada. Outside Europe anyway”. As a general interpretation, the degree of IM for each CS can be explained by the proximity to foreign countries, but also by the size or established connections of the city. Pascal explains: “I have some people with experience abroad in Lille, because Lille is well connected to London, or to Brussels which is closer. I also have [foreign people] in Marseille, with coworkers who speak Italian, as Marseille attracts more foreigners than other cities [...]. I am currently studying the prospect of opening a CS in Strasbourg, and with the European Parliament there, I’d expect many more foreigners”.

Camille is conspicuous in the NC community of Lille, being one of the rare coworkers raised in France, who has worked abroad for a long time. She was born in Paris, but spent 3 years in Japan for her education. She has “a fond recollection of this extraordinary experience”, and would gladly embark on another international adventure, although she has no precise projects in mind. Annie (Rouen) is an entrepreneur with a rare, short (study) experience in the US. Although she speaks good English and does not exclude the idea of leaving France, she

does not obsess over it. For her and her husband, the door remains open, but quality of life is her main priority, and she values what she enjoys in France. “We have often discussed the subject. Working outside of France would not be a problem, but is it what we want? We are so lucky to live in France, our French culture gives us great quality of life, we realize this when we travel abroad. We have often wondered in which country we’d like to live, but have never found an answer”. At any rate, Annie is “not attracted by large cities”. She is happy in Rouen. Yohann (Rouen) does not have a positive memory of his one-year stay in Finland: “It is complicated to be accepted, because you will never possess all the codes, no matter what efforts you make, so you come home to find your roots”.

#### Regional Mobility and Attachment

Most coworkers have a strong sense of belonging to the place—city and/or region—in which they were born, have spent their childhood and maintain strong family ties. Of the 8 coworkers, who participated in our focus group in Rouen, 5 were born in the city, 2 in Dieppe, a city about 60 km away and one was born in the South of France but “married a man from Rouen and came to join him in the North” (Sylvie). Very often, this local attachment is coupled with a strong mobility but at the regional scale only. Romaric (Lyon) has developed a whole career path of professional mobility within the Rhône-Alpes region, while remaining as often as possible based in Lyon, a city, which is the epicenter of his existence. “I have lived in Lyon practically all my life. My parents and grandparents are from Lyon, so I have a strong attachment to this city”. He worked for several years in Valence and Grenoble, but each time preferred to remain living in Lyon and commute to the two cities, each around 100 km away. “I didn’t even move! I did the return trip everyday”. At 46, he intends to stay in Lyon. “I have my roots in Lyon, I know many people here, both professionally and personally. I have a second home in the Alps. I am not averse to an experience abroad, but I’m not actively seeking this in my profession”. The career of François (Rouen), 35, designer and director of a communication agency, is similar. He was born in Rouen, and never left the region: “I come from Rouen but I studied and worked in Le Havre. I have spent a lot of time in Le Havre between studies and work, a little over 10 years. It is barely 100 km away, an hour by train. Then I came back to Rouen, this city is important to me”. François is also very mobile, but only regionally. His area of travel “goes as far as Paris, Caen, the whole Normandy region”.

At 53, Fabienne (Rouen) is older, but she has always wanted to stay in her native region. Born in Dieppe, around 60 km from Rouen, she is an independent consultant. In 30 years of career, sometimes for large international companies, there has been no shortage of professional opportunities to work abroad or in larger French cities. “Executives are moved around every 3 or 4 years, but I didn’t want to move, and at first I was told ‘that’s a shame for you’. I refused another kind of career, that is certain, but I stand by that choice, because I didn’t want to live in Paris or in a big foreign city.” Married to an entrepreneur from Rouen, whose business is regional, she wanted to find a professional and personal life balance. “I had children, I wanted to preserve my family and professional lives and I think I succeeded in that”. She has always lived in the countryside, only a few kilometers from where she was born and “would not be able to live in a large city”. A university graduate, fluent in English and German, she does not feel that she has sacrificed her professional ambitions. “I have been lucky enough to have had exciting experiences reporting to headquarters in Paris, while located in my region. My strength lies in this area!”. This lifestyle choice is not one of immobility, because Fabienne has travelled for most of her career and continues to do so. “In the past few years, I clocked up 85,000 km per year! I’ve reduced my travelling now, I do about half of that.” Today, Fabienne accompanies firms in their creation and development strategy in Normandy. As she mischievously notes, she “*capitalizes on her non-mobility*”, since her knowledge of the region has enabled her to build up an impressive local network and to advise her clients. “You can’t really know the actors, projects, everything, beyond where you live. I have the luxury of being able to lock myself away in Normandy and not have to leave!”. Coworking suits her so well that she is registered with two other coworking structures [other than NC] in Le Havre and Caen”.

For some coworkers, who are active but older in age, NC feels like a return to one’s origins. After having experienced significant mobility, mainly in France, less often internationally, they wish to return to their native city and region. Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon) describes the profile of people who “come back for family, so they want to have roots”. This is true for Michel (Rouen), a wealth management consultant who, at 64, returned to work in his home city. Throughout his career, he moved around a lot, mainly in the North of France, particularly in Lille, where he lived for a long time. “At a certain point in all the travelling, even if the North isn’t far away, I felt the need to come back to my roots and near

my loved ones.” NC is therefore an ideal compromise between his professional obligations, which he continues to pursue intensely, and the desire to devote more time to his family. Christophe (Lyon) is 50 and grew up in Lyon. During his studies and early in his career, he was mobile throughout France but not abroad. “I studied in Clermont Ferrand and Strasbourg, then I started working in Paris before going to Aix-en-Provence, where we opened the South East branch of *AZNetwork* [specialized in digital transformation and IT projects]. I lived in Aix for 4 years”. Today, he still travels all over France, but for the past 10 years he has been based in Lyon, despite his headquarters remained in Aix. Married with two grown up children, who study in Lyon, he likes living there. “I could have lived in other places, but my life is in Lyon now”.

Even when they are not from the city or region, many coworkers “choose to use NC spaces because they do not want to go to Paris and wish to avoid the disadvantages of a large city” says Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon). They are looking for “a dynamic, mid-sized city” (Ibid.). This is what Pascale, 56, found in Lyon. Born in Paris, she worked for a long time in the capital and in several large provincial cities before moving to Lyon 20 years ago. She now has no desire to leave a city she likes so much. “I chose to live here, it really was a personal choice”. Although she worked for large international corporations, such as *McCann Erikson*, a global network of US advertising agencies operating in more than 120 countries, she never wanted to move abroad. “Some people want to work abroad, but I didn’t want nor needed to”. Mathieu’s expectations are relatively similar. At 43, he worked in several cities in France before moving to Lyon. He is the MD of *Isatis*, a company specialized in calculating and obtaining tax credits for clients. He just became a father and cut his work-related travelling to spend more time with his family. Nevertheless, he remains highly active professionally, and wants to develop his company. To do this, he uses remote working tools. For the past year, he has worked at NC Lyon and no longer travels. “I meet my clients based in Lyon via video calls. It is a lot quicker, everything is online and it is convenient for everyone. I do almost no travelling. It is a choice”. Ahmed (Lyon) is from Benin but moved to the Lyon area 14 years ago, after studying in Lille. He is now the MD of *Novodec*, a firm specialized in designing customized web solutions, and has no intention of moving. “I live in West Lyon, my life is here. I love this city”. We should note that a lack of interest in spatial mobility is often combined with a high openness to the world. In his job, François (Rouen)

is “in contact with the whole planet”, like many coworkers. Pascale says she has “a real intellectual curiosity about other countries”. Many coworkers enjoy travelling for private reasons. The messages they post on social networks or on the NC website show a broad set of international cultural references<sup>4</sup>.

