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Individual Entrepreneurship in the Context of Diversity and Flexibility of Workplaces

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Abstract

In the presented text, entrepreneurship is considered in the context of different ways of transforming the space of interpersonal relations and changes occurring in the organization of professional work associated, inter alia, with an individual and more flexible approach of the youngest generation of employees to the place of employment. The above trend is manifested by e.g. professional activity performed in today's popular coworking spaces, designed for the purpose of creative interactions and building contact networks, which are also crucial in the process of establishing an own business. The main purposes of the study involve: 1. a critical analysis of knowledge about flexible, innovative forms of work organization; 2. identification of the characteristics of flexible workplaces (from the point of view of contemporary employees), their positive and negative traits, relevant also for young entrepreneurs; 3. recognition of types and possibilities of professional activities performed (also by educators) in creative, customized workplaces. Hence, the research problems are clustered, inter alia, around the following question: Are the characteristics of the so-called flexible workplaces relevant for the youngest generation of potential and existing entrepreneurs – and if so, which of them? The project involves preliminary, qualitative research with the use, inter alia, of narrative interviews conducted with the use of thematically oriented cards with interview instructions, carried out among final-year students. The study takes into account the differences in professional experience of respondents, correspondingly to the variables of speciality and mode of study. The results of the theoretical analysis, complemented with the results of own research and professional experience may be useful for beginner entrepreneurs and entities supporting young people in coping with the competitive environment and the changing labour market. The above-mentioned results also lead to the following conclusions: the formation of flexible and diverse work spaces (including the offering of interactive tools, opportunities to establish different professional relationships) gives employees, particularly young people, a lot of place to decide how and where to work. They can also spot opportunities associated with working on their own account and create a favorable working environment.

Keywords: *coworking spaces, diversity, flexibility of workplaces, young entrepreneurs*

Track: *Entrepreneurship*

Word count: 5.287

1. Introduction

The creation of non-conventional, flexible workplaces is the result of, among others social changes, among which it is worth paying attention – due to the subject of this study – to greater mobility (occupational and spatial) of contemporary employees who are currently looking for various possibilities of personal development (where the workplace is to be the source of self-realization) and the realization of individual aspirations and plans, making choices among many ways of life (Marody, 2015). They also present a new approach to their social roles. This includes, among others the involvement in many roles that are negotiated

between family members and adapted to the circumstances of life, which often take place in the same environment, e.g. at home. Young people, in particular (but not only), wish to have the freedom to choose their form of work and to decide on the periods and place of their performance (Espinoza *et al.*, 2014; EY, 2015). Flexible forms of time and place of work are valued mainly by the Net Generation brought up in the environment of digital technologies and actively involved in creating the network, unafraid of changes and looking for what is new (Tapscott, 2008; Melosik, 2013) – which is important for the issues discussed in the text below. What occurs more and more frequently is that employees want to perform their duties outside the employer's office, work in a more personalized manner, adapted to their stage and style of living. Individualism is one of the characteristic features of modernity, in addition to: the multiplicity of options in all areas of our activity, especially in professional work; dominance of economics in various areas of life and the tendency to expand space. (Sztompka, 2012). Solutions that are part of the highlighted phenomena can be, for example, coworking spaces (various types, including business incubators, freelance cooperatives, business centers), but also work provided in flexible offices supporting team activities and allowing the adaptation of jobs to the changing tasks (Hays, Kinnarps, Skanska, 2017), or long distance cooperation, e.g. in virtual project teams. Summing up the preliminary considerations, it should be added that coworking variations are part of the popular trend of sharing personal space and work space, which is also one of the important directions of the sharing economy. That is why new companies are emerging, whose services are focused on the idea of space, and – as emphasized by the authors quoted here (Grozdanic, 2016; Owyang, 2016) – more and more startups create common spaces.

