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Bridging the Gaps Within and Between Public Services Through Samverket, a New Co-Working Concept

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ABSTRACT

Gaps within and between public actors cause inefficient, incomplete, and inequitable public services. A new co-working concept, Samverket, was designed and tested to address these shortcomings in two Swedish regions. This paper investigated qualitatively how public sector employees perceived the conditions for cross-organizational networking, learning, and collaboration when using Samverket and whether they experienced positive outcomes for society. The results show that this co-working concept can innovate public services and highlight which conditions are optimal when designing and using such a workplace for public sector employees. These new findings are relevant to the public sector, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

KEYWORDS

Public sector innovation; psychological safety; public cross-organizational networking learning and co-development; third place concept

To create a society where citizens receive an effective and comprehensive public service on equal terms, collaborations within the public sector are of utmost importance. Yet, interstices within and between public actors are common, leading to a limited coordination of services (Larsson, 2011). In Sweden, for example, children with neuropsychiatric challenges (e.g., ADHD) are often tossed back-and-forth in the systems due to a lack of collaboration between schools, social services, and caregivers (Ek et al., 2017). Likewise, since the care of mental illness and addiction problems belong to different public actors regulated by different laws, shortcomings in their cooperation have been identified (Matscheck & Piuva, 2022). Consequently, this leads to a waste of tax-financed resources (Engen et al., 2021) and a lack of adequate and comprehensive public service, thus causing suffering for those affected. Besides obstacles posed by different legislations, employees from different tax-financed actors (e.g., police, health care, education) often lack the necessary networks and platforms for collaborations (Larsson, 2011).

Through digitalization, work can be conducted from different places, which has led to a massive increase in co-working places worldwide and, consequently, to individuals having a joint work platform (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2023). Traditionally, the users of co-working places were independent workers (Spinuzzi, 2012). However, in Scandinavia, this workplace arrangement has gained increased popularity for public sector employees as well (DiMarino et al., 2018; The Swedish National Financial Management Authority, 2022). Nevertheless, within the public sector, co-working places are used as supplementary office spaces; therefore, they are generally not intended to offer needed platforms for cross-organizational collaboration between public actors (The Swedish National Financial Management Authority, 2022). However, to remedy this, a network of public actors in northern Sweden proposed to create a co-working space designated for collaboration within the public sector. The Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova) supported this idea by financing a two-year project in which two co-working places for cross-organizational collaborations were designed and tested in Östersund and Stockholm. Both workspaces, called Samverket[1], had the common goal of innovating networking, learning, and co-development between public actors (Vinnova, 2021).

Accordingly, this study aims to take a first step in evaluating a new work concept by focusing on the user's perspective. Specifically, we explored how public sector employees perceive the conditions for networking, learning, and collaboration at Samverket and whether they experience any outcomes that could benefit society. To explore this, the study is anchored within theories of the third place (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) and of social networks (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) to facilitate networking, as well as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999, 2019) to support joint learning and co-development.

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Theories of the third place and social networks

The concept of "third places" was introduced over 40 years ago by Oldenburg and Brissett but is still relevant today since it can expand social capital and facilitate well-being (Bosman & Dolley, 2019). The third place differs from traditional offices and co-working spaces as it specifically aims to promote the willingness to use these places and to benefit from new interactions. Third places are neither at home (i.e., the first place) nor at work (i.e., the second place) but rather are accessible "places where people gather primarily to enjoy each other's company" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, p. 269). Accordingly, when designing a third place within a work context, sociability should be focused on promoting conversations around spontaneous topics and complex matters. To achieve this, the third place should be a "neutral ground" for interactions where all users are equally important. Namely, users should be neither hosts nor guests (Oldenburg, 1997), and hierarchal status (e.g., socioeconomic or occupational status) should not affect interactions (Oldenburg, 1989; Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). To support this, the climate should be casual and unpretentious, such as using food and drinks as conversational icebreakers and eliminating status markers (Oldenburg, 2002). Accordingly, compared to more traditional co-working designs, the third-place design tends to be better suited for socialization and knowledge exchange between users who are not acquainted with each other.

