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connectedhubs

The Social and Community Impact of Rural Working Hubs in Ireland

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Executive summary

This qualitative study examines the social and community impact of rural working hubs. Findings are drawn from semi structured interviews which took place between June 2022 and November 2022 with 28 hub users and 5 managers from 13 hubs across Ireland. Reflecting the rural locations and the move to remote and hybrid working, hub users came from a wide variety of sectors and held a range of job titles at all levels. Case studies of successful hubs showed that hubs fulfilled a variety of needs for their users. Hubs were often located in renovated buildings with the support of the local authority/agency and founded or inspired by people with experience of remote working. Using a Sense of Community framework, the findings uncover what influenced hub users' Sense of Belonging at the hub, explores interaction patterns between hub users, managers/founders and the locality and uncovers ways that hub users achieve work, personal and community value. Rural working hubs have been touted as a lifeline for rural communities. By providing the means to reduce or remove the daily commute, rural hubs can help reinvent what it means to live and work in rural Ireland by renovating rural housing and bringing people back into the community to support local businesses, clubs and schools. Unfortunately, our research finds that many small rural hubs are not being used to their full potential.

The sustainability of hubs will be influenced by the extent that the public experience a Sense of Belonging in hubs and feel that hubs can fulfil their needs. The physical infrastructure rural working hub needs to be inclusive and responsive to the requirements of hub users. It should provide a professional environment with high quality broadband, and a variety of working spaces that support the privacy requirements of diverse users. In addition, the hub also needs to support the interaction needs of their customers. These vary between users, some need structure, others mentoring and learning opportunities to support productivity. Many also seek social interaction to support well-being and community integration.

Some examples can be found of the potential of hubs to play an important role in the future of rural digital transformation. Many hubs exist as a result of a strong local community and a responsive local authority. Phase one of rural working hubs, their physical creation is largely complete. Phase two needs to identify shared goals coordinating local businesses, local community and digital entrepreneurship. Unofficial mentors have been identified in several successful hubs. They share important information that links customers with providers and support the needs of a variety of hub users. Those who benefited most were usually women, graduates and start-ups.

Potential areas to develop include identifying hub champions from existing users who are committed to using hubs and have accumulated experience of working in this setting; creating a better system of hub management instead of relying on volunteer managers; working with government agencies to co-ordinate existing services with hubs for better local engagement i.e. LEOs; formalising knowledge sharing across government agencies in relation to best practice for the development of hubs; providing opportunities for larger organisations to place pods of employees at hubs; working with universities to support student use of hubs for study space and engagement with businesses.

"letting people live the life that they want to live in their location and not letting geography be a limiting factor"

Founder and hub user

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Background

Formerly an urban phenomenon, remote working has become commonplace across the globe and the focus has moved to peripheral and rural locations including: France (Leducq & Demazière, 2021), Italy (Akhavan, Mariotti, & Rossi, 2021), Switzerland (Bürgin, Mayer, Kashev, & Haug, 2021). Identifying the value in community work spaces and boosting rural regeneration, Ireland has recently been identified as a leader in government [supported remote working](#). When people moved to completely [remote work](#), as a response to the pandemic, digital transformation that would have taken years had to happen in a couple of weeks. This became a time of re-evaluation for many who tried to remember the why behind the pattern of their working lives; influencing the great resignation notably in the USA and inspired a [reorganisation of work](#) for many here in Ireland. The [democratisation of work](#) following the pandemic now means that many people [expect to work](#) remotely or blended work time. Along our western seaboard the need to work remotely is nothing new pre 2019 the Atlantic Economic Corridor formally recognised the [value of remote hubs](#), which went on to form the basis of the government supported [Connected hubs](#) network. Commitments to maintaining high standards can be observed in the Community Enterprise Hubs Association Ireland [quality development programme](#).

Traditionally remote working hubs or coworking spaces and enterprise hubs are built on a [sharing philosophy](#) consisting of collaborative workspaces, and in Ireland we have many successful examples of this approach e.g. digital hubs like PorterShed in Galway and [Ludgate](#) in West Cork. Thanks to government initiatives such as the [Connected Hubs](#) network there are currently over 300 hubs in Ireland providing remote working facilities and incubation space for startups and entrepreneurs in Ireland; but the fear exists that without a targeted approach to managing these spaces many will end up gathering dust or operate as serviced offices with a focus on individual value, when they could be so much more.

[Legislation](#) supporting the right to work remotely has now been passed in Ireland. It has been recognised that the flexibility of working remotely can [support work life balance](#) and has the potential to be beneficial for women with caring responsibilities and older workers. Complexity and contradictions also exist as international studies have found that working remotely can place [extra pressures and stresses](#) on some groups e.g. women, young people and managers.

In Ireland a grassroots social enterprise [Grow Remote](#) supports remote workers and managers as well as remote employers to share best practice of working remotely and link people seeking remote employment with high quality remote employment with companies such as Shopify and eBay that are not limited by location.

The first steps to [rural digital transformation](#) are access to a public digital infrastructure and shared work space but equally important is the skilled coordination with local experts and technical support. Remote working hubs can be a conductor for this rural digital transformation, as they are at the intersection between remote employees, entrepreneurs and local rural communities. Digital inclusion is often an important element of rural remote working hubs, for some hubs their key focus is on inclusion. For example the accessible for all [Crann Impact Hub](#) and the community led [ACT Athlone](#) who highlight how hubs can play an important role in the integration of people with disabilities and marginalised groups into the workforce.