2. Spaces and workplaces – Theoretic Framework

According to the Polish pedagogue Maria Mendel, the place is a kind of micro-space particularly close to man. Our life is being lived and recorded in places and local environments that are becoming increasingly important today. The place, its role and the changes it is subject to are the subject of an interdisciplinary discourse (e.g. there are different views on the essence of the place and its functions), a matter of nature, among others economic, cultural, psychological and pedagogical nature (Mendel, 2006; Lewicka, 2012). Unloosening the rules of being present in a traditionally understood workplace (transferring work to private or public spaces) and the demand for flexible workplaces such as coworking spaces is also the result – which has been signalled in the introduction – of the dynamic development of the technology sector, including startups. The effect of the above-mentioned development is, among others the observed increase in the importance of remote work based on information and telecommunications technologies (Carnoy 2000; Eurofound, 2015). Teleworking offers the expected autonomy and greater independence, but also carries risks related to, for example, more intense and prolonged working hours. The challenge for teleworkers is therefore both managing the organisation of their working time, as well as greater responsibility for working conditions. The following aspects may entail similar difficulties: isolation from the work team and weariness caused by routine or the environment – in the case of working only at home (Kulpa-Puczyńska, Nawrat, 2015; Eurofound, 2018). Task-oriented flexible work organisation also requires employees to be more effective (combined with additional activities) and availability – meaning subordination to dealing with their company's tasks (especially when running their own business) and the place where those tasks are implemented (Castell, 2007; Marody, 2015).

It is also expected that the flourishing of technology and online resources will continue to play an important role in the development of individual entrepreneurship, e.g. in creating new spaces for entrepreneurial ventures. Entrepreneurs can also live and work anywhere, however,

while making their choice, they are increasingly often guided by direct access to specific people and institutions, with a view to building or developing a network of contacts and support. Thus, entrepreneurship does not forfeit its local character (Thornton, Flynn, 2003). It is, among others, in the properties of the network of relations (their nature, diversity, durability, range) – according to sociologist Piotr Sztompka – where one should look for human entrepreneurial and innovative potential. It is also important for the work environment to support additional employee activities, their interests and the need for self-improvement. The atmosphere of the interpersonal sphere (openness, partnership, strong co-operative relations, trust) and team spirit are also of great importance (Sztompka, 2016). Can we – in the case of non-traditional, flexible workplaces – talk about their “magnetic” nature that encourages exploration, exchange of experience and active participation in the implementation of changes? Using the phrase referring to the name of one of the two functions distinguished by T. Beckley – a place understood as “an anchor” and as “a magnet” (Lewicka, 2012). Nowadays, we observe the dominance of intermediate, less permanent relationships made by choice. According to Anthony Giddens who refers to R. Sennett’s standpoint, current professional activity is, among others, the implementation of unrelated projects, where it is difficult to build long-lasting social ties (Giddens, 2001). It is also associated with great diversity among self-employed people. Almost half of this group includes “Employers” and “Stable own-account workers” who knowingly decided to run their own business, valuing, among others, independence at work. However, a quarter of the self-employed work because of the lack of a better alternative and these are, for example, people characterised by low income and high level of self-uncertainty (Eurofound, 2017).

Taking into account the above-stated deliberations and previous considerations when looking for the answers to the last question, it is worth analysing the possibility of working in a coworking space. This is where an employee (e.g. a self-employed worker, freelancer) can rent a well-equipped desk for a set time (he/she does not always do it regularly, but usually chooses a coworking space close to his/her place of residence – according to the *Co-working in Europe – 2018 Deskmag’s Global Co-working Survey*), with the possibility of individual or team work, also with people from other companies and industries. The purpose of co-working is also to create a favourable working environment for planning and implementing joint, innovative projects by co-workers (specialists) characterised by different, complementary competences (Eurofound, 2015). Coworking spaces also offer help to people starting their own businesses, including the organisation of meetings with mentors, investors or future co-workers, and proposing, for example, marketing or legal consulting. A good example of such activities (educational and networking-based) is Campus Warsaw – the third space in Europe for Google startups and, for example, the Warsaw’s Smolna Center of Entrepreneurship. Thanks to the places supporting young entrepreneurs and the acceleration programs addressed to them (such as BeCreative in Warsaw – in 2016, Startup Hub Warsaw’17), cities have a chance to attract young talents and new ideas. This is another challenge, bearing in mind also a further increase in the percentage of debuting startups (in 2018 – 18%). In addition, data published in *the Polish Startups Report 2018* shows that almost every second company surveyed – next to the need for financial resources – indicated the need to hire qualified employees. Startups can offer them a work culture that is characterised by flexible time and the possibility of remote work (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2018), i.e. forms of work organisation expected by modern employees.