Furthermore, the number of users is central in creating enough interactions to lead to positive outcomes, such as learning and creating ties between users. Namely, a critical mass is essential for new relationships to emerge. This can be understood by Granovetter's theory about strong and weak ties, which describes the impact of a person's network of close and brief relations (Granovetter, 1978). Granovetter's social network theory posits that the majority of interactions a person has occur within densely connected groups in which the ties are strong and that these groups are connected by many weak ties, which can build an extensive network (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). When applying this to work-life relationships, Fronczak et al. (2022) found that having an extensive network of weak ties stemming from a few strong ties can benefit one's professional life. Specifically, Fronczak showed that researchers with many weak ties on work-related social platforms such as LinkedIn and Monster (compared to those with fewer weak ties) had a higher h-index and more cited publications. Since the third-place design facilitates the creation of numerous weak ties when enough users are active, it is likely to promote the expansion of social networks, collaborations, and cross-organizational interactions.

However, a casual atmosphere and a critical mass are insufficient to create a climate where such exchanges and new collaborations are possible. Indeed, aspects facilitating a group climate where people feel safe to speak up and elaborate on various issues are of utmost importance. We, therefore, turn to the concept of psychological safety in the next section.

Psychological safety

Psychological safety is believed to provide a fruitful way of handling the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity surrounding public sector employees' work by supporting communication, collaboration, and experimentation (Edmondson, 2019). A high level of psychological safety within a group is characterized by a climate based on mutual respect and trust where everyone feels able to raise questions, concerns, and ideas without putting their social (e.g., exclusion from the group) or professional (e.g., seeming ignorant) stance at risk (Edmondson, 1999). Consequently, within a safe communicational and interpersonal climate, employees have the right conditions to learn, contribute, as well as perform effectively (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Newman et al., 2017).

Psychological safety tends to develop when employees are being heard, for instance, when leaders respond to employees' concerns or implement some of their suggestions (Kerrissey et al., 2022). In a place for cross-organizational collaborations, where sharing experiences and ideas is one of the goals, users will ultimately both seek and share feedback. However, seeking and sharing feedback can either strengthen or hinder a safe, interactive climate, depending on how it is done. For instance, psychological safety diminishes when a leader who asks for feedback shows that they do not want or will not act upon the feedback they receive. On the other hand, when leaders share their need to grow and improve, it normalizes vulnerability, thus strengthening psychological safety (Coutifaris & Grant, 2022). However, within the public sector, there tends to be a low internal and societal tolerance for mistakes, which impedes employees from sharing and learning (Gargantini et al., 2022). To create a "fearless group," Edmondson suggests (i) *setting the stage* by framing work and emphasizing the purpose for shared expectations and meaning, (ii) *inviting participation* by demonstrating situational humility, practicing inquiry and setting up suitable structures, and (iii) *responding productively* by showing appreciation and destigmatizing failure (Edmondson, 2019, p. 159). When doing so, it is crucial to be consistent and congruent, have clear goals, and have supportive leadership (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Additionally, even if it is

challenging for public sector employees, it is important to highlight how innovative outcomes could be implemented into daily work practice (Lidman, 2023).

Accordingly, fostering psychological safety within the group of public actor employees seems crucial to innovate the work of the public sector through a new co-working design. In sum, as the theories presented above suggest, physical, social, and organizational aspects of the new work environment must be considered when designing and testing a co-working place for networking, learning, as well as co-development within and between public actors. This aligns with Ferreira et al. (2023), who suggest that co-working research should consider several dimensions, in particular control mechanisms, rules, organizational integration, physical environment, and communication style.

Thus, within this study, we aimed to explore qualitatively and from the user's perspective i) how public sector employees perceived the conditions for networking, learning, and collaboration at Samverket and ii) whether their work at Samverket was perceived to benefit society.

Method

This study was part of a larger research project investigating various aspects of Samverket. Data were collected on three different occasions: when the project started (April 2022), halfway through the project (November 2022), and at the end of the project (April 2023). On each occasion, participants answered questions related to all areas of the overarching research project, but only answers related to the two aims of the study are reported here.

The research setting of the new co-working concept, Samverket

A creation team with different actors (i.e., a County Board, co-working and behavioral experts, and a real estate company) was selected by Vinnova to design and manage the new workplaces in Stockholm and Östersund. Although the project was initially planned to last for 2 years (including time for design, creation, launching, and use of the concept), the use of Samverket by members was reduced to approximately 1 year (April 2022 to May 2023) due to COVