

Is Flexible Shared Workspace Model Truly Beneficial for the Users? A Review of Costs and Benefits

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Abstract

With the advancement in technology along with the changes in consumer behaviour, flexible shared workspace which is a new model in the workspace concept has become increasingly popular. Although abstract evidence is available on benefits as well as on the costs of these workspaces in a disorderly manner, comprehensive and scientific evidence is not properly and recently reviewed to identify the costs and the benefits of these flexible shared workspaces. Thus, a clear knowledge gap exists on whether these spaces are truly beneficial for their users. Intending to fill this knowledge gap, the main purpose of this study directs towards identifying the costs and benefits of using shared workspaces. The study findings will be useful for current and future shared workspace users when making decisions on selecting spaces for their work and also for space providers in order to identify the areas that they should improve to attract more customers. This study was done through a comprehensive literature review and 21 quantitative, qualitative and mixed approach articles published on flexible workspace context during the years from 2000 to 2022 were reviewed. The findings of this study reveal that the costs are mostly related to the areas of privacy, productivity, control, psychological concerns, cost and ergonomics while the benefits relate to a high level of flexibility, collaboration, knowledge sharing, networking, performance and low cost. The authors propose future researchers to conduct research studies to validate these findings empirically.

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Keywords: Flexible Workspaces; Sharing; Facilities; Costs and Benefits; Review

Introduction

Due to the advancement of technology and the changes in consumer preferences and behaviour, the concept of “work” and “workplace” has changed during recent decades. Flexible, mobile and multi-locational are the key new methods of working that have been identified by previous scholars (Makakli et al., 2019). Flexible shared workspaces which is defined by Spinuzzi (2012) and Parrino (2015) as a workplace where a group of individuals who come from different backgrounds shares the same work environment, can be highlighted as a new methodology in the workspace concept (Makakli et al., 2019). As a result of globalization and the expansions of various industries, these spaces have become a leading global trend (Huliana & Ellisa, 2019).

As the number of services that provide shared workspaces has increased at both local and global levels (LaSelle, 2019), the costs and benefits that these services generate have become increasingly apparent and constantly discussed in recent years (Mendel, 2020). While benefits are often highlighted, this very commitment to flexibility can also lead to some critical downsides that are unique to these spaces. In this study, benefits are considered as all positive effects, whereas costs are the negative effects of shared workspaces in monetary and non-monetary terms.

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As revealed by scholars that engaged on a survey of the literature on workplace innovation reveals that more studies are available and written on the benefits and less studies have focused on costs (Balkin et al, 2001). However, since the information on both benefits as well as costs of shared workspaces is essential for the space users in decision making (ven de Voordt, 2004), the lack of available information on costs and benefits will lead to ineffective decisions that will ultimately lead to adverse outcomes. Although various initiatives have been made in this direction, it is difficult to identify a comprehensive overview of costs and benefits (Negen & van der Voordt, 2001). Hence, this study raises the question what are the costs and benefits of flexible shared workspaces?

Objective of the Study

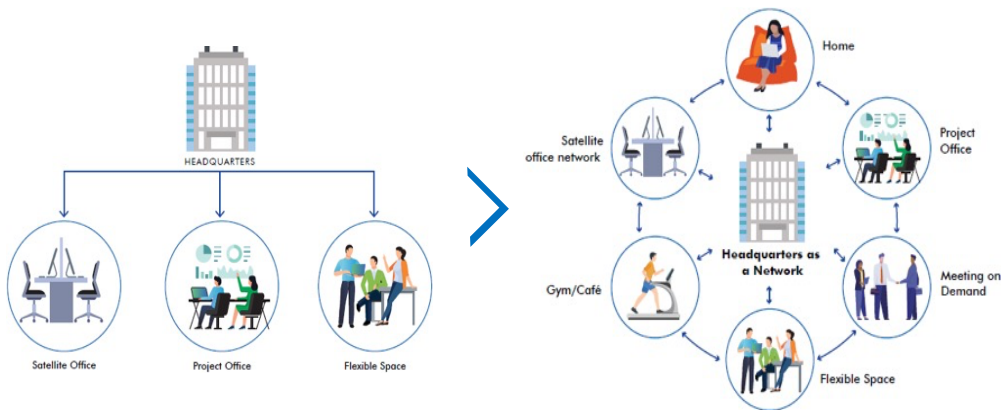
The objective of the current study is to identify costs and benefits of using flexible shared workspaces as an alternative workspace.

Literature Review

Flexible shared workspaces

According to the definition of Harvard Business Review (2015), a shared workspace is “a membership-based workspace where diverse groups can work together in a shared, communal setting” (Spreitzer et al., 2015). CBRE Research (2021) reveals that the continuous spread of flexible workspaces is anticipated to increase the available working style options post Covid-19. Accordingly, the corporations around the world have already been transformed to agile and more flexible workspaces as shown in Figure 01.

Figure 01: Agility in the flexible space industry



Source: CBRE Research (2021)

The key core values of these shared workspaces include collaboration, community, accessibility, sustainability and openness (Kwiatkowski & Buczynski, 2011). In addition, the open environment nature of shared workspaces, spontaneous interactions are happened often between the users (Roth & Mirchandani, 2016). In addition, creating an environment for proper collaboration to stimulate interaction and networking among these users is often recommended for the shared workspace providers (Fuzi, 2015). Furthermore, users from different sectors and industries can share knowledge with each other and develop themselves in this community-driven environments (Sykes, 2014). Accessibility to such individuals is of the utmost importance in networking and social interactions in a community. Thus, co-workers can deal with different

people while sharing ideas, resources, experiences even celebrate others' successes (Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017). Furthermore, shared workspaces are located in multiple locations. Hence, the users can select a location as per their preferences leading to a high level of convenience (Fuzi, 2015). In addition, rental or the membership fee is another key element in accessibility, these shared workspaces are mostly offered comparatively affordable ranges with a number of options in the tenure period and flexible rental contracts, such as a rental period for a day, a week or a month (Sykes, 2014).

Segments and layouts of flexible shared workspaces

As observed by Morrison and Macky (2017) shared workspaces offer a condition for more open arrangements of physical office layouts which would increase communication and sociability among individuals who work together in the shared workspaces. In 2016, six types of shared workspaces based on the business model and level of user access were identified by Kojo and Nenonen namely, i) public offices such as free working spaces and libraries, ii) third places such as public spaces that provide services (Ex: cafes), iii) collaboration hubs such as public offices based on collaboration between workers, iv) co-working hotels such as shared office space based on short-lease contract and a compact service package, v) incubators such as shared office space rented by an organization or entrepreneurship according to the flexible lease contract and rents and tenant requirements such as the fit to the community and vi) shared studios. Moreover, as identified by CBRE Research (2021) in their survey done in India recently, there are five flexible space segments as shown in Figure 02. There are start-ups coworking/incubator/accelerator, enterprise coworking, business centres, hybrid spaces and managed offices. As shown in the Figure 02, the flexibility is higher in the first three segments which come under the pre-built, shared and serviced spaces.