### NC: A Community Offering Alternatives to Mobility

In most cases desired, this reduced mobility is possible because NC provides coworkers with the resources or opportunities necessary for their work. Indeed, Mathieu (Lyon) believes that “if you come here with a strong will to do business, there is a real chance that you will succeed”.

### The Development of Internal Business Relations

Yohann and his associate run an architectural firm created 5 years ago. As coworkers in Rouen, they “had the opportunity to accompany NC in its development by designing all of their sites”. This was a huge operation, which provided them with significant revenue. Similarly, Annie (Rouen), MD of a company specializing in the creation of connected electronic products, supplies all the digital media present in the NC sites, enabling coworkers to communicate remotely. “For us, NC is a showroom, because some of our products are used daily in each space. Some clients came to us after seeing our products in the various NC spaces. I have even begun prospecting in Bordeaux, which shows the spatial strength of the NC network”. Camille (Rouen), MD of a company offering endodontic training courses via e-learning based teaching has called on coworkers from Rouen to design the interiors of the dental clinic she uses for her training courses, to procure the tactile screens required for disseminating the sessions to remote clients, and for the visuals and logos she has developed. Camille has around 10 coworker suppliers. Similarly, Michel through NC Rouen has found many clients, who asked him to manage their assets. Photographer Julien rents the NC Rouen photographic studio, and has worked for nearly all the other coworkers of the site: “They all ask me to do their photos, as I am on site with all the necessary equipment”. Adnan, manager of the NC Rouen gym, is a former high-level Moroccan sportsman, who became a sports coach at the age of 33. He estimates that around 90% of the coworkers are his clients. They

4. See “portraits de coworkers”, or “la magie du coworking”, in which coworkers talk about the people who inspired them in their careers. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE2E1AqM50F1q4V7IHBC54w/videos>.

“represent 40% of my turnover, the rest are local people from Rouen”. He also intends to develop with NC and plans to sign an agreement to open a gym in all the spaces due to open in the near future. Demonstrating the business links between them, during the focus group in Rouen, the 8 coworkers were amused to conclude that they were all each other’s clients (observation notes).

### A Community of Mutual Aid and Advice

Bringing people together and pooling their expertise are also essential practices to the dynamics of creation in which many coworkers find themselves. “How can we progress in our professions if we don’t hear other points of view?” asks Yann (Rouen). As a young graphic artist, he sometimes asks coworkers working in the same field as him for their opinion: “In a normal context, where we all have offices in different places in the city, you wouldn’t call a competitor because you have a problem with a project”. The space is designed to promote such exchanges, as Annie (Rouen) says: “The offices are small but common areas are large, I see that as a pretext for meeting people”. In all three sites, the common areas occupy almost half the surface area.

For company managers in particular, there is great satisfaction in being able to share common concerns. It is the entrepreneurial spirit, which brings them together. “Because there are relatively few employees here, most of us have one thing in common: being a company manager! We are all value creators, and we all have questions to which we cannot always find the answers alone. Talking about them and exchanging with people from the same region can really help”. More than others, young entrepreneurs and freelance workers need guidance. Marie-Anne appreciated being supported and understood, morally as well as practically, when she started her business. “When you are a freelancer and you start a business, you are often isolated. The advantage of NC is that you can talk to other people. I have problems, which seem very complex to me, but other people have the solutions. Actually, I saved a huge amount of time by being at NC”. Adnan, a young self-employed sports coach, who has been with NC Rouen for 6 months confirms this: “We are surrounded, we don’t feel alone as an entrepreneur, if we need advice, there are people here who work in all fields: lawyers, accountants, doctors, commercial, communication...”. Some coworkers created their companies within NC, following advice from other coworkers. As Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon) states: “We have seen employees leave their

companies and come back as nomads because they had the idea of creating their company through contacts with coworkers, so it speeds things up”.

In the end, NC represents a wide range of professional opportunities, from which many coworkers are able to draw without looking elsewhere, so saving the (mobility) cost of sourcing them. As Yann (Rouen) highlights “we often find the resources we need within the community”. It is a huge advantage, not least because it saves time. For Vincent (Lille) “The time it takes to look for partners, meet each other and build up trust is saved as we see each other every day”.

### The NC Business Model, or How to Embed A Diverse Working Community in a Region

The founders of NC go to great lengths to organize and sustain this professional community. We should highlight several important elements here.

#### Diversity of Coworker Profiles as A Resource

The diversity of coworker profiles is a key factor of NC’s success. This is why its founders decided to limit the occupancy capacity of each client, making no exceptions for larger companies. Pascal explains: “I tell my teams to never give more than 15% of workstations to the same coworker. This way, I mechanically create diversity as I multiply my customers, which means that today I welcome all types of companies, like *Bouygues* or *Air France* as well as small independent firms”. Similarly, workspaces vary a lot in nature. As Pascal says: “We seek a mix. Our sites are divided between nomadic spaces, in which we welcome free-lancers, and private office spaces, better suited to small companies, or subsidiaries of large companies that have a local branch, like *Doctolib*<sup>5</sup>”. NC attracts different profiles, which is a resource for the whole community. Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon) says: “There is such a range of ages, backgrounds and professional spheres, it is very enriching”. Julie (Lyon) adds: “Coworking brings so many people together that it is bound to have advantages”. Karima (Lille) agrees “Not only is every effort made to encourage exchange. The range of skills is impressive”. The notion of diversity is even considered in the design of the common areas and office furniture. The interiors of each room have a particular character, as NC designs them with

5. *Doctolib* is a platform for doctors and patients. In 2019, its website and mobile application booked 30 million patient visits per month, and counted 75,000 health professionals and 140,000 healthcare facilities as partners.

the intention of avoiding standardization. For Pascal, it is important to “offer variety in the locations: no two meeting rooms will be furnished in the same way. If the client moves from one site to another, they will not find the same decorations. “I don’t mind if they don’t like Meeting Room 17. As long as there are others they do like, they will take one that suits them”. Far from being merely anecdotal, this concern for originality and a certain amount of aesthetic risk-taking is in keeping with aiming for coworkers’ diversity.