Table Study participants

| ID | Gender | Type | Age | Industry |
|-------|--------|------|-------|-------------------------------------|
| H1_1 | M | OB | 45-55 | Business services |
| H1_2 | F | RE | 35-45 | Financial services |
| H2_1 | M | OB | 25-35 | Creative design |
| H2_2 | M | RE | 25-35 | Construction |
| H2_3 | M | OB | 45-55 | IT Software development |
| H2_4 | F | RE | 25-35 | Construction |
| H2_5 | F | RE | U25 | Ecologist |
| H3_1 | M | OB | U25 | Web design digital marketing |
| H3_2 | F | RE | 25-35 | Project manager |
| H3_3 | F | RE | 45-55 | 3rd level educator |
| H3_4 | F | Mgr | 55-65 | Community development |
| H3_5 | F | RE | 25-35 | IT creative |
| H3_6 | M | RE | 25-35 | IT business services |
| H3_7 | F | RE | 55-65 | Administration |
| H4_1 | F | RE | U25 | Marketing |
| H4_2 | F | OB | 25-35 | Financial services |
| H4_3 | F | OB | 25-35 | Developing start up |
| H4_4 | F | OB | 35-35 | Business services (export) |
| H5_1 | M | OB | 35-45 | IT web services |
| H5_2 | M | OB | 25-35 | IT web services |
| H5_3 | F | Mgr | 35-45 | CEO |
| H5_4 | M | Mgr | 35-45 | Community development |
| H5_5 | M | RE | 25-35 | IT automation |
| H6_1 | F | RE | 35-45 | Market research |
| H6_2 | F | RE | 35-45 | Distributed membership organisation |
| H7_1 | F | OB | 25-35 | Clothes designer |
| H7_2 | F | RE | 55-65 | Public sector local development |
| H8_1 | M | OB | 35-45 | Recruitment |
| H9_1 | M | RE | 55-65 | IT software |
| H10_1 | M | RE | 45-55 | Utility services |
| H11_1 | M | Mgr | 55-65 | Business services |
| H12_1 | M | OB | 55-65 | Technology service provider |
| H13_1 | F | Mgr | 55-65 | Business services consulting |

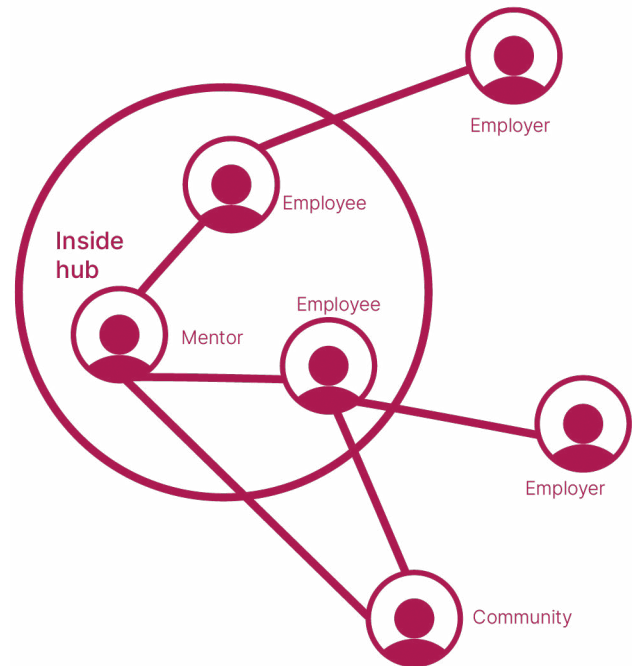
OB = own business RE = remote employee Mgr = hub manager

The following vignettes describe how hubs are used from the personal perspective.

Remote employee Alice

Alice is a project manager who moved back to her own locality with her family. She discovered the local coworking space (digital hub) when she was taking an online exam and needed very reliable broadband. She now has space to work from home but visits the hub a few days each week for social and networking purposes. She enjoys attending the hub because it is welcoming and friendly and looks professional. She has encountered young professional people with families like herself. A chapter of a local group of remote workers adds to the attraction, together they organise events and outings communicating using instant messaging and social media when not attending the hub.

Having a second screen available at the hub would be really useful for her instead of bringing one in each day. She stays in touch with colleagues using MS Teams, but worries that being on calls a lot will disrupt other users. Privacy is important, but she doesn't want to hog the privacy booths all the time. She recently had a work decision that made her worried and was happy and relieved to discuss this challenge with another hub user who took on the role of a mentor and suggested a workable solution, she found this really valuable. In contrast to many male hub users, despite gaining time by not commuting, as a mother of young children she spends this extra time 'catching up' with housework.



The Internal Ecosystem of Enterprise and Remote working hubs

For some people, hubs are a public service. “important for rural towns, no different to libraries, no different to local arts centres” – H2.1. Hubs provide an important service. They enable a safe professional space for people to work. Avoiding the isolation of working alone in a room is recognised as being important by employers and employees.

“On-boarding people is easy, off-boarding people is something that people overlook. Whereas with this, I’ll pay someone to go to a hub, they have a desk, they can stay at home if they want, but they can go in and go out. I know that they are sitting at a proper desk, they’re covered by public liability within here” – H5.2.

“...when people started to work from home it was great at the beginning. The novelty was brilliant for about four or five months. And then after that their mental health isn’t great, motivating yourself, dealing with difficult respondents. That can be very tough when you’re just on your own in a room” – H6.1.

Enterprise and rural working hubs were found to support businesses and individuals by providing the appropriate infrastructure and social outlet to support successful working practices. Some practical examples of how this was achieved are described below.

Creating a sense of belonging at the hub

A Sense of Community can be created in rural working hubs when management is responsive to the needs of remote workers and creates an environment where their users can experience a sense of belonging.

At the forefront is a professional space with high quality broadband and a people centric approach.

"...everything was here that we needed... within a week we were up and running because everything was here" - H6_1.

"it's just like everyone's very nice, you know, and they just kind of help you out and you know so that's the kind of thing that you look for, you don't want to be a number in the system" - H3_6.

Some people need higher levels of privacy than others, spaces offered need to reflect this.

"I have a dedicated office to just do lots of Zooms and things like this from a confidentiality perspective. I need that privacy" - H8_1.

"Because of the nature of my work and a confidentiality and non-disclosure agreement, I don't use the hot desks. I use the pods just for a bit more privacy" - H2_5

A kitchen/canteen and space for people to chat, without disturbing others.

At a former hub "the people at the coffee dock would be laughing and joking and there'd be an awful lot of noise and I'd be on client calls and I could hardly hear my client but yet when I went to the manager of it, he did nothing about it ... I just left" - H4_2.

"...there are lots of workers in the childcare facilities in the hub. Then you have obviously the community team in there, the centre management team, the caretakers. It is like a family though, we all have lunch together" - H8_1.

"...there's like a noticeboard in the canteen and she'd like, let them know if there was talks on, so you'd see everyone then from the hub would kind of support that" - H2_2.

Finding the best place to work

Figure 1 outlines the diverse needs of different hubs users.

*the need for reliable broadband is common to all, some need more bandwidth

An experienced hub manager described how a successful hub can be about more than just a space it

is also about creating opportunities for people to meet in a casual way.

"you want an energy in a hub, so and by that... by energy I mean people really, because the more people you have coming and going, you get those... those, you know, water-cooler moments or whatever you want to call them, but I think that's where the kind of extra special stuff happens. A bit hard to quantify. So you need to be active and busy and trying things and doing things, and that creates that energy I think" H5_4

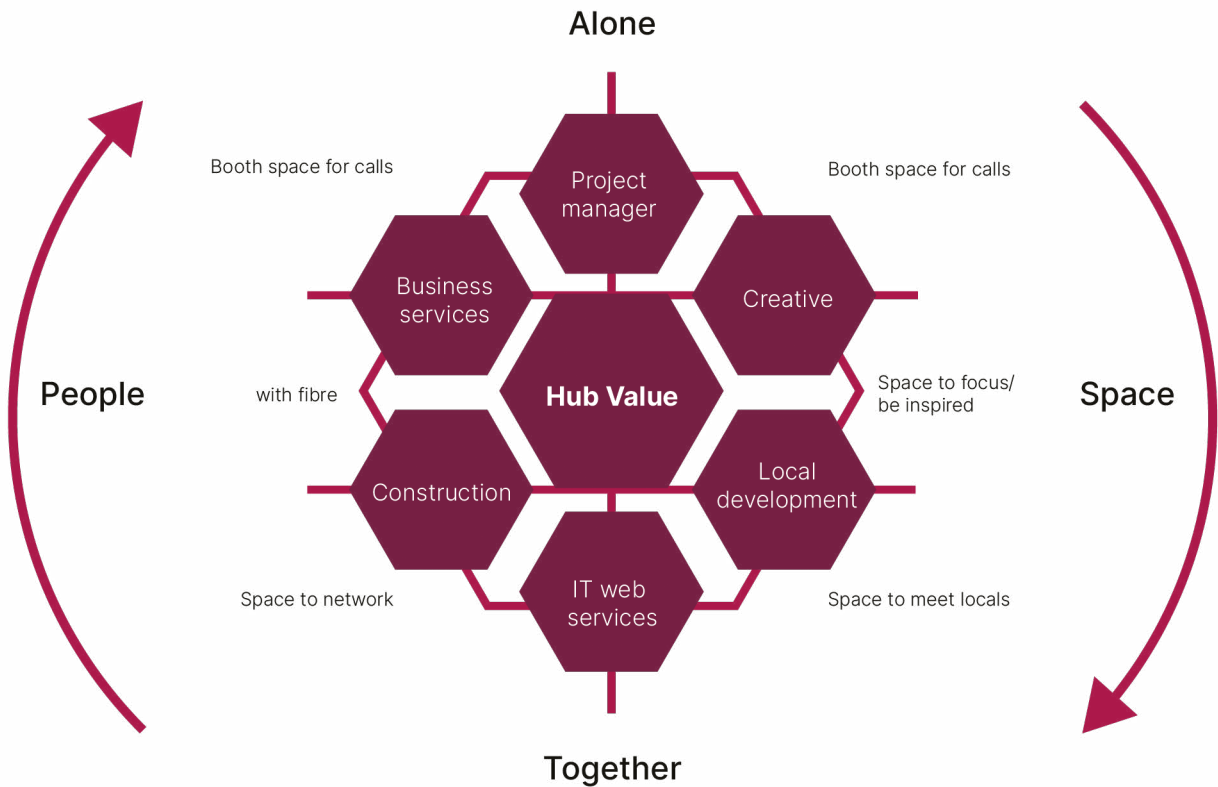
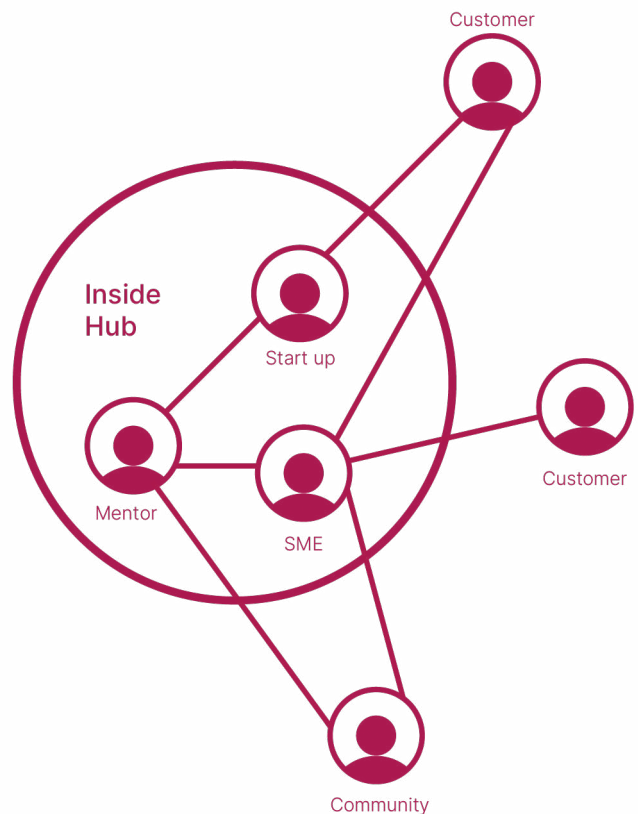


Figure 1

Self-employed Ian

Ian is a graphic designer who was tired of city living, he moved with his family out of the city and now uses the local coworking space (digital hub) to help separate work and life. He found working from home isolating and it was too difficult to switch off. He lobbied local government to start the hub. He works full time at the hub and has a private office which enables the cognitive space he needs to create high quality work, complemented by a canteen area where he can chat with other people using the hub. He feels that people at the hub care about one another and look out for each other. In the communal area he builds relationships with other hub users and has found other users to 'help out' (soft networking). He has worked on projects with several other hub users.