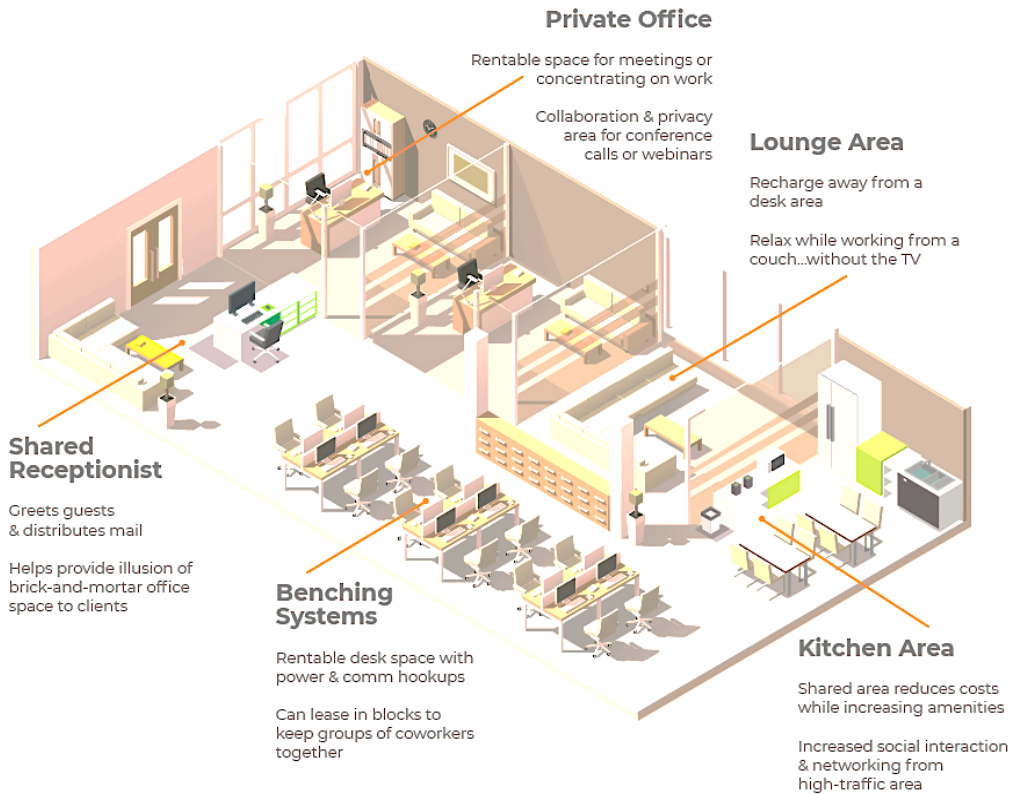
Figure 02: Flexible space segments



Source: CBRE Research (2021)

The users of the flexible workspaces have different layout options to choose from. Taking the layout options mentioned by the Rework Furniture (2021) as shown in Figure 03, five main layouts can be identified; benching systems/ hot desks, private office, lounge area, shared receptionist, and kitchen area.

Figure 03: Shared space layout options



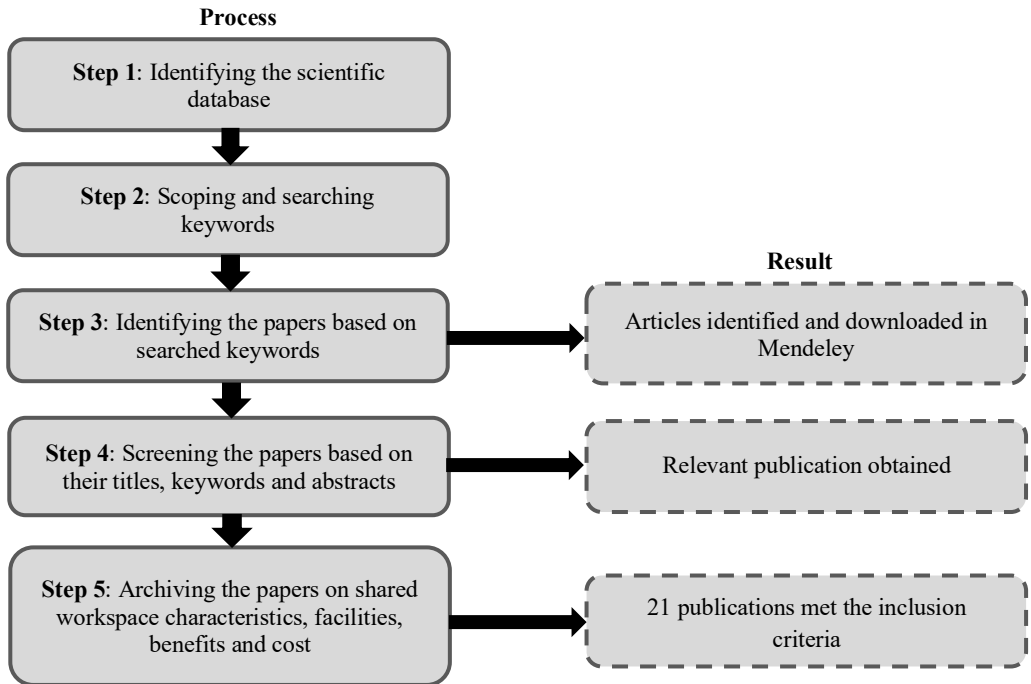
Source: Rework Furniture (2022)

Although these are taken as common layouts, the modern and upcoming spaces offer more diverse and flexible options. Therefore, outlining a comprehensive overview of costs and benefits of these options and facilities as set as the objective of the paper, would definitely be useful for many parties.

Methods

The data collection of this study was entirely literature based. This comprehensive literature review was done using 21 quantitative, qualitative and mixed approach articles altogether published on flexible workspace context during the years from 2000 to 2022. For analysis, critical review and descriptive review methods were used according to the chronological order. The search process for the literature review followed by Shafique, Luo and Zuo (2020) was adopted in this paper.

Figure 04: The search process for the literature review



Source: Shafique, Luo and Zuo (2020)

Results and Discussion

Facilities available in flexible shared workspaces

When it comes to the facilities provided in these spaces, it is a blend of informal and creative space workspace elements (functional spaces) (Orel, 2015). When comparing this multi-tenant offices concept with traditional multi-tenant offices, the shared office concept provides more spacious, facilities including coffee, kitchen, meeting rooms, 24/7 accessibility, printing and copying facilities lounge space and other informal spaces (Spinuzzi, 2012). Table 01 given below summarizes the characteristics and facilities of flexible shared workspaces highlighted by the previous scholars.

Table 01: Facilities of flexible shared workspaces

	Dejl (2011)	Deskmag (2012)	Deskmag (2013)	Fuzi (2015)	Fuzi et al. (2014)	Gandini (2015)	Kojo & Nenonen	Leforestier	Merkel (2015)	Moriset (2014)	Parrino (2015)	Perera et al.	Spinuzzi (2012)	Spreitzer et al.	Sykes (2014)
1. 24-hour access								✓							
2. Co-working host						✓	✓		✓	✓			✓		
3. Access to tools, resources and network	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓								
4. Atmosphere and interior aesthetics	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓					
5. Collaborative spaces					✓		✓	✓				✓		✓	✓

6.	Concentration rooms		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
7.	Diversity of tenants		✓		✓						✓
8.	Event spaces					✓	✓				
9.	Flexible (shared) workspaces				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
10.	Flexible lease contract	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
11.	Good accessibility (e.g., Private and public transport)		✓	✓						✓	✓
12.	Kitchen areas	✓					✓				✓
13.	Meeting/ boardrooms						✓			✓	✓
14.	Networking events and workshops	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	
15.	Open layout						✓				✓
16.	Virtual platform					✓	✓			✓	

Source: Compiled by Author using Literature (2022)

Costs and Benefits of Flexible Workspaces

The current percentage of flexible workspaces is around 2%, yet it's expected to increase up to 13% by 2030. Although it seems to reach the predicted number, most companies do not have a certain methodology. Further, it doesn't fit every business model. Therefore, it is vital to understand the costs and benefits of these workspaces to make effective decisions.

A study of the literature on workshop innovation shows that the previous studies have focused more on the benefits while a lesser number of studies have discussed the costs and risks of shared workspaces (Balkin et al., 2001). In this paper, the term "benefits" is used for both monetary and non-monetary returns and positive effects whereas costs are referred to the probability of a negative outcome and resulting impact in both monetary and non-monetary terms. The associations of costs and benefits are summarized in Table 02.

Table 02: Cost and Benefit associations

Costs	Benefits
Sacrifices	Yields
Investing capital and employment	Better firm outcomes
Negative effects	Positive effects
Risks	Profit
Extra costs	Low-priced costs, Reducing cost expenditure and negative costs

Source: Ven de Voordt (2004)

Although many attempts are evident, scholars have found it challenging to convert non-monetary costs and benefits (Ex: "dissatisfaction translated into the costs of absenteeism, advertising costs to attract new employees") into monetary terms. Moreover, the direct and indirect costs and benefits of shared workplaces are also considered. For instance, when customers need to reserve their workspace in advance, for example, these additional transaction expenses for office administration are direct costs. Likewise, costs and benefits of shared workspaces are identified through this comprehensive literature review and discussed in the following sections.

Benefits of Shared Workspaces

When reviewing literature, six key monetary and non-monetary benefits were identified as most influencing factors to the selection of flexible workspaces over traditional workspaces. A summary of the literature of key 13 papers on the benefits of shared workspaces is given in Table 03.