#### Supporting and Encouraging Coworkers Within Each Now Coworking Space

Whenever they can, the founders of NC do business with coworkers rather than with external companies. As Pascal clarifies: “We call on many of them for work, not because they are the most expert, but because they are local and this proximity hugely simplifies our working relationship”. As Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon) recognizes, it can be reciprocal: “In Lyon, there is a coworker who practices shiatsu. She offers us shiatsu sessions and we talk about her to coworkers and thus find her clients”. The agreement between NC Lyon and the Lyon Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) follows the same logic. Romaric (NC Lyon and Project Manager at the Lyon CCI) explains: “It was win-win, we proposed to use the space and that enabled us to meet new clients”. By doing this, NC builds loyalty among coworkers, whose services can be used by other coworkers, to form what could be called a “client community”.

From this perspective, the Site Managers have the essential task of encouraging meetings between coworkers, often informal but which prove useful. Nisrine (NC Manager Lille) explains: “In the course of a day, exchanges of opinions, sometimes very intense, are not necessarily explicit, but are very much part of the job”. Every year, many events are organized. “Nearly an event per day outside of school holidays at NC Lyon, focusing on practical rather than theoretical aspects” says Anne-Laure. She remembers someone who completed the *Compagnons du Devoir*<sup>6</sup> program and became a management consultant. “There was a young woman in the space who talked to them and, two months later, she found the courage she needed to take the plunge. It was just one event among many, but this is a story of someone who progressed as a result”. Pascal insists that “local teams have total freedom in organizing events, so they can adapt to

6. A famous association established in 1901 to promote traditional buddy system values associated with apprenticeship solidarity.



the customers they have at the time". Passionate about their city, NC managers find local events that best suit the coworkers in each location. Laurence (Rouen) sees in this system "a quick and efficient way to get to know the region's economic players". Finally, as Romaric (Lyon) says, NC cultivates "a global opening to the local ecosystem, with people of the area".

### **Proximity and Beauty: The Importance of the Workplace**

The urban location of each NC space is a strategic issue. As Pascal points out: "Clients come to us for our location. If you look at their personal address, you'll see that most live nearby. They come by bike or on foot". Julie (NC Manager Lyon) confirms: "We have a bike shed which is always full. Many people live close by". NC Lyon is the only site providing a few dozen parking slots. Every site is in the city center, close to a train station, and well served by buses and cycling routes. This is important for coworkers to get to NC quickly, but also because they may have to travel from there to somewhere else in the region, or perhaps even further away. In this case, the ongoing creation of a national network of NC spaces is an asset. Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon) says: "The idea is to develop in the 10 largest cities in France. It will be a huge advantage for our members". For Christophe (Lyon), who travels all over France, the prospect of geographical coverage "is very interesting". Eventually, coworkers will have a well-located drop-off point, in a place permanently open, whose operating principles they appreciate and which constitutes a subset of a large community.

The short time spent travelling between home and work is a determining factor in the quality of life of many coworkers. Some employees, who feel their company is too far from their home "register with NC to work closer to home", observes Anne-Laure (NC Manager Lyon). Coworkers are often ecologically conscious and wish to preserve both the planet and their health. This is true for Adnan (Rouen), who has a 3-minute journey between his home and NC using his electric scooter. As a keen sportsman, he stays in shape and rarely comes by car. Adnan has managed to live close to his workplace ever since he was a student: "It has always been important for me to live where I study, practice sports or work". Passionate about nature and open spaces, he even uses his scooter for professional trips to "visit clients within 10 km". As busy professionals, coworkers also seek wellbeing and a work-life balance, which involves rationalizing and limiting their travel. Every morning, it takes François (Rouen) 20

minutes to get to the NC space, generally by bus or bike. On the way, he drops off his daughter at school. Even when he travels by car in the region, he returns home every night, which is important to him. Camille similarly says: "NC is 4 km from my home, so it takes me 15 minutes. I put my daughter on my bike, take her to the nursery and come here". Agnès (Lyon) likes using her bike for the exercise and peace she experiences: "I enjoy my 10 minutes of cycling there and back. It's like an escape, it makes the disconnect between work and home".

NC spaces are also chosen for their splendor and uniqueness, often steeped in history (see Appendix 1). Pascal observes that "pride in the place is important because many people show their families around their place of work. However, when you are self-employed or have a very small company, if you have a 40 m<sup>2</sup> office in the city center, you won't tend to show people around". The space even becomes a promotional tool. This is what coworkers call the "wow effect": "New clients, who come here for a meeting get the full treatment, I show them everything. There's a brand image of this coworking space that attracts clients, that makes them feel confident, and that's really important", insists Yohann (Rouen).

### **Lack of Commitment as A Means of Building Loyalty**

NC has chosen not to provide its customers with a preferential offer based on the duration of their subscription. As Pascal says: 'Here, commitment isn't for sale. You can't say "Hey, I want to pay less and commit to a one- or two-year subscription"; it isn't possible, whereas all our competitors have decreasing prices the longer you subscribe'. This contractual freedom is very important for many coworkers, who as a result are more inclined to remain NC members. Nisrine (NC Manager Lille): "People who are looking for the most freedom, the least commitment are at the same time the most loyal, even in these times of lockdown". When asked why he chose to join NC Rouen, François replied: "The big advantage is the freedom. There is no lease, and that is important for me. I come, I pay, I leave when I want". This touches on a deep-seated aspiration among coworkers, who all appreciate spatiotemporal autonomy and flexibility. These notions were recurring themes in the interviews. Even if there is a relative regularity in the hours of use of NC spaces (see Appendix 2), the fact that working time can be chosen is considered a defining element of work life quality. As Michel (Rouen) says: "No defined hours, no attendance or absence rules linked to my workload. I can come any time". Karima (Lille) also emphasizes this



“freedom of choice” in NC. Fabienne (Rouen) needs “autonomy to be able to manage her projects”. Much more than a way of organizing her work, it is a character trait: “I don’t like to be subjected to anything”.

### Outside of the Home, But “Just Like Home”!

NC is much more than a place of work for coworkers: it is also a way to find a certain quality of life and balance between family and professional activities. The issue of mobility—which is in the vast majority of cases both geographically restricted and chosen—is therefore also a means of reconciling these objectives. Very often, the NC space is like an “alternative home”. Michel (Rouen), who is self-employed, explains: “My flat is comfortable, but I needed somewhere to work outside of my home”. For him, the simple fact of “moving from your home to a place of work which is friendly is important”. François (Rouen) agrees: “I don’t think it is good to work from home, not even occasionally. A workspace is essential”. Haikel (Lille) says: “I find it difficult to work from home. In NC, I feel calm and undistracted”.

Sometimes NC is a way to beat loneliness and isolation at home. Julien (Rouen) acknowledges this: “The main interest of NC was to stop myself from sinking into the sofa in front of the TV working from home. It gives me a place, in which to work and socialize with people”. NC can represent a relational community. Yann (Rouen) explains: ‘When I arrived [in NC Rouen in 2015], I lived in a storage box. I wasn’t homeless, but not far off’. On a social and relational level, NC gave him everything he was missing: “There is a real attachment. Not a family, I don’t like to use that word, but a real link with lots of people”. In NC, situations of social exclusion are rare, but some unemployed people do come to “take a step back, they take stock, breathe a little and find something better for themselves”, explains Vincent (Lille).