Balancing productivity with sociability

Typical of the sharing economy not everyone will contribute, but some do [pay it forward](#) by mentoring or connecting people starting out with new knowledge and [networks](#). Sometimes this begins with managed interactions or [events](#), or is self-organised by hub users to create new collaborations.

While it is realistic to consider the role of rural working hubs as a way to bring digital transformation to life at community level, a volunteer-led model is not sustainable. Hubs need knowledgeable support to be sustainable and to fulfil their potential.

Productivity and structure (work value)

For most users, hubs fulfil an important role supporting the achievement of work goals with appropriate infrastructure and professional atmosphere, finding that the use of hubs improved their productivity. Adding structure to the working day was especially important for young workers and some entrepreneurs.

"I'm way more productive which means that I'm getting way more done in the time. Like I probably would have been working away all day into the evening at home whereas now I might start at you know 8.00 and I'd be finished by 6.00 or earlier!" – H4_2.

Equally hub users who are entrepreneurs have found hubs to be a very valuable place to make business contacts. Hubs can facilitate an important ecosystem, the trusted environment of the hub often provides opportunities for business collaborations or learning.

"So, I had a voice recognition start-up, and I met many, many people working here that were either in the regulated industries that I could learn from... they could do introductions to me, or look at my software, so it was brilliant – great validation... I had a list of people... trusted people that I knew that I could actually reach out to, they would view... they would respond warmly, they would be interested in meeting, so it gave me that level of confidence, but also... it also just opened up many, many doors to potential customers" – H5_5.

"...it's strategic for us to use it, I mean like theoretically we could all just work from home but the strategy is like for us we've got really good products like we have a really good company now but no one really knows how good we are" – H5_1.

Most rural hubs are very diverse. In Hub 7, spaces are in high demand, a young designer (H7_1) found herself lucky to finally find the right location for her start-up business. Speaking about the atmosphere of the hub "there is definitely a full hive of activity going on" – H7_1. Having previously worked from home, she felt that the professional supportive hub was really helpful "...just having that structure of having somewhere you have to go in. I always get dressed in the morning and just having other people doing things around you as well, has been a good structure for your day and it just makes you feel better I think about what you are doing" – H7_1.

“it’s strategic for us to use it, I mean like theoretically we could all just work from home but the strategy is like for us we’ve got really good products like we have a really good company now but no one really knows how good we are” H5_1



Personal value

Hub users described how the rapid transition to working remotely was initially highly valued for its novelty, but over time difficulties associated with this type of working became apparent. As a result of not commuting, people really appreciated improved work-life balance with opportunities to spend more time with family, at sports or hobbies and volunteering.

Some described how their productivity fell on days they were at the hub, but their well-being soared. Over time many people felt the isolation of working alone and the lack of separation between home and work life was difficult; hubs can play an important role in each of these cases as described below.

“When people started to work from home it was great at the beginning. The novelty was brilliant for about four or five months. And then after that their mental health isn’t great, motivating yourself, dealing with difficult respondents. That can be very tough when you’re just on your own in a room” – H6_1.

Yvonne long time public sector remote worker

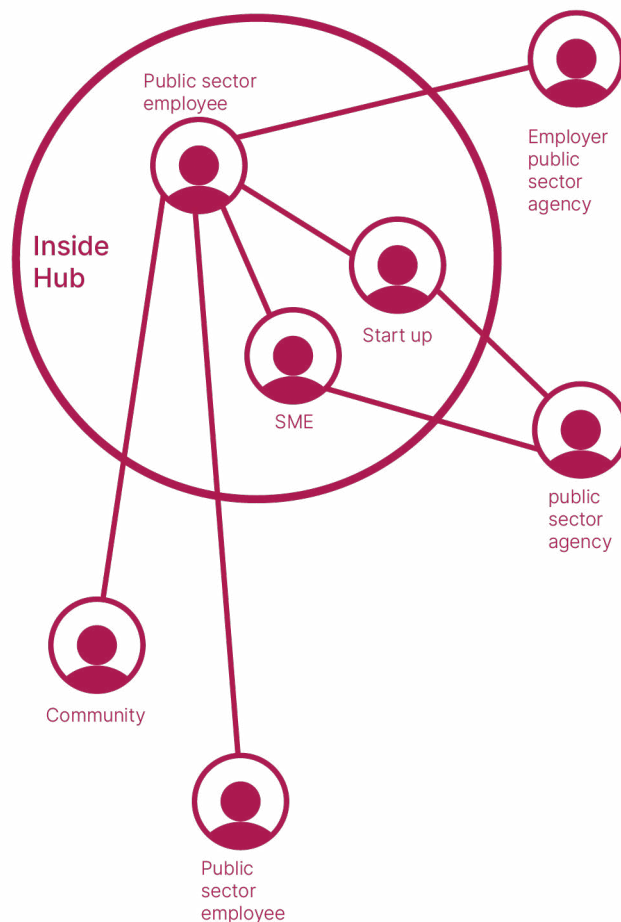
Yvonne works for a public sector organisation and has been working remotely since before the pandemic. She is based in a very rural area and is an outreach for her agency, the location allows her to work and connect with her local community. The building she works from is a port of call for local people, as it offers training facilities and meeting rooms. The opportunity to interact with others using the building has helped to overcome her feeling of isolation. Fibre broadband has been a game changer for her and the other people working at the hub, and has also enabled a whole new kind of visitor to the area who can use the hub to work as they holiday.

For Yvonne, Covid led to an improved awareness by others of the challenges of working remotely, especially the isolation. Now fellow workers are more mindful of the need to connect visually (Teams or Zoom) at meetings without having to travel. The positives for Yvonne include being able to work autonomously and having flexible hours that can support her family caring commitments and being removed from the distraction of office politics. Sometimes she misses the ability to get a quick clarification without having to lift the phone or send an email.

“In terms of work-life balance, I get to have dinner with my kids every evening at quarter to six, every evening. And that’s... not a lot of people can say that. Even people living in Dublin or close to Dublin, they can’t say that. So, work-life balance is great” – H2_2.