Table 03: Benefits of shared workspaces

	Deijl (2011)	Fuzi (2015)	Fuzi et al. (2014)	Gandini (2015)	Kojo & Nenonen (2014)	Leforestier (2009)	Bollingtoft et al. (2003)	Moriset (2014)	Parrino (2015)	Perera et al. (2019)	Spinuzzi (2012)	Spreitzer et al. (2015)	Sykes (2014)
1. High flexibility		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
2. Collaboration		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Knowledge sharing		✓		✓			✓			✓	✓		
4. Networking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5. Performance		✓		✓						✓	✓		
6. Low cost		✓								✓		✓	✓

Source: Compiled by Author using Literature (2022)

Flexible shared work arrangements are dynamic, low-cost workplaces where different backgrounds meet, work together and share knowledge with one another (Fuzi, 2015). These workspaces allow their users to make choices about where they work, when they work and how much work they have to do (Jeffrey Hill et al., 2008) in order to balance their family demands and work (Galinsky et al., 2008). Accordingly, a high level of flexibility can be identified as an evident benefit of shared workspaces. Various flexible work arrangements also with prevalent workplace flexibility practices such as flex time and flex place offered by organizations can also be highlighted (Coenen & Kok, 2014). Not paying a lease and flexibility in increasing or decreasing the number of desks/chairs, private offices as required are key benefits of shared workspaces. Many organizations have been providing the facility of “flex space” also called telecommuting or teleworking which allow employees to work away from traditional offices either from home or off-site using information and communication technologies (Coenen & Kok, 2014).

In addition, collaborative work is a key component of a flexible workspace concept, and this can be identified as another key benefit. It includes information exchange, formal and informal partnerships and joint ventures. Shared workspaces provide the opportunity for joint work, knowledge exchange, collaboration, work satisfaction, creativity, innovations and entrepreneurship (Spinuzzi, 2012). Due to freedom of choice and autonomy, high-quality layout, high level of health and well-being, the social space of shared workspaces expedites knowledge exchange, networking, collaboration, innovation and work satisfaction (Gandini, 2015; Perera et al., 2019). Once employees are segregated into separate rooms, all opportunities for collaborative work and creative conversion within an office are limited. Network opportunities provide by flexible workspaces are beneficial for many industries. Working with different people and business makes it easier to collaborate and new clients and build and expand their networks. Networking with other firms also provide opportunities to acquire new knowledge, develop capabilities and achieve benefits (Bollingtoft & Ulhoi, 2003).

Flexible workspace is always trendy, modern and progressive and aid to increase creativeness. Further, the flexible shared workspace concept promotes the idea of working as fun and creates an inspiring environment to increase morale and productivity (Servcorp Blog, 2021). In shared workspaces, entrepreneurs can nurture their ideas into practical formats and these spaces can be beneficial, especially when aiming for new-born businesses and new ventures (Moriset, 2014).

Flexible workspace focuses on low-cost offices where a large number of employees can work and interact while compared with single and dedicated company offices (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018). Flexible workspaces make it easier to manage costs by allowing the users to select different rental options that fit their schedules, for instance daily, weekly, and monthly, etc. Further, due to less time and money spent on commuting long distances, it can result in monetary as well as non-monetary savings in terms of money, time and energy (Perera et al., 2019). In addition, when considering user performance, scholars have found that productivity can be increased while the rate of employee turnover can be reduced by allowing them to work at shared workspaces (Allen, 2001; Perera et al., 2019).

Costs of Shared Workspaces

On top of the evident benefits of shared workspaces, scholars have also found several significant downsides that are unique to flexible shared workspaces. The summary of the literature of key 9 papers on costs of shared workspaces is given in Table 04 and factors are discussed in detail referring to past literature.

Table 04: Costs of shared workspaces

	Ashkanasy et al. (2014)	Cha et al. (2017)	Perera et al. (2019)	Kim and De Dera (2013)	Maher et al. (2005)	Von der Voordt (2004)	Mendel (2020)	Sercorp Blog (2021)	Glover (2020)
1. Lack of privacy	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Productivity drop	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
3. Lack of control over environment			✓			✓		✓	✓
4. Psychological concerns						✓	✓	✓	
5. Cost related issues						✓		✓	
6. Ergonomics issues							✓	✓	✓

Source: Compiled by Author using Literature (2022)

Lack of privacy in terms of visual and acoustic privacy is a major drawback that can be identified in shared workspaces (Ashkanasy et al., 2014; Cha et al., 2017; Perera et al., 2019). To users, the shortage of private areas and routines that include flexible operating areas can be irritating too. The acoustic privacy or the level noise can make an adverse impact on concentration which can ultimately result in a low level of performance (Kim & de Dear, 2013; Perera et al., 2019) and it has been identified as the most unsatisfactory indoor environmental quality factor (Perera et al., 2019; Ashkanasy et al., 2014; Maher & von Hippel, 2005). Loss in productivity can arise because of distractions and issues which affect concentrated working, Loss of productive time through continual logins and seek for free spaces, excessive loudness, reduced morale, and employee resistance. Accordingly, shared workspaces minimize work satisfaction because of loss of privacy, territory, status, and identity (ven de Voordt, 2004). Depending on the character of the business, issues such as some privacy or confidentiality concerns can be occurred once sharing

space in co-working areas with different companies. The open nature of co-working spaces expresses that they aren't suited to people or businesses who typically have to be compelled to hold private conversations or meetings.