NC is a functional and pleasant space; these two aspects are inseparable. NC offers a multitude of services, without the coworkers having to worry about them. Camille (Rouen) is pleased that NC handles many logistic and administrative functions: “Here, they look after everything for you, you don’t have to worry about an electricity contract or insurance, when you have a small business, this is important”. Mathieu agrees: “You pay your rent, and that’s it. There are usually lots of things to organize when you have your own office, but here it is really practical”. NC is also a place where you feel good, and, in some respects

pampered. “Like home” says François (Rouen): “NC seeks to extend the family setting. You find all the aesthetic codes and comforts of home. The sofa, the soft lighting, the plant, my kitchen, lounge, sports room, bathroom, toilet... It’s not all clinical. NC designs places that are emotional”. Convivial moments happen frequently and do not seem staged. In Rouen “the weekly aperitif is a ritual” says Maguy. Similarly, “the newcomers’ breakfast” enables those who have just joined the space to get to know the community. On each of the three sites, Pascal says “we often celebrate birthdays”.

Aside from a few basic rules of living together, everyone can enjoy NC as they wish. As Annie (Rouen) explains: “You can choose what you want in terms of relationships. [...] Some of my team, developers, don’t really care about forging relationships with others, you won’t see them often in the common areas”. Mathieu (Lyon) similarly adds: “I’m a bit the bear-like, reclusive type, I don’t go in the dining room, I have a coffee machine in my office. I work and if I want to stretch my legs, I go outside”. One of the attractions of NC is its capacity to meet very different needs. This freedom means each person can define their practices according to their needs, without conforming to a single rule. “You can arrive at 8 am or 4 pm, not come at all, have a siesta, practice sport, have a drink, play table football or table tennis, stay holed up in your office or spend the day in the common areas, no one judges you” says Laurence (Rouen).

To sum up, NC constitutes a community of very diverse individuals, who find in the same workspace the resources they need professionally, while also addressing their social and emotional concern for a quality of life, importantly supported by a reduced mobility. Coworkers are attached to a city or region, where they often grew up, and they organize their professional lives, either to stay there, or to move closer. Without being banned as a matter of principle, long-range spatial mobility is neither an aspiration, nor a functional need for our coworkers. Territorial anchorage, however, is not synonymous with immobility, as some coworkers move around a lot within the same region; reduced mobility is a choice. It is not perceived as a hindrance to their career prospects and their entrepreneurial ambitions. One of the CSs’ main objectives is to find a global balance—personal, professional and even environmental—enabling coworkers to choose where they live, to be entrepreneurial and successful while also devoting themselves as much as possible to their home lives. It is a question of combining individual

pleasure and fulfilment with economic efficiency, but also of being concerned about one's life environment, preserving health and nature, so using the car as little as possible. A deliberately limited spatial mobility thus becomes an asset for coworkers who, beyond their differences but thanks to their diversity, all share an unquenchable desire to remain masters of their destiny.

## Concluding Discussion

This study contributes evidence on the existence, within CSs in mid-sized cities, of a *less kinetic* elite class (Costas, 2013), whose entrepreneurial capabilities of creating new organizations (Sergot *et al.*, 2018) do not rely on long-range, national or international spatial mobility, but rather on an alternative, diverse community. Some research defines coworking as a spatial arrangement that juxtaposes heterogeneous and contradictory aspects and potentially enables its users to articulate an economic diversity (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020). Our study has shown the many heterogeneities of CSs, with the NC diversity-driven model seeking independent professionals (i.e. freelance, entrepreneurs), but also employees of firms of different scale and sectors. In this respect, our case answered the call to redress an imbalanced focus of research on freelance coworkers, by developing knowledge also on entrepreneurs and employees (Tremblay & Scaillerez, 2020). Our data refute the expectation of finding more self-employed workers in the largest urban agglomerations (Tremblay & Scaillerez, 2020, p. 39). Indeed, freelance, self-employed workers made up a small fraction of the CS populations of the two larger cities of Lyon and Lille (11% and 15% respectively), while they were the more representative group of the CS in Rouen, with a considerably higher density of 37%. Our NC case study however also found that CSs in the smaller mid-sized cities were not used just by the self-employed or small start-ups, but also by senior employees from large firms (see Appendix 2). Further studies may focus on the centrifugal mobility from large cities (like Paris), related to the centripetal attractiveness of mid-sized cities (like Rouen), whereby CSs may capture the need to reduce spatial mobility and commuting costs among employees of large Paris-based firms. Our data however support the idea that CSs may work as solutions of a sustainable (im)mobility, well beyond rural areas (Lejoux *et al.*, 2019; Flipo, 2020). In fact, a common characteristic of many individual coworkers of our

mid-sized cities is a lack of IM, and a spatial mobility that remains bounded to the region and the city. Even *within* their dear cities, coworkers use CSs to reduce their spatial mobility, in a way that seems more than just economically convenient in a banal way. It is in fact the diverse ecosystem of CSs that provides their users with the potential resources and freedom to experiment, engage in (or disconnect from) a community that affords many business professional opportunities, along with other socialization and informal networking occasions beyond work purposes. Our case study offers evidence that CSs are relational, emotionally rich and heterogeneous places, where business and entrepreneurial activities seem to happen more or less deliberately or serendipitously, but where work-life balance importantly results from an urban ease linked to a reduced spatial mobility.

The NC community mobilizes local resources and capital around itself, so that a diversity of skills, services and expertise centripetally converges towards its CSs. Even before the Covid crisis froze mobility, many coworkers had chosen *not* to reside abroad for any length of time, instead fully exploiting the network effects of a digitally interconnected world, and of physical workspaces where many local opportunities materialize within “a village in the city” (as Pascal put it). Instead of just being alternative workspaces, our study suggests CSs as urban spaces that become densely diverse *places*, and benefit users well beyond work purposes. Key to this insight is an analysis of how a spatially organized clustering of heterogeneity contributes to the social, material and emotionally lived ease and freedom that coworkers enjoy. In respect to our research question, on how coworkers' mobility may better explain CSs, we suggest CSs as poles of attraction, or platform places, where reduced spatial mobility does not hinder, but rather favors entrepreneurial dynamics, because it clusters together many diverse, usually dispersed, resources. In this sense, we can consider that some CSs are “urban” places, no matter the size of agglomerations where they emerge (Fuzi, 2005), since they seem to share with cities this organizational dynamic of clustering diversity.