“I was always obviously getting ready at home, but getting ready for work, if that makes sense, and having that separation” – H4_2.

A professional in his late twenties described moving to live by the sea to have more time to surf. The hub has played a key role in facilitating his current lifestyle, he works blended time. As a professional place to work the hub has facilitated social interaction this is really important, as he feels connected to other users in Hub 2. He feels that there is potential for future collaborations as there is a cluster who work in the construction industry at the hub. He also feels it is important to support the hub as it is really important to him in his professional and social lives.



Hubs as part of the rural ecosystem (shared value)

Intriguingly as more jobs become available where individuals can work from anywhere, people are recognising the importance of place, and [work life balance](#) becomes a key factor in employee retention.

"...my family don't have to be locked into living in a suburban area, or near a big city, where the work is" – H2_1.

"...it's been brilliant for me to be honest to have the hub here. It's a great facility...professional space was a key requirement...pre-COVID I got my boss to agree that he'd do remote working with me, so it was basically once there was a good enough space" – H2_2.

In extremely rural locations such as gteic Béal an Mhuirthead, the hub is a 'game changer' providing a professional space and high-quality broadband enabling people to move home. An important benefit of this are the young highly qualified people who join the [local economy](#) and support innovation. As well as facilitating remote workers, many of the gteics support job creation through scalable startups and in common with many other hubs, finding ways to fund community managers in these spaces is an important challenge that needs to be addressed.

Working remotely since before the pandemic in a hub as a sub office of a public sector community development organisation, a rural remote worker finds that "it allows me to be able to both work and connect with the local community and still for me personally, it means that my place of work is nearer to me, than what it would otherwise be" – H7_2. As well as saving an hour each day on her commute her working time is flexible. She finds this is really beneficial as it supports family and social obligations.

The director of an international business services company was delighted to have a local hub refurbished close to where he moved to with his wife who was from the area. He was one of the first people to occupy a space, it has become much busier recently. He chose the hub because "it just was a good set up. I kind of liked that it was away from the town and it was in like the country... it was a no brainer and as soon as we met the people, they were warm and welcoming and yeah just kicked on, that was two years ago now" – H8_1.

The pandemic highlighted how technology could be a more efficient way for people who are geographically dispersed to meet. "...we used to be dragging people up to X or dragging them to certain parts of the country. Even for the one meeting, every six weeks or whatever it is still easier to do that on Zoom" – H6_2.

"it was a no brainer and as soon as we met the people, they were warm and welcoming and yeah just kicked on that was two years ago now"

Community Value

Some hubs are more established and two outstanding examples of community-oriented hubs were found in this small qualitative study of rural hubs. There are a few large hubs like Hub 5 in rural locations. Almost 6 years since their launch the hub has a strong community focus despite also being a recognisable brand and digital tech hub.

The diversity of local needs that they cater to includes “job enablement, coaching, concierge, business supports, X remote, female returnees. The networks and the clusters; so we have the Women’s Network, we have the X Tech Hub Network, the Women’s Network didn’t exist down here before...then we have our education programme, we were partnering with the schools and, arguably speaking, COVID accelerated that” – H5_3.

A west midlands rural enterprise hub was also found to have a strong community focus.

While the main aim of this enterprise hub is facilitating business, in practice a myriad of community interactions were also supported by the hub. The hub and the manager’s time and expertise were identified as a focal point for supporting and connecting networks in the community.

They successfully coordinated community events, a space for formal learning, a local magazine and several digital brokerage services including a shop local online platform and provided space for community groups and services. They are expanding to a second location in their town to fulfil the need for more remote working spaces. Below a hub user describes how he feels that he contributes to the local economy by using the rural hub.

“...even if they do fall short of making a profit, I come in, as I said, we’re doing business with each other, I go across, I buy a sandwich, I go next door I buy a pint off X, I get my hair cut up the road, I get my car fixed by the mechanic – I’m not doing that in Cork city, I’m not doing that in Galway. This is new economic power that I’ve brought as an individual, to a small place here” – H5_2.

Patterns of future hub use

From the data it is clear that many entrepreneurs and small business owners are recognizing the value of remote working and enterprise hubs and hubs are part of their future plans. While many remote workers use hubs full time, there are a significant proportion of people who are working blended hours and value the time they spend in hubs.

“I’d like to have someone in Dublin and Galway and up North as well, if I could put like four people in different hubs and then we have a site in the U.K. so I’d kind of like to use the hubs in the U.K., we’ve a guy in New York who might talk, he’s talking about starting to work with us, so that would be ideal, I mean you could just use the hubs there. So, I don’t think we need an office anymore because of this like you know and it’s great” – H5-1.

“I’d still come in here maybe once or twice a week, I think, just to kind of keep in and also to get, still have the opportunity to mix it up a bit. I think it’s no harm to be able to mix it up” -H2_4.

Making hubs sustainable and inclusive

Hub users are concerned about the sustainability of hubs, many now view them as a public service and feel that in rural areas the digital divide is more pronounced and hubs could really make a difference.

"...they are seen as being important for rural towns, no different to libraries, no different to local arts centres" – H2_1.

Challenges still exist, many hub users only came across the hub 'by chance', and feel that the public are unsure how the hubs can be useful for them.

"Some people are a bit afraid of it and based on that tech, you have to be working for Google to be working down there. That is a piece of work that the hub has to do here, a selling point or making it inclusive" – H1_1.

Importantly a lot of expertise has been built up in the public sector regarding best practice in setting up and running rural working hubs. There needs to be a way of enabling this knowledge to be formally recognised and shared. Equally some hubs run projects that have knowledge outputs. These need to be accessibly archived and shared with the relevant users.

"...my primary goal has been to institutionalise this data, this information, anybody then can come in, well once they learn how to navigate it, and can redistribute!" – H5_3

Hub users as hub champions

While conducting the interviews hubs champions were identified in several hubs, these are people who have lived experience of remote working or the locality or both. Hubs need to be responsive to their needs as they are a largely untapped resource at present. In mature hubs the hub manager becomes a significant asset who can supply expertise to enable community projects and co-ordinate networks and government programmes.