The data collected, among others as part of the (previously quoted) research titled *Coworking in Europe – 2018*, indicate that the described work spaces are also spaces intended, most of all, for the organization of meetings and networking-based activities, and social interactions constitute one of the basic reasons for their selection (Foertsch, 2018). In coworking spaces – also known as spaces for development – conferences, lectures (including motivating lectures

with interesting speakers), discussion panels led by experts, workshops, meetings with mentors are organized. There are initiatives such as e.g. “Startup School” – which equip early-stage entrepreneurs and their teams with skills necessary to run and develop their own business (Campus Warsaw can be an example). Coworking centers adapt the educational offer to the expectations and needs of their clients, adult methods of learning, but primarily to new market challenges. In addition, according to the analyses referred to in *Cushman & Wakefield COWORKING 2018. The concept of a flexible workplace evolves* and also *CoworkingPoland.pl*, large companies often build their “innovation cells” in coworking spaces, which allows them to make use of another source of inspiration and have constant access to the latest knowledge. It can also be said that the described “new” workplaces, similarly to modern companies, take into account tendencies resulting from the development of flexible organization of work, such as approaching individual clients, acting on the global market and flexible creation of coalitions with companies and other entities. Universities start to cooperate with coworking spaces more often, providing students with access to communities of experts, advisers, successful entrepreneurs – their skills and experience. This also creates opportunities for students to participate in courses preparing to becoming an entrepreneur or an opportunity to implement their own business projects in a motivating work environment. Students can also teach other co-workers (Cagnol, 2013). It should be added that co-working is also included in the offer of Academic Entrepreneurship Incubators established at Polish universities, particularly in areas with high development potential.

3. Methodology and results of own research

The project involves preliminary, qualitative research with the use, inter alia, of narrative interviews conducted with the use of thematically oriented cards with interview instructions, carried out among 25 final-year (mainly) female students of pedagogy and special education of first and second degree studies. They were the participants of a. Vocational advisor’s workshop – classes conducted at the Faculty of Pedagogical Sciences of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw (CSWU), speciality: personal and career counselling and continuous learning and b. Entrepreneurship for teachers workshops – carried out in the framework of the “Modern Pedagogue” project No POWR.03.01.00-00-K423/16 [in Polish: „Nowoczesny pedagog”), also conducted in the said faculty, but covering – with its didactic programme – students of different specialities (including preschool and primary education or pedagogy of social rehabilitation and pedagogy of care and upbringing). The selection of the research sample was purposeful, dictated by criteria that seemed to be important – at the stage of preliminary research – for the analysed issue, among others: the specificity of respondents’ future professional work and students’ plans related to setting up and running a business after having completed their education – which concerns mostly the participants of the “Modern Pedagogue” project, whose aim is to strengthen professional competences desired in the labour market, including those concerning entrepreneurship. The very project (due to its various activities) entails the inspiration for students and graduates to take further, creative actions in the area of professional activity (Kulpa-Puczyńska, 2017). In addition, upon the decision to do preliminary research, the previous results of the theoretical analysis – also related to the implementation of an independent project financed from the funds for statutory research (subsidy of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for research activities of faculties) – were taken into account. “Running an own business as a way to use entrepreneurial skills of educators” [in Polish: „Prowadzenie własnej firmy jako sposób na wykorzystanie przedsiębiorczych zdolności pedagogów”] (UmoPBNP-5/18).

It is also worth adding that despite the low entrepreneurial activity among students and graduates of pedagogy, the still significant popularity of this course of study in Poland (Central Statistical Office, 2017) was taken into account and also attention was drawn to certain interesting data on the most popular “products” sold by startups, which included solutions concerning significant – from the problem’s perspective – areas such as education (9%), content/social services (9%) and analytics/research tools/business intelligence (13%) (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, another research project is planned, where “flexible workplaces/work spaces” and “individual entrepreneurship” will constitute one of the basic theoretical categories significant for a new research activity. The correctness of these categories will also be verified through the research results presented in this text. The project will include, among others surveys conducted with the help of auditorium questionnaire technique addressed also to the students and graduates of other universities and courses of study – particularly those, who show an increased tendency to decide to start a business, which finds evidence in the results of analyses carried out, for example, in the framework of the *Study of Human Capital in Poland* [in Polish: Bilans Kapitału Ludzkiego (BKL)] (PARP, 2015). The reasons for the above-mentioned decisions, including data obtained in own research, may be the subject of another individual analysis – also in the context of the generally low level of young entrepreneurship (under 30 years of age) in Poland, which is also less popular among young women (and which has been noted in BKL).

3.1 Characteristics of “new” workplaces – the point of view of young employees

Richard Florida, referring to the views of M. Gladwell, described “new” workplaces as visually interesting, open and interactive spaces (which foster the organization of meetings and exchange of information and ideas), arranged according to different needs of their users - hence the diversity and flexibility of these spaces, e.g. in terms of equipment (Florida, 2010). What properties of the analysed workplaces have been spotted by the respondents?

A qualitative analysis of the results of own research leads, among others, to the general statement that the respondents’ answers concentrate primarily on the organizational values of the “new” workplaces, including the possibilities of: **a.** providing work for many employers; **b.** choosing working days, working hours and adjusting working time to other activities of “flexible” employees; **c.** reducing time needed to commute to employer’s/employers’ seat (good location is one of the most important features of coworking spaces, which has also been emphasized in thematic publications or research reports); **d.** carrying out professional tasks in comfortable, modern places, offices. Referring to the last group of features, it should be added that today’s coworking spaces can also be found, among others in private apartments and in shopping malls, cafés, hotels and banks that offer separate workplaces for their customers. The highlighted properties – important for young employees – are reflected in the following opinions: “An employee is not bound by any rigid schedule and definite working hours, he/she performs working duties when at suitable time”; “He/she can work at a sudden inflow of inspiration, well-being, he/she decides when to concentrate on work”, “you do not have to constantly deal with one type of tasks, you can mix tasks, which helps avoid monotony at work”. According to the respondents, due to the mentioned solutions, “we have more free time, which can be used to carry out our own needs, spend time with family, friends, develop ourselves and passions”. Moreover, “a pre-set deadline for the completion of work, without imposed time norms, allows to achieve the set goal more effectively.”

According to the respondents, flexibility is another important feature of unconventional workplaces, but this flexibility is understood as the freedom to create “new” workplaces (along with the previously stressed flexibility of working time). At this point, it is worth adding that today’s coworking spaces are also dedicated for specific groups, e.g. coworking spaces with facilities for working parents; with workshop equipment (fabrication laboratory)

including both basic tools and modern technologies, or spaces supporting the implementation of artistic ideas or social projects. The search for innovative solutions to social problems, or counselling activities addressed to various groups, in particular those marginalized on the current labour market – are prospective areas of activity for contemporary educators (Kulpa-Puczyńska 2017), including educators-coworkers. According to some respondents, which is very important, flexible workplaces may reduce stress, fatigue, monotony and other unpleasant experiences that go along (unfortunately) with present workplaces. Moreover, “apart from delivering more relaxation, they also provide the possibility to increase efficiency and creativity”; “the development of flexible forms of workplace organization creates opportunities to draw inspiration from a new and interesting environment, which enhances our creativity”. The essential, psychophysical aspect of professional activity outlined here is also well reflected in the subsequent statements: “The environment greatly influences the way we work. It is important to feel independent, not being watched, overwhelmed or assessed” and “an employee who is less frustrated with restrictions, is more willing to undertake activities aimed at the development of their personality, abilities, interests, (...) such an employee is more rested and creative”. Thus, the described flexible workplaces bring significant benefits (including greater independence of employees/employers, or a variety of performed tasks), but they can also be a source of serious challenges associated with, for example, high mobility of young entrepreneurs, variety of workplaces and the need to coordinate work with private life (Kulpa-Puczyńska, Nawrat, 2015).

3.2 Flexible and “social” workplace. Discussing the results of own research

For a full picture, it must also be emphasized that a coworker may also encounter negative consequences of an open, flexible work environment such as problems associated with privacy and distraction in the workplace (hence the constant search for balance between the public and private space of work) and full availability due to ubiquitous mobile devices. These problems – undoubtedly important nowadays – include also individual issues related to, among others, employee’s personality or his/her expectations towards the workplace, but they are also determined by cultural factors. Thematic analyses also draw attention to the fact that people working from different places and having the opportunity to choose a place of work – feel more comfortable when it comes to their privacy. It is therefore best to provide a working environment that would provide the possibility to choose where and how to work (Congdon *et al.*, 2014). Among the costs related to flexible forms of work organization (various solutions, also concerning the workplace), indicated by the respondents, the social costs most often associated with social isolation of “flexible” employees (teleworkers) and financial costs accompanying renting a place/desk for work prevailed. Not without significance is the fact that it is mainly women (as other research results show) who experience the negative effects of social isolation, lack of contact with the work team (Bańka, 2005). Another challenges mentioned by students – potentially associated with unconventional workplaces – can be assigned to one of the five groups: **1.** difficulties concerning proper motivation to work, focusing on professional tasks that may result, among others, from a too relaxed attitude to work and towards colleagues; **2.** problems associated with the organization of work (place and time of work) and lack of necessary skills in this area, as well as the employee’s dedication of his/her free time to planning a professional activity; **3.** difficulties in maintaining the work-life balance (“it’s easy to exaggerate and work too much and too long”, “sometimes you work over a time that you would prefer to be free but the project has to be completed”); **4.** problems related to building more permanent, stable relationships with other employees, if we only occasionally use flexible workplaces, as well as **5.** difficulties related to the nature of work/occupation, which are reflected in the following example statement: “the job of a vocational advisor is associated with providing a convenient place for meetings, conversations