Our findings are of course not without limitations. Firstly, our qualitative study is not representative of all CSs, so our trends do not allow for broad generalizations. We also acknowledge that not all mid-sized cities are the same, since the relative proximity of the sampled communities to Paris locates our CSs somewhat “at the center of the periphery”. Furthermore, the coworkers' lack of IM implies neither that they lack international networks, nor that they

enjoy less valuable knowledge transfer with international firms. Future research on CSs may study how these workplaces collectively organize a specific openness to international resources and experiences through local networks. The NC case suggests that, while openness among coworkers to IM does not rule out the possibility of working abroad, the mobility capital they value in the CS is local and even particularly “urban” in the above mentioned organizational sense of urbanity as attracting diverse resources.

The coworkers’ ideal of having a workspace “near home” on more than just a spatial level, includes also an emotional and symbolic domestic comfort. Coworking spaces are becoming deeper socialization sites than just alternative workplaces, not only providing individual users with the desired degree of autonomy, integration and participation, but also lowering collective transaction costs. If previous reviews found the cost reduction of CSs to be a marginal motivation for coworkers (Flipo & Lejoux, 2020), we specify that CSs, as many platforms, enable valuable interactions, and sustain a dynamic spatial (im)mobility.

To answer our research question, coworking spaces become particularly interesting lived places where *spatial mobility reductions* in its users’ practices appear an important function of their satisfaction. At a time when IM has never been more technologically and financially accessible and recent mobility restrictions have accelerated our awareness of the affordances of digital innovations in connecting our workplaces globally, organizations such as CSs question the value of mobility (Lejoux *et al.*, 2019). NC’s ecosystem attracts the resources it needs within it: relational costs are reduced by having a supplier of services at spatial proximity and at a reduced cost (firms *paying* to be at proximity). This dynamic makes NC more independent from traditional extra-organizational resources: often its key suppliers (i.e. its architects and interior designers) are somehow internally, or centripetally co-opted, allowing not only these professionals to develop, but to do so by working for the coworking organization that hosts them. The scale of the NC network, developing from a local to a national scale, does not itself target international expansion. Its managers and coworkers simply prefer the tangible advantages of proximity, and the potential of making a difference for coworkers as well as for the surrounding urban neighborhood<sup>7</sup>. The mechanisms

7. Lille’s chamber of commerce assessed the local economic impact of *Now Coworking* at 40 million € (CCI, 2017).

we observed qualitatively attract and value diverse “collective” resources, drawn to the core of CS communities, as if driven by a form of “gravity of proximity”.

No matter how *individual* spatial mobilities may be at the origin of the creation of an organization (Sergot *et al.*, 2018, p. 58), the reaction to the mobility imperative through a culture of nonmovement (Kesselring, 2006, p. 296) is a *collective* organizational achievement, which NC illustrates well, as the affordances of a diverse community (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020). A CS is not simply the sum of its members, but the dynamic of their clustering spatially together, preserving equal access to different size of organizational actors, encourages a diversity, which enables multiplier network effects. Differently from literature that found coworkers having “an explicit objective to foster community for the sake of community” (Garrett *et al.*, 2017, p. 838), in our case various and even contradictory views of community coexisted as a potential of diversity (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020), that required management.

NC offers a case study on how to manage diversity, by designing organizational spaces that offer many qualitative openings, but also important quantitative closures, preventing bigger, more powerful occupants from throwing too much “spatial and economic” weight in order to dominate (remember the quota imposed by NC’s founder). The diversity has a cost that produces the perceived and lived value of the CSs we observed.

Beyond NC and other coworking space providers, many organizations may reflect on how their location manages (or fails) to tap into a pool of diverse resources that may be key to resilient employment and business relations, innovation opportunities, and interactions with the external environment, whether near or far, virtually or physically. It is the very notion of organization, which is potentially called into question. Many companies are affected by the challenge of attracting scarce, talented human resources, and could be even more so in the future. This raises questions of how to manage employees in work groups that are not spatially co-located, or in partially owned and partially shared workplaces and resources. How can we think, humanly and technically, about both opening up to the world, and anchoring (or even immobilizing) the regional precious resources, and provide incentives for dynamic workers to stay and develop where, when and how they want (giving up a lot of the control usually associated with management)? Coworkers are actors, concerned about their

freedom to act, often resistant to hierarchical constraints, who seek a comfortable and convivial living space, with few restrictions. In their desire to be as free as possible, some coworkers, including employees, feel they are largely unsuited to the profile of traditional firms where aspiration to great spatial mobility is greatly valued. They perform well when they experience autonomy, which importantly includes setting space-time boundaries. From this angle, the success of CSs can inspire other organizations, whether regarding the flexibility of working hours, development of telework, or through other ways in which workplaces can be places of personal fulfilment.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Presentation of *Now Coworking* (NC)

The NC network comprises 5 spaces, opened, in chronological order, in Rouen (1200 m<sup>2</sup>), Lyon (3000 m<sup>2</sup>), Lille (3200 m<sup>2</sup>), Marseille (2900 m<sup>2</sup>) and Bordeaux (4000 m<sup>2</sup>), in early 2021 representing a community of more than 2000 coworkers. Despite the pandemic crisis, NC has opened two sites in 2020 and plans to open in the 10 largest French cities (except Paris) by the end of 2022. In Lyon, the space is located on the top floor of the emblematic Citroën garage. Built in 1932, the building is a listed historical monument. NC Lille occupies all 5 floors of the old and prestigious *Palais de la Bourse*, boasting a rooftop view over the old city. NC Rouen is also situated in the heart of the city. The location is atypical, as it is a former garage, which was renovated to host large volumes covered by a huge glass roof. In Marseille, NC is located in a 5-storey building, directly in the Old Port, opposite the Town Hall. In Bordeaux, NC occupies a huge former ferry terminal, classified as a historic building, with a view of the Garonne river quayside.

There is a wide range of workspaces on offer. Premises without fixed workstations, known as “nomadic” spaces, and shared offices, more suited to the needs of the self-employed, remote workers or small teams. The private offices, with a capacity of 1 to 50 people, may suit all types of firms: from start-ups and SMEs to multinationals. Each site is unique, but all have one or more fitted kitchens, common areas, sports facilities, rest areas (where you can sleep) and games areas. Some have an amphitheater, a hairdressing salon, a cinema or an auditorium.

Prices vary, with a minimum price of 49 € excluding tax per month for a 10-hour “nomad” subscription (219 € excl. tax for unlimited access). A shared office costs 300 to 400 € excl. tax, while the cheapest private offices cost 300 € excl. tax. The price range may suit all budgets.

NC is one of the few French independent CSs that are doing well in an increasingly competitive market in France. The real estate and hotel industry and investment companies have steadily seized on the coworking concept to incorporate it into their service offer. Among them, Kwerk, WeWork, Startway, Wojo Mama Works, Regus, Morning, Spaces, etc. These generally large and well-equipped spaces are aimed at individuals and companies of all sizes. They are characterized by a diversification of the spaces offered, including private rooms, and designed to appeal to demanding business customers. The first-generation players now account for almost 10% of the market share—compared with 90% for the second generation—and occupy smaller surface areas (700 m<sup>2</sup> on average), compared with their competitors (2600 m<sup>2</sup> on average). In the French market, NCs occupies an intermediate position, in terms of size and price, combining intense community interaction with a varied and rather high-end offer of large, hybrid workspaces and services (Xerfi, 2020, p. 143-144).



