# Not Going Back to the Office any Time Soon: Coworking Spaces in The Netherlands

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## 1 The Pandemic in The Netherlands

The Netherlands was hurt similarly to most other Northwest European countries in the first wave of the pandemic: an initial peak in March 2020 (see Fig. 1) led to a lockdown of public life, with all schools closed and everyone working from home as much as possible. In May and June 2020, measures were gradually released. Although commuting was still officially discouraged, public and private transport use rose gradually, with road traffic intensity regaining its usual intensity by week 30 (late July; [1]). The second wave hit the country starting in late September 2020, leading to a (smaller) lockdown, with schools and shops staying open but restaurants and other public facilities closed. Public transport was slightly reduced in late October 2020. However, in December 2020 the country went into a second full lockdown, even stricter than the first, as also non-essential shops closed down. Just as in the spring of 2020, working from home was the norm.

This second full lockdown lasted until April 2021, when the restrictions were gradually lifted. Shops and terraces opened, and schools, the latter enabling many workers with smaller children to no longer work from home every day. The Dutch

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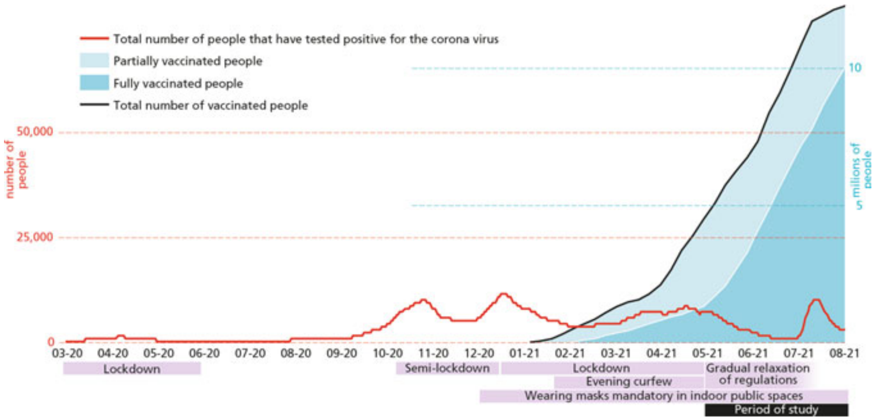


**Fig. 1** Overview of lockdowns and infections in the Netherlands, early 2020 to mid 2021. *Source* Visser et al. [2]

vaccination program started in January 2021 and reached a 73.1% vaccination rate in August 2021 (Our world in data, 2022).

## 2 Coworking Spaces and Other Third Places

In the public discourse regarding the effects of the pandemic on Dutch society in general and daily life in particular, working in "third spaces" was rarely an issue. Most news items as well as policy advice focused on the rediscovered possibilities and problems relating to working from home [3–5]. In fact, coworking spaces (CSs) had closed down during the first wave without particular attention in the press and did not gain particular attention when measures were gradually released in the late spring and summer of 2021 and onwards. Since the pandemic, the average number of hours worked from home has doubled, and now stands at 6, 5 h per week [3]. Yet provincial development plans ("Omgevingsvisie") are slow to incorporate these trends, and even where stimulating working from home is now on the agenda in some provinces, coworking spaces are not.

Non-profit "third spaces", such as coffee shops and libraries, were probably used more as replacement offices in the denser cities, where housing space is more restricted. There is little data available to investigate this hypothesis (but we will be able provide some in §4, below). Official regulations simply emphasized that working from home should be the norm [3]. However, we should note that the Netherlands has always been the leader in remote working [6], but not in CSs. These have mainly been of interest to self-employed, for whom the pandemic was also an advantage: "the normalisation of the virtual office has made it easy for freelancers and small business start-ups to operate without the need for dedicated office space" [6, n.p.].

During the first Dutch lockdown, CSs suffered from a drastic reduction in demand for the rental of meeting rooms; on the bright side, regular employees increasingly found a place at coworking sites [7]. Not long after the start of the pandemic, the first sounds were heard of increased appreciation of the lower densities the countryside has to offer—both as a short-run effect of avoiding the now dangerous density of the city and because of a renewed appreciation of space, particularly garden spaces [8–10], while prices in the core cities remain high. Such a development is in line with international developments [11]. Rather than a general dislike of urban living, a simple expansion of telecommuting options might also spread welfare more evenly and give peripheral regions a much-needed boost [12, 13]. In combination with developments in the re-organization of offices, where large central offices may be on the way out, this may mean an increased interest in regional hub offices, which could take the form of shared CSs.