Although flexible workspaces provide nice opportunities for networking and collaboration, there can be lots of distractions and users do not have control over their surroundings and what people do (Servcorp Blog, 2021). This may become a problem when a team needs to focus. Sharing meeting rooms with different businesses could cause scheduling clashes and possible disruptions to the business. A co-working desk or hot desk kind of flexible workspace functions do not give out maximum effort on how the workspace should be set up to fit in with the existing layout.

Apart from that losing a job role along with the usual workspace cause universal psychological imbalances such as expression of status, personalization of the workspace, privacy and territoriality (Mendel, 2020) This can also additionally cause resistance among users. Users are not solely connected worth as to if their efforts are measured effectively and efficiently. Additionally, users wish to obtain pleasure while working. Moreover, cost (more expensive compared to alternatives), scheduling clashes, lack of control over environment and branding, ergonomics" are disadvantages attached to flexible workspace. (Servcorp Blog, 2021). Flexible workspaces are generally a more cost-effective option for small-scale businesses, but it's not cost-effective in the long run for large firms compared to hiring their own private office. Further, shared workspaces are more overpriced comparing alternatives such as work from home or a cafe for an individual freelancer or consultant.

Some reports imply when the objectives on profit cannot be reached due to lack of budget, there has been the provision of unergonomic facilities at flex spaces (Glover, 2020) When there isn't enough budget for the set-up, the cost would be focused on cheaper desks, chairs, couches, etc. that do not apply to the concept and ergonomics, hence this might cause low productivity as well as injuries.

Table 05 summarises the costs and benefits of shared workspaces found from this review study.

Table 05: Summary of the costs and benefits of shared workspaces

	Bollingfoft et.al.(2005)	Deijl (2011)	Fuzi (2015)	Fuzi et al. (2014)	Gandini (2015)	Kojo & Nenonen (2014)	Leforestier (2009)	Moriset (2014)	Parrino (2015)	Spinuzzi (2012)	Spreitzer et al. (2015)	Sykes (2014)	Perera et al. (2019)	Ashkanasy et al. (2014)	Cha et al. (2017)	Glover (2020)	Kim and De Dera	Maher et al. (2005)	Mendel (2020)	Servcorp Blog (2021)	Von der Voordt (2004)		
Benefits	High flexibility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										
	Collaboration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										
	Knowledge sharing	✓	✓		✓					✓			✓										
	Networking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓										
	Performance			✓		✓					✓			✓									
	Low cost			✓								✓	✓	✓									
Costs	Lack of privacy												✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Productivity drop												✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Lack of control over environment												✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	
	Psychological concerns																		✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Cost related issues																					✓	
	Ergonomics issues															✓				✓		✓	

Source: Compiled by Author using Literature (2022)

Conclusion

Due to the advancement in technology along with the changes in consumer behaviour, flexible shared workspace which is a new model in the workspace concept has become increasingly popular. The objectives of these workplace innovations have been expressed in different ways at different abstract levels where one person discusses how to develop the functioning of the organization while another one concentrates on increasing effectiveness, productivity and providing maximum support for new working ways. Similarly, current as well as future potential users of shared workspaces should be aware of both costs and benefits of using shared workspaces. However, a clear knowledge gap has been identified by the authors as comprehensive and scientific evidence is not properly and recently reviewed to identify the costs and the benefits of these shared workspaces. Accordingly, this paper aimed at reviewing literature in order to identify the costs and benefits of shared workspaces in monetary and non-monetary terms. The findings of this study reveal that the monetary and non-monetary costs are mostly related to the areas of privacy, productivity, control, psychological concerns, cost and ergonomics while the benefits relate to a high level of flexibility, collaboration, knowledge sharing, networking, performance and low cost. These findings will be useful for shared workspace users as well as the space providers, to be used when making effective decisions. Further, the authors propose future researchers to conduct research studies to validate these findings empirically.

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