### No country for old women ... but plenty of coworking space for diverse, big firms in the province

Our empirical context shows that coworkers are mostly young, male professionals, with women constituting a younger minority. Men constitute the majority of all three NC populations, Lyon and Lille counting approximately a third of women, while the community of Rouen has a slightly higher proportion of women (i.e. 37.5%). Our populations show a relatively homogeneous gender and age distribution: except for a younger male presence in Lille, and an older female population in Rouen, the average coworker of our sample is in the mid-thirties (see Table 8). The coworkers of Rouen are slightly older, which is in line with Rouen's region (i.e. Normandy) having a negative migration balance for students and workers aged 15–29 (i.e. more people of this age leave the region than move to it), and a positive migration of 55 years-old people and older (Silvestre, 2017).

**TABLE 8**  
Gender and age distribution across the sampled coworking space populations

Now Coworking community (as of December 2019)

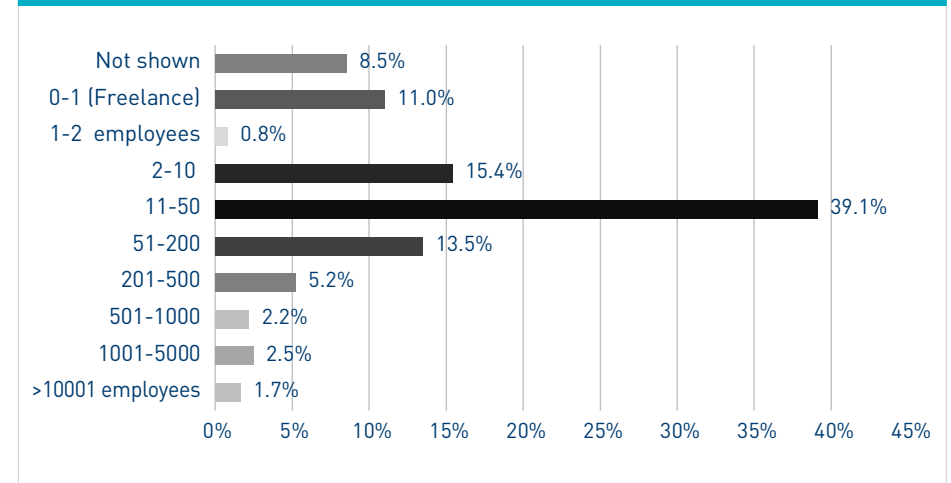
<b>Total population</b>	1008		
<b>Total men</b>	667		
<b>Total women</b>	341		
<b>By CS</b>	<b>Rouen</b>	<b>Lyon</b>	<b>Lille</b>
<b>Total</b>	232	363	413
<b>Men</b>	145	243	279
<b>Average age men</b>	38,9	38,55	33,65
<b>Women</b>	87	120	134
<b>Average age women</b>	37,77	32,33	32,27

The analysis of diversity and density empirically revealed how the organizations populating our CSs differed in size and sector, which told us more about the type of coworkers in our case, for instance comparing density (i.e. proportions) of freelance versus employees and entrepreneurs.

Figures 1 to 6 visualize how our CS populations differ from each other, allowing us to compare how organizations of various sectors and size weigh differently *within* (Figures 1–2; 3–4; 5–6), and *across* the communities of our case study (Figures 7 and 8).

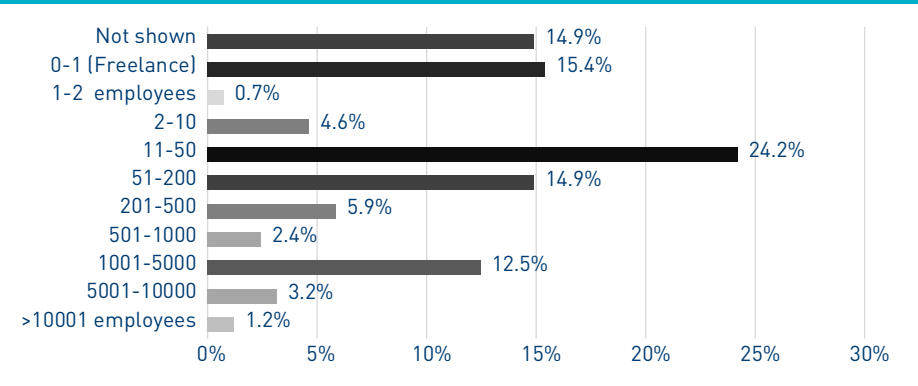
Our case shows that CSs are mostly, but not exclusively, places for small firms. In absolute terms, employees of small firms are the majority of coworkers populating our CSs. A comparative analysis reveals the interesting insight that the density of small organizations that populate CSs increases with the size of the city. In a specular inverse proportionality, coworkers from large firms were more densely concentrated (i.e. made up a higher proportion of the CS total users) in smaller peripheral cities. In short: *the bigger the city, the smaller the firms mostly populating the CS, and viceversa: the smaller the city, and higher was the recorded proportion of large firms in the CS.* As evidence of the first part of the above, the CS population of Lyon was made of coworkers employed by small size firms (between 11 and 50 employees) for 39%, a percentage reaching 67% if we add the 15% of smaller firms (2–10) and the 13% of larger firms with between 51 and 200 employees (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
Distribution of coworkers by firm size in the CS of Lyon



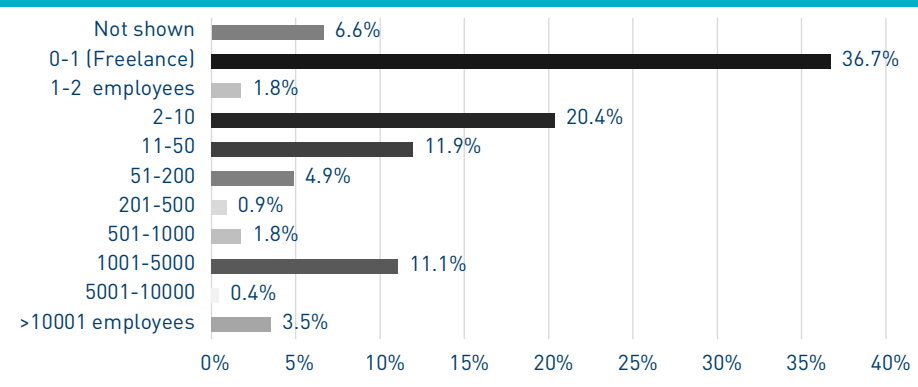
This group of small firms is less concentrated in the CS of Lille: firms between 11 and 50 employees are the 24% of the population, growing to 44%, when adding the 5% of firms with employees between 2 and 10, and the 15% of firms with between 51 and 200 employees (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**  
Distribution of coworkers by firm size in the CS of Lille