## 3 The Effects of the Pandemic on Spatial Distribution of Living and Working—Did the Dutch Periphery Benefit?

Although data is scarce, there are some indications that recently a redistribution of population is taking place in the Netherlands. Whether this is due to the pandemic or to the steep increase of housing costs in the Randstad (the core economic center of the Netherlands) is still unclear. Figure 2 suggests that post-pandemic (2021) migration flows away from the Randstad, the Dutch core area, do not lead to a population increase in peripheral regions [14]. Instead, the areas surrounding the Randstad are more in favor, which points at longer commuting distances. Larger commuting distances can be compensated by [14] fewer workdays of travel to and from work, which to date remains the norm for many larger employers. The website of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment reads that the cabinet calls on employers (with over 10 employees) to make agreements with employees to permanently encourage hybrid working [15]. Also, employees can request their employer to work entirely or partly from home. TNO reported in late 2021 that 72% of employees expect to be allowed to continue working from home, and 25% have made a formal agreement; moreover, 43% of employees wishes to work as much at home as on site [16].

However, when investigating the impact of a working from home advice, one should consider the fact that the Netherlands has a fairly high proportion of self-employed people, compared to other European countries [17]. The recent rise of self-employed "can also be seen in light of the growing presence of the third place as a work location" [18], given that self-employed and freelancers are key users of coworking spaces [19]. In addition, flex work (temporary work) and parttime work was and is relatively common in the Netherlands: the parttime employment rate

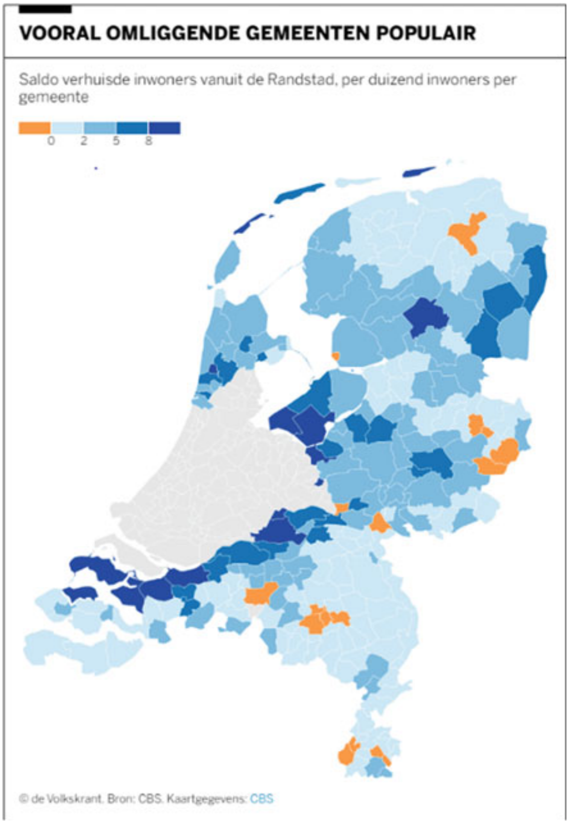


**Fig. 2** Net migration from the Randstad area to other municipalities, per 100 inhabitants per municipality (Hofstede [14])

is 36%, versus 16% for OECD, while the temporary employment rate (including freelancers) is 27.4% for the Netherlands and 11.8% for OECD as a whole [17].

This peculiar labour market structure might both mitigate *and* enforce the impact of both pandemic and its related regulations. On the one hand, already before March 2020, many people worked not at the workplace at all, but instead parttime, or temporarily, from home and/or at a (shared) workspace. The pandemic only strengthened this pattern. Due to the pandemic those firms who were not yet set in more hybrid mode did change this now. Compared to before the pandemic, the possibilities to meet online have doubled from 52% in 2019 to 94% in 2021 and nearly all companies offer working from home facilities (increase from 85% in 2019 to 96% in 2021). The number of firms that offers more flexible 'office-hours' also increased from 83 in 2019 to 86% 2021 [20].

In the pandemic, several businesses started paying (more) attention, or in some cases expanded their attention to the mental health of employees. In particular, labour union FNV published (together with political parties from different sides of the spectrum) a call to guarantee the right to work from home [21]. Many studies have been done in the 2020–2021 period on the effect of working from home on workers