A remote working expert describes how different configurations of work space are important often in response to the privacy and security requirements of employers.

"So, whether it is a little pod, or an open space, or an office for one or two people, having those different options for people is really important, not only because so many companies stipulated that you need to have whatever it is. But just what suits people, that they are able to - depending on the day or whatever their schedule is like, having those options; coffee, good coffee or a coffee machine, is key. I am not even a coffee drinker" – H3_7.

Highly knowledgeable regarding the future of work, a director and founder of a recruitment management company describes a key area where hubs could make a significant impact for employers and employees.

"I think the difference is going to be like pods of threes and fours ..promote it to AIB, An Post and you know these big business with workforces spread all over. Aer Lingus, all these businesses which do have remote working policies now and have people dotted all over, but are strong Irish brands and strong Irish employers, you know if you have got 4,000 people working for you, you are going to have a few little pockets that you still value them getting together and collaborating and culture stuff" – H8_1.

A hub founder notes that "some kind of incentivization for employers is required. So whether that be tax relief, maybe or some kind of support towards funding employers, you know, to use the spaces I think will be good. The other angle we were potentially looking at was for government departments, you know, that maybe we're looking to offer working home options that maybe they could encourage their people to come in" - H1_2.

“You know, you go at your work and most of the time, even in a flow state then you know, you don’t feel the time going by. You can be three hours, which is great for productivity but not the best for everything else” H3_1.



Two models of hub management

"...volunteer is not a sustainable model. It also means they don't necessarily have adequate training and the expectation on them then is too high" – H5_2.

There are many examples of successful rural coworking and enterprise spaces in Ireland, based on different kinds of management models, in response to local needs. In Ennistymon one of the Digi Clare group of remote working hubs is run by the local council in collaboration with local communities. They don't have a manager on site they are managed remotely by the council with an onsite caretaker and responsive email support. Influenced by a community oriented 'anchor' tenant, coworkers have organically created a sharing community.

The data shows that this hub manages to focus on productivity and social interaction that includes knowledge sharing.

"...we are trying to utilise the facilities to get kind of a success out of it and all the goodwill, and get something really meaningful back" – H2_3.

The anchor tenant is recognised by other hub users as a source of advice and assistance. Highlighting the importance of productivity first he describes their role in the hub ecosystem

"we've to get on with our work basically, and we facilitate all the other things that come by... we're a facilitator really to be honest" – H2_3.

This hub demonstrates a successful example of hotdesking. As fulfilling work goals is the most often mentioned reason for using remote hubs, the physical layout of the building (there is a separate canteen area, individual offices and sound booths as well as open plan desks) means that productivity time is protected while social interaction is also facilitated.

One of the first users of this hub when it opened at the end of 2019 was a sole operator who works in creative design. An experienced hub user, he identified this hub as most suitable because it could provide a one-person office space. The 'right' hub has appropriate facilities and social interaction, reasons for attending the hub are varied *"the facilities is the main reason I do it but the social interaction is a really, really great benefit"* – H2_4.

A graduate who moved home and works remotely uses the hub as a professional private space to work,

there were too many distractions at her parents' house. Originally working blended, she now works fully remote *"I was paying rent in X, and I decided that everything for me was at home in X. So, I moved home"* – H2_5.

The hub philosophy of supporting each other can be observed in the way that all interviewees at this hub felt that knowledge sharing does take place in this trusted environment. Inspired it would seem by the anchor tenant there are strong links with a variety of local community and sporting organisations. Even the people who did not mention volunteering were happy to support others at the hub who do and felt it was important to support the hub as well.

Working from a different model, Co:Worx in Edgeworthstown was started from an accomplished local development clg. along with local members of [Grow Remote](#) with advice from their local council. They have a fulltime manager and a knowledgeable committee and have in a short space of time created an impressive community of coworkers and entrepreneurs.

Located in a rural midlands small town, this hub is community led and they have recognised the importance of meeting the local need for working spaces to suit different types of users. The focus is on meeting work goals, but also finding ways that the hub can support the creation of value for their users. The social side of the hub is very important as is the opportunity to identify synergies between users. At this early stage the emphasis has been on raising public awareness of the facilities available at the hub as a community facility.

The search for reliable broadband and space to complete an online exam inspired a local project manager to use the hub. She finds the hub is a great way to overcome the isolation of working from home, describing hub use as *"less out of necessity if I'm honest, it's more the social aspect"* – H3_2. The local remote working group has positively influenced her use of the hub and has helped her to make connections in the community. The hub played a significant role in supporting her integration into the local area.

"...when we moved in, we were renovating the house, so I didn't really get a chance to meet everybody and then the next thing we were in the pandemic. So, didn't have the opportunity to really make those connections in the community that you would do otherwise" – H3_2.

A UX designer, remote worker and entrepreneur now living locally chose the hub “because it was nice and bright and modern. It just felt like something similar to what I work at back home” – H3_5. Although it is smaller it had all the facilities she needed, the high quality internet remained the most important element. The owner of a digital marketing and web design company in his early 20s who is also a member of the local remote workers group describes working and then using the hub:

“...you know, go at your work and most of the time, even a flow state then you know, you don't feel the

time going by. You can be three hours, which is great for productivity but not the best for everything else” – H3_1.

In the hub he works with his office door open. This leads to the right amount of interaction for him, he has already collaborated on projects with some of the other hub users. The hub manager and cofounders are proactive in introducing people and helping them to find common ground.

These examples demonstrate that there are many routes to success for rural working hubs, but some factors described below can be found in most successful hubs.