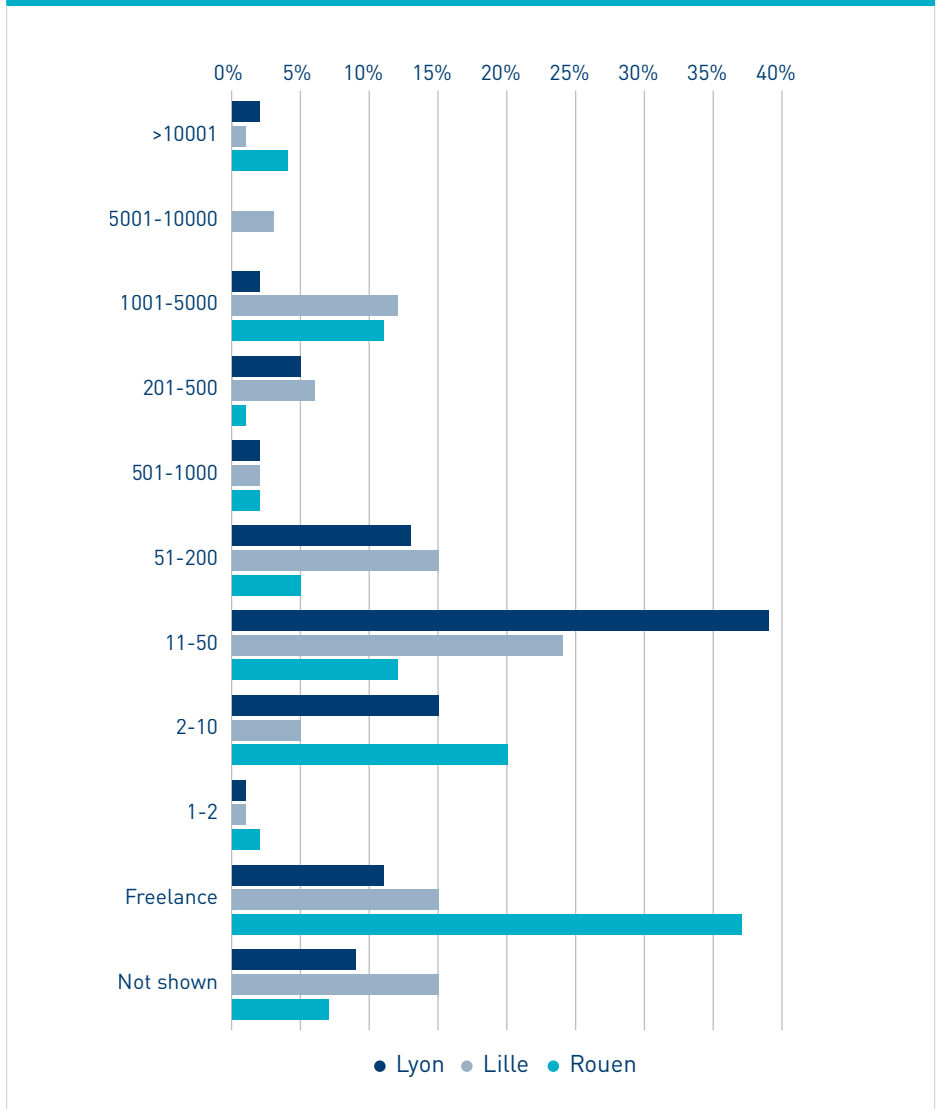


Such small entrepreneurial ventures weigh even less in the CS of Rouen, where coworkers from firms of 2–10 employees account for 20% of the population, declining to 12% for coworkers in the 11–50 size, and to 5% for the 51–200 size (for an overall total of 37%. See Figure 5; cp Figure 7 for firm size comparison across all three CSs).

**FIGURE 5**  
Distribution of coworkers by firm size in the CS of Rouen



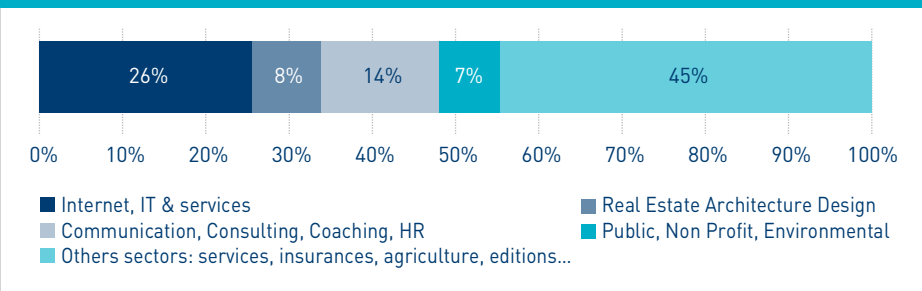
**FIGURE 7**  
Comparative distribution of coworkers by firm size in the three CSs (%)



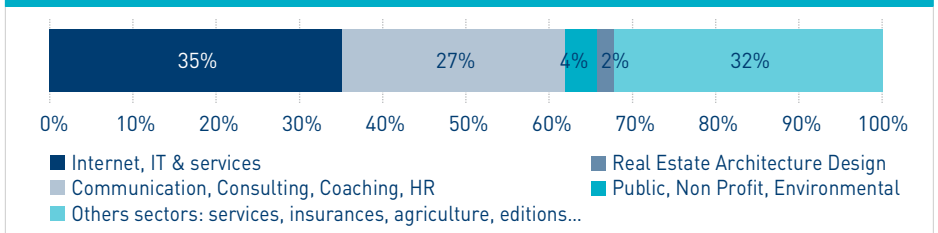
As evidence of the second part of this trend, our data clearly show that the provincial CSs of Lille and Rouen, located in the peripheral orbit of Paris, attract not only the self-employed, and (to a comparatively inferior degree) small firms, but also more employees of big companies. The CS of Lyon attracted only 6% of its population from larger companies, 2% for each firm size of 501-1000, 5001-10000, and over 10.001 employees. The CS of Lille, by contrast, attracted a much larger proportion of these firms, these coworkers making up the 18% of its population. This is not surprising, given that Paris and Lille are just one hour away by train. We traced big firms, between 1000 and 10000 employees—in sectors as diverse as Marketing & Adv and Supply Chain & Logistics—that were based in Paris, but had apparently decided to displace a small part of their workforce (between 10 and 30 employees) at a relative proximity. As the train takes two hours to reach Paris from Lyon, this dynamic was not observed here, so the few (5/6) coworkers of firms of comparable size in Lyon all belong to different companies, which often are not French and do not have headquarters in Paris. However, the attractiveness of Rouen for large firms is interesting: the Rouen-Paris train connection takes one hour and a half – midway between the travel durations of Lyon-Paris (2h) and Lille-Paris (1h): despite the distance and commuting duration, up to 17% of the Rouen coworkers are employed by large, Paris-based organizations.

Our *generalist* coworking spaces (Fabbri, 2016), being neither sector nor professional role specific thus agglomerated different sectors (see Figures 2, 4 and 6), where two of the most represented sectors are “Internet, IT & Services”, often the field of the small start-ups described above, and consulting, marketing & advertising (see Figure 8), which match freelance-based services.