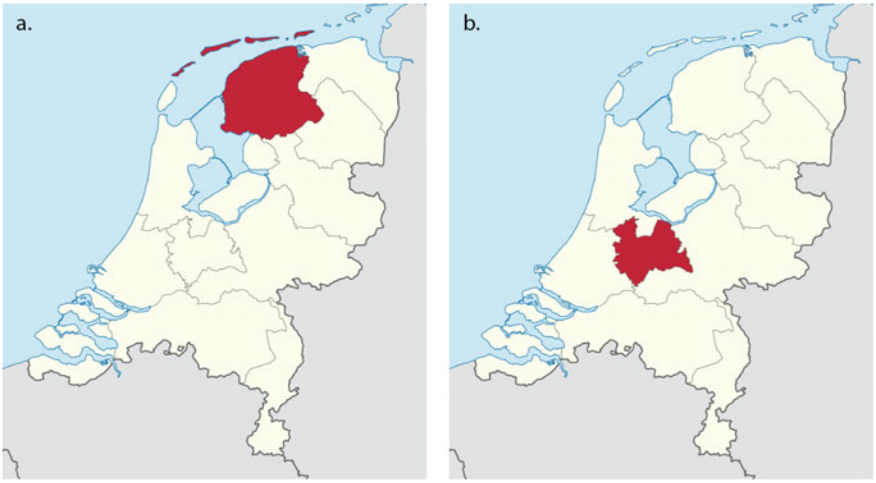


**Fig. 3** Provinces Friesland (a.) and Utrecht (b.) in red *Source* Wikimedia commons

themselves. Some find negative effects for prolonged working from home, such as diminishing intrinsic motivation and lack of connectivity (among others [22]) and others find more positive effects such as growth in autonomy and agency (e.g., [23]). So, even though the experiences with working away from the office are moderately positive, also in the Netherlands, it is unsure if the guarantee for the right to work from home would pave the way for more CSs in general and in particular for more peripheral areas in the Netherlands? Unfortunately, a map of Dutch CSs does not exist yet, although various data sets are available, albeit not all up to date. Therefore, we have to take refuge to own data collection in two contrasting Dutch regions, which we briefly present below. As a base line measurement was lacking, we were unable to include changes in CSs presence over time.

## 4 Spatial Distribution of Coworking Spaces in Two Contrasting Dutch Provinces

Friesland[1] is one of the Northern provinces of the Netherlands (see Fig. 3), and in the rather densely populated Netherlands it is considered ‘rural’, with a population density of about 200 inhabitants/km$^2$. Its capital city Leeuwarden (ca. 125,000 inhabitants, 2022) is very much a regional centre of amenities, with museums, hospital,

[1] The field research on Friesland, on which this section of text is based, was performed in the spring of 2021 under the guidance of dr. Schutjens and dr. Smit by Floor Roll, Boris Beije, Arne Eijgenraam, Sterre de Rooij, Merlijne Hermans, and Noa Eijgelshoven. The authors thank these students from the honours programme at UU for their work and enthusiasm.

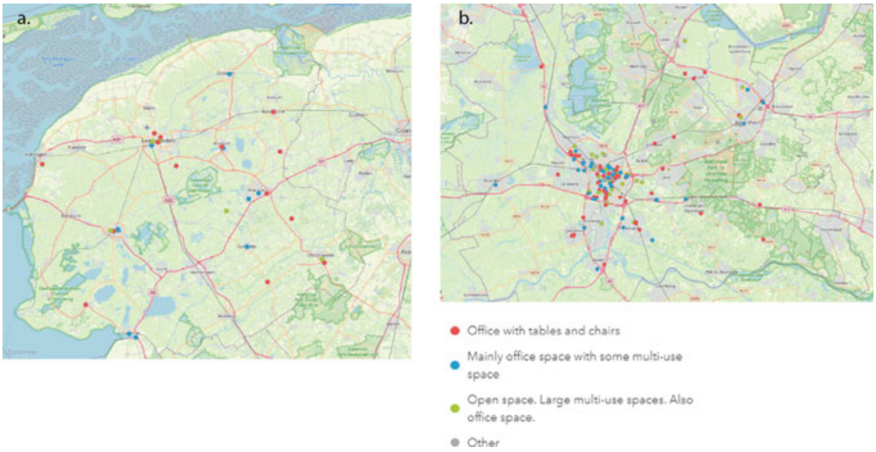


**Fig. 4** Coworking spaces in Friesland (a.) and Utrecht (b.)

banks and other companies and two Universities of Applied Sciences. Leeuwarden is regarded the centre of activities for many residents in the province of Friesland.

Coworking spaces are available at different types of locations in Leeuwarden. In 2020, there were 6 operational coworking spaces plus one under construction. However, of these six coworking spaces, three were multicompany buildings, located on industrial sites at the city edge; the one under construction was of a similar type, but located more centrally. The others are located in the inner city and conform more to the ideal type of shared coworking spaces.