Hub ecosystem in practice

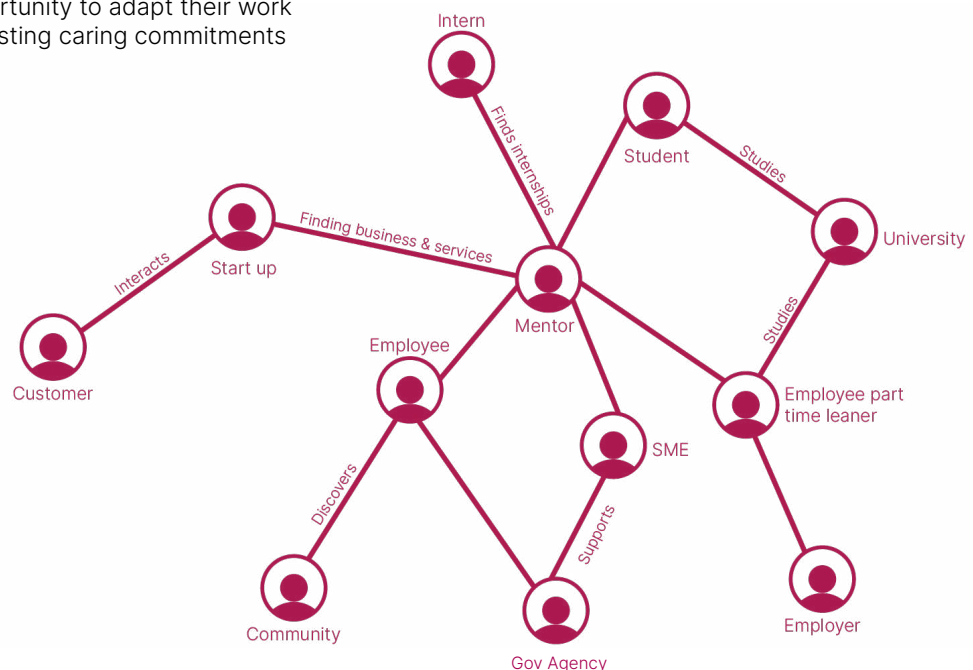
People tend to use hubs to help separate home life and work. Hub users seek a professional/social space to support their work/life balance as a response to burnout, support their productivity in a distraction-free environment or to help overcome feelings of isolation associated with working from home. At the same time hub users often use the opportunity to interact with other hub users to get to know people locally and support their own well-being.

Technology used by the hub users enables their remote working by supporting information sharing often using VPNs with video conferencing playing a key role in staying in contact with their organisations and customers. Technology was used largely for task oriented interaction related to productivity, project management software was negatively viewed by the hub users and time management software was only used for billable hours.

Flexibility of working hours was important to most hub users, giving them the opportunity to adapt their work obligations around their existing caring commitments or lifestyle choices.

Spatial and technical configurations that support privacy were very important for some hub users, and Sense of Belonging was frequently linked to the perception that the hub was a professional space although the extent that the hub provided a social space was equally important.

The inner circle represents the hub and the outer the potential to develop further interactions. Areas that could be further developed include encouraging greater student use of hubs to facilitate better opportunities for internships and future employment, developing more opportunities for interaction with the wider community and ways to support customer interaction inside hubs. Factors that were found to support interaction in hubs included: a mentor who had an established business, an experienced hub manager and a vibrant remote working group.



Appendix

Method

Qualitative interviews with hub users and managers explored individual hub users experience of using a remote working hub: the extent that they experienced a Sense of Belonging at the hub, the type of interactions experienced at the hub, the expectations they had for the hub and the extent that their needs are fulfilled by using the hub. Individuals' lifestyle values that are important in relation to their digital hub user were also explored. A user narrative approach (Myers, 1997) was used to gather rich data on how social norms are developed in rural coworking spaces to explore users experience of value in relation to their use of the hub, physical infrastructure, social interactions and networks; giving an in-depth insight into this real-life context. It enables users to describe their 'personal processes' of activities at the hub (Pentland, 1999; Schwarz, Chin, Hirschheim, and Schwarz, 2014).

Following professional transcription of 32 interviews with 808 minutes of interview time, the transcripts and field notes were carefully read and the first round of coding took place using NVivo, where initial themes were created, codes were reviewed by the research team and user stories were created to represent groups of actors (Spinuzzi, 2012) to help gain greater understanding of the user narratives. A second round of coding was then undertaken to cluster codes within themes, and hub users stories were analyzed with others from their hub to gain an understanding of interaction processes within each hub. Codes, themes, user stories and hub overviews (see below) were reviewed by a second researcher and discussed with the research team before proceeding with the analysis.

| Social antecedents of SoC virtual community | | |
|--|---|--|
| Social media community – info sharing | Social interaction | (Mamonov, Koufaris, & Benbunan-Fich, 2016) |
| Social media community – usage Learning community | Production of trust Familiarity Perceived/social usefulness | (Lin, 2008), (Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012) |
| Online sports newsgroup | Exchanging support | (Blanchard & Markus, 2004) |
| Social media | Social information exchange | (Chen, 2014) |
| Social media | Social information exchange | (Chen, 2014) |
| SoC at work/ coworking | | |
| SoC at work job satisfaction and org citizenship | Coworker support, emotional safety, sense of belonging, spiritual bond, team orientation, truth telling | (Burroughs & Eby, 1998) |
| SoC coworking | Collective identity, filling a social void, sense of ownership, genuine friendships | (Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017) |