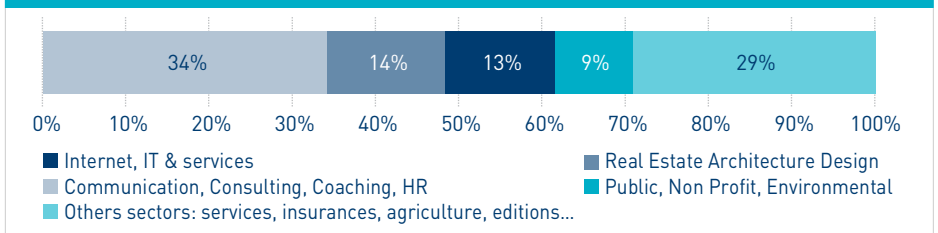
**FIGURE 2**  
Distribution of Coworkers by sector in the CS of Lyon



**FIGURE 4**  
Distribution of Coworkers by sector in the CS of Lille



**FIGURE 6**  
Distribution of Coworkers by sector in the CS of Lyon

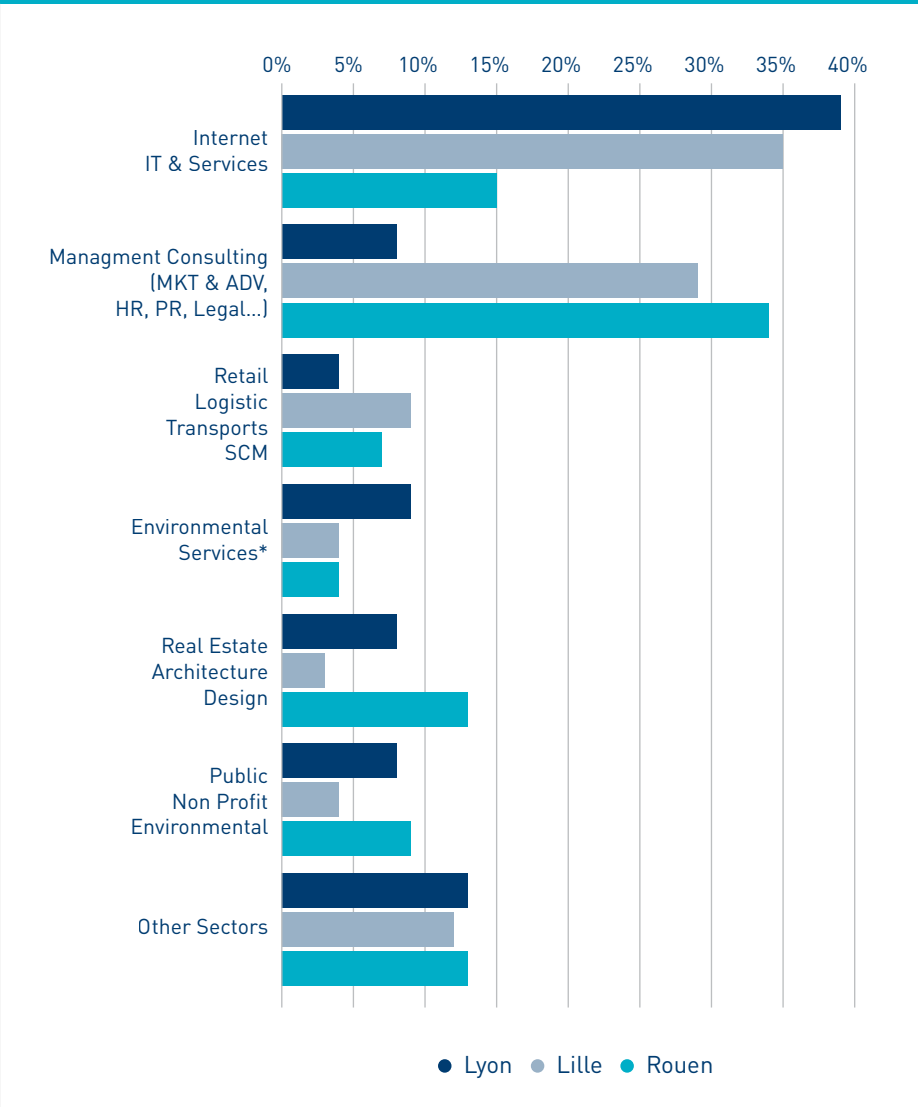


If the populations of coworkers of our case study are similar in age and gender across cities, CSs differ in how dense is the agglomeration of the diverse firms they host. A higher concentration of employees from diverse, large multinational corporations has thus the potential to make a peripheral CS more internationally interconnected, than a CS located in a larger city.

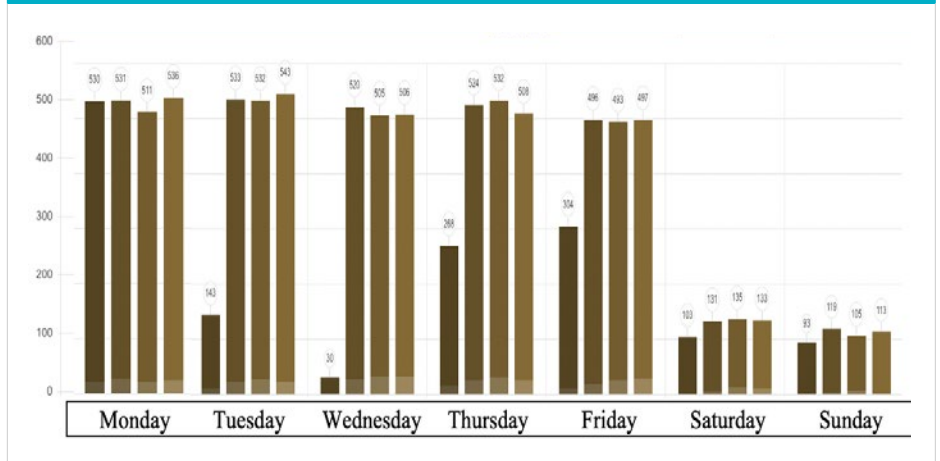
Passing from the social composition of NC spaces to the use over time that coworkers make of the sites, we obtained site-undifferentiated evidence on the distribution of the registered presence of the coworkers during the week and around the clock (see NC graphs below).

The two graphs above suggest that coworkers, while they concentrate the majority of their physical presence in conventional daily 9 to 18 hour slots during working days, are also present 24/7. If peak weekdays see a daytime space occupancy of around 50% of their total population (i.e. around 500 of 1000), during the weekend this rate drops to 10% (circa 100 coworkers), but there are never less than 40 coworkers present at NC all through the night.

**FIGURE 8**  
Comparative distribution of coworkers by sector in the three CSs (%)



**FIGURE 9**  
Coworkers' attendance at Lille, Lyon and Rouen by weekday over 4 weeks



**FIGURE 10**  
Coworkers' attendance of NC's sampled spaces by hour of the day