For the province as a whole, the pattern is similar, with multicompany buildings located on industrial sites but sometimes in town centers (Heerenveen, Drachten) and in two cases in a residential neighbourhood of a large town. 'True' coworking spaces are few, but they are invariably in town centers, not in the periphery of this already peripheral province. Figure 4a shows the distribution of all 29 spaces as gathered through a web search.

By way of contrast, we look at the centrally located province of Utrecht (see Fig. 3b), which forms part of the Randstad conurbation. At half the size of Friesland, it has over double the population, with a population density of ca. 1000 inhabitants/km$^2$. We found a total of 240 coworking spaces here, shown in Fig. 4b.[2] A large part is concentrated in the eponymous capital city of Utrecht, with a smaller cluster in Amersfoort (25 km to the East). Here, many different types are present, besides multicompany buildings: there are serviced offices, fablabs, makerspaces, creative spaces, and 'pure' coworking spaces, as well as combinations of the above. We see four reasons for this contrast. Firstly, the phenomenon of coworking spaces is still in a growth stage [24], and this growth starts in the 'core' urban areas, spreading only later to the peripheries. We see this core-periphery split both at the national level

[2] Data were gathered initially by Casper Leerssen in 2019 and updated in 2021 by the team mentioned in the previous footnote.

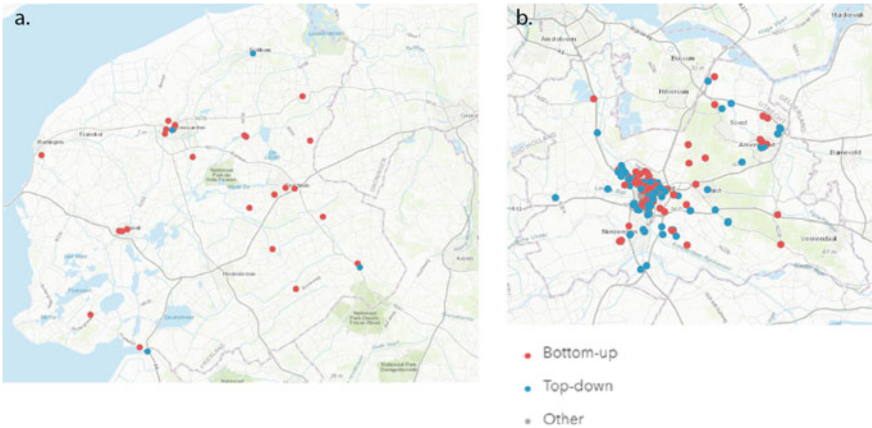


**Fig. 5** CSs in Friesland (a.) and Utrecht (b.) by organizational type

(Utrecht first, Friesland follows) and within provinces: in both cases, the countryside and villages lack coworking opportunities (in line with [25]). Secondly, the economic activities of Utrecht (city and province) lend themselves better to coworking spaces: creative and innovative activities are more present in Utrecht than in Friesland (cf. [26]). Thirdly, on the user's side, the housing situation is less dire in Friesland than it is in the Randstad area (and in many cities around the world—[27]), meaning even many of the true creative class [28].

Apart from the classification by type above [29] we looked at the organizational aspect of coworking spaces. There are many small, 'bottom-up' initiatives, often local, sometimes socially responsible and/or non-profit. Just like in any growth market, larger companies form or enter the market, and these have advantages of scale. Following [30] we have therefore classified all observed spaces as bottom-up (her CS1) or top-down—where we mean both her CS2 of government-sponsored individual sites as well as commercial sites, which Fiorentino calls CS3. These are shown in Fig. 5. Interestingly, in Utrecht almost half the spaces are top-down, while in Friesland almost all spaces are bottom-up. Interviews[3] in the field in Friesland confirm the identification as bottom-up; most owners are either local or strongly attached to a local space. Whether this had a positive impact on the surrounding area (as suggested by Fiorentino et al. [30] and identified by Berbegal-Mirabent [31] as the leading topic in coworking research) is unclear, interviews in the field do not indicate a specific local impact.

[3] Interviews were performed 'on the fly' whenever suitable operators or workers at a coworking space were encountered. A topiclist and full report of the interviews are available upon request.

## 5 Conclusion

The spatial distribution of CSs in the Netherlands closely follows demand by both workers and employers, and therefore also population density. In more peripheral areas, bottom-up initiatives are the norm, while in a more central province also large CSs organizations are active. There is no evidence of the pandemic changing the location choices of CSs nor of their tenants, except for a temporary decrease in demand for CSs during the lock-downs and the closure of a number of CSs due to loss of clients. As the Netherlands traditionally counted many workers already working from home or in third spaces, we expect the effect of the pandemic on working patterns in the Netherlands to be less pronounced than in other countries. Working from home is here to stay!

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