| Sense of belonging | | |
|--|--|--|
| Technology and the spatial production of coworking space | Atmosphere/vibe profession impression Contested space of technology use | (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021) |
| Digital nomads – lifestyle values | Being accepted and needed, engaging with the local community and culture | (Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet, 2021) |
| Shared emotional connection | | |
| Online sports newsgroup | Obligation, attachment, identity self and others, relationship with other members | (Blanchard & Markus, 2004) |
| Public civic engagement | Positive social/relational interaction with others | (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009) |
| Neighbourhood | Emotionally involved in the community | (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) |
| Influence | | |
| Neighbourhood | Bidirectional open to influence/power to influence | (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) |
| Virtual community | People influence other members of the community | (Koh & Kim, 2003) |
| Online virtual newspaper | A feeling of having influence in the community and of being influenced by the community | (Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011) |
| Needs fulfilment Value of coworking | | |
| Needs fulfilment. Well-being and psychological need rural hubs | Autonomy, Flexibility, work-life balance, removing distractions exerting professionalism, building networks of exchange overcoming isolation, social connection support networks, communion with nature (locational), Competency Relatedness | (Merrell et al., 2022) |
| Digital nomads – lifestyle values | Sense of achievement, Self-fulfilment (positive effect on own environment), Warm relationship with others, Sense of belonging | (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021) |
| Social networks CWS | Collaboration, Community, Sustainability, Openness Accessibility | (Rese, Görmar, & Herbig, 2022) |
| Internal/external networks in rural settings | Importance of place, inclusivity and identity in determining relationship with other actors in the local economy | (Bosworth et al., 2023) |
| Tensions relating to competing needs | Social needs, business networking, knowledge exchange, productivity, physical well-being (autonomy and competence) | (Rådman, Johansson, Bosch-Sijtsema, & Raharjo, 2022) |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Shane remote worker Challenges finding the right place to work, identifying user value Values – reliable connection with clients using tech, location, social support, work-life balance</p> | <p>Within the hub ecosystem</p> |
| <p><i>"There's an atmosphere, there's a sense of friendliness and a welcome. And it's often due to the people that are there...you know if you didn't show up for a week or two, they'd be asking, where were you, we were wondering what happened to you"</i></p> | <p>Developing a sense of belonging - Personal goal</p> |
| <p><i>"I use a tool called Dropbox Capture, you can create a little short video, a reel, and the video will have a little picture of you in the corner and it's recording you live, and you'll be presenting, record it...The clients love it...you can showcase the work, you can say, here's the context. And they're constantly listening to you, they're engaging with you, and then they see the work, and it's easier to sell the work"</i></p> | <p>Use of technology to engage with clients – Work goal</p> |
| <p><i>"...clients want you to be responsive...you just need to be able to be present to the client, and show you're committed – to show your face, so always camera on for me. And once they get over that, they don't ask that question again"</i></p> | <p>Trust and working online – Work goal</p> |
| <p><i>"...there's always things going on, some days I think there might be markets taking place. Just certain days are busy, and there's tractors driving up the main street. If you need to take a break and get a break from work, you can walk out, and you feel like, I'm walking into a community here"</i></p> | <p>Sense of place – fitting in feeling inspired – personal, community goal</p> |
| <p><i>"I need to be able to shut my brain off, or at least disconnect from work – particularly, disconnect from the laptop.. the laptop lures you in, work can lure you in. And if it's in close proximity to your home life, that's a problem"</i></p> | <p>Separating home and work-life – personal goals</p> |
| <p><i>"...a kitchen with a seating area... friendly chats, friendly catch-ups with other parents. You hear about things that are happening with kids' events, you hear about clubs that are starting up, looking for members to join. You hear about things happening in the community, you hear about... you discuss, you get to reflect on the events of the day"</i></p> | <p>Separate space to socialise - Shared emotional connection – personal and social community goals</p> |
| <p><i>"...we had a Christmas party, the council got us mulled wine, we had food, we all huddled in to the canteen"</i></p> | <p>Feeling listened to – Influence</p> |
| <p><i>"...you can always go to them and say, I have an idea, can we get a Christmas tree or something, and they've never had any problems"</i></p> | <p>Feeling valued at the hub - Influence</p> |
| <p><i>"I've actually done... three collaborations within the hub so far. One with a company across the hall – again, just chatting, what are you doing, oh okay, we might actually need you to help us with something, great...very organic, and very casual. But it's pure business"</i></p> | <p>Openness and trusted environment - Achieving personal and work goals</p> |
| <p><i>"But if you kind of say to him, oh I'm doing this...I'm struggling with this, trying to get the budget approved. And he'll always kind of, have you thought about trying it that way, XX, or, we've had that experience before and it's really frustrating, and we did this and it kind of worked for us!"</i></p> | <p>Unofficial mentoring – work goal, personal goal</p> |
| <p><i>"Through just drinking coffee and that I just got to talk to them, and I was able to help them with their IT then. That was from the volunteering side that worked out. I have met a lot of people at it in XX and that is the main advantage"</i></p> | <p>Volunteering – personal and social community goal</p> |
| <p><i>"I get to have dinner with my kids every evening at quarter to six, every evening"</i></p> | <p>Work-life balance – personal goal</p> |

| |
|--|
| Sense of belonging |
| Physical space to connect to work (21/37) - Broadband to connect, reliability, security |
| Convenient (4/8) - Close proximity to user's home and easy to use, flexible |
| People using the hub and hub personnel - People user can relate to (9/13) - Hub management friendly and responsive (13/19) |
| Strategic for growth (3/4) - Bringing right people together |
| Not the right hub (5/6) - Aesthetics, activity, noise, personnel, users |
| Professional space (14/27) - Consisting of physical attributes, personnel, users |
| Social space ((14/20) - Friendly, welcoming |
| Cognitive space (4/4) - Distraction-free for working |
| Entrepreneurial (5/8) - Business focus, informal conversations |

(Number of individuals and number of references)

| |
|---|
| Types of social interaction Socioemotional |
| Connecting with others (15/29) - Software to stay in touch with work - Face-to-face serendipitous interactions |
| Feeling supported (10/12) - Social interactions which extend beyond the hub/work |
| Task oriented interactions |
| Connecting with work processes (19/44) - Software to coordinate work with others - VPNs, work internal comms, project management software, time management software |
| Sharing routines (5/6) - Work patterns, tea/coffee/ lunch breaks |
| Tacit understanding (6/14) - Understanding behaviour norms – philosophy of hub use |
| Feeling listened to (8/10) - Responsiveness of hub management |
| Sharing information (17/40) - Exchanging knowledge |

(Number of individuals and number of references)

Needs fulfilment

| |
|---|
| Work value (trusted environment) |
| Supporting work (11/21) - Physical, cognitive space connect to work - Helping to make remote work for companies |
| Collaborations (8/14) - New work partnerships |
| Mentoring (7/9) - Sharing knowledge, someone knowledgeable to share |
| Personal value |
| Work-life balance (16/32) - Flexible time, finding structure in work day - Finding time for family, lifestyle (sport/hobbies) - Well-being, personal development |
| Social and community value |
| Sense of place (17/24) - Importance of the locality for lifestyle |
| Local community (14/17) - Volunteering in the community - Wider community cooperation |

(Number in of individuals and number of references)

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“There is loads of opportunities for development in those hubs.. I think there is tremendous opportunity in Ireland to crack this nut”

Founder and hub user