with the client – does a coworking space give such a possibility?” While talking with the respondents, also the following opinions could be heard: “costs incurred by an employee using modern forms of work organization are comparable to the costs of a “classical” employee” and “if a given form of work organization, concerning e.g. a workplace, suits the employee, he/she does not incur special costs”.

The *Sixth European Working Conditions Survey* also highlights the importance of a workplace (in which employees perform their tasks) in terms of the organization of work, but also in terms of the quality and quantity of social interactions (Eurofound, 2017). In turn, in a previously quoted global study commissioned by Ernst & Young Global Limited, which involved various generations of employees, the five main reasons of quitting a job, indicated by the respondents, included “a work environment that does not encourage teamwork” (EY, 2015, p. 12). In this context, taking into account the quoted data, it is worth asking: which of the qualities of flexible workplaces, in the opinion of respondents, are important for the youngest generation of entrepreneurs (prospective and current)?

The mentioned qualities include: the opportunity to work in teams organized out of the initiative of entrepreneurs–coworkers, i.e. a feature that is well illustrated by the following statements of the respondents: “working with another person allows you to acquire the necessary skills (today and in the future) and positively affects the quality of work” or “cooperation with others allows you to work out a good organization”. Attention was also paid to the following possibilities associated with the described coworking spaces: “the possibility to realize several ideas (and passions) at the same time”, “the development of own ideas in a larger group of employees and getting to know their opinions about our work”, “ability to consult with more experienced employees”, “cooperate with people from around the world, as well as manage your company from anywhere” and “benefits in the form of vast professional and social experience”. It is worth adding that experimenting with the labour market and in the labour market is one of the important characteristics of the period of life the respondents are in – i.e. “emerging adulthood”, next to, among others focusing on oneself and one’s own needs (self-focus) and great freedom in choosing behaviours and lifestyles: full-time or casual jobs, living in one or many places, developing a career in the domestic or global market. However, it must not be forgotten that at this stage of life young people are also accompanied by confusion and uncertainty (Arnett, 2004; Bańka, 2005).

4. Conclusions

Innovative companies are characterized by an organizational structure that enables: interaction (extensive contacts and cooperation); creativity, including a positive approach to ideas supported by motivational systems and learning through constant involvement of managerial staff and employees in rationalization activities (Tidd, Bessant, 2011). The above-mentioned elements can also be found in coworking spaces. However, they have not been fully identified (e.g. the creative nature of “new” workplaces) and subjected to a more in-depth analysis and assessment (coworking spaces as places of education) by the majority of respondents. The respondents focused on the benefits and costs associated with running their own business (more on subject - reasons for which female students of pedagogy consider setting up an own business, can be found in, among others, Kulpa-Puczyńska, 2018), also taking into account the possibility of supporting young entrepreneurs through unconventional, flexible workplaces. This probably results from the lack of specialist knowledge and often personal experience related to working in coworking offices. Domestic working students – provided that they use flexible forms of work organization – most often choose this variant that it gives the possibility to individually organize their working time – adjust their working time to the schedule of classes at the university. Thus, the standing-out statements are the

statements which better reflect the essence of the analysed solutions, including opinions of people who 1. have taken up a job that fits into the specifics of the studied speciality (this is often the case with the speciality: personal and career counselling and continuous learning) and also 2. have experience related to, for example, project work (experience collected also during classes and apprenticeships, and through voluntary participation in student organizations and various associations), as well as experience in managing a team of employees. Those people also are active in the web and have the necessary IT competences. The mobility of young people and all experience in this area is also significant. In addition, the respondents also indicated home teleworking and mobile teleworking as the most attractive solutions for young employees, not excluding the work in flexible, creative coworking spaces. In their opinion, these places of work are particularly beneficial at the beginning of the career, when we gain various professional experience. Also, the employer offering flexibility in their workplace “is more competitive in the labour market and has a chance to stand out among other job offers and attract talents.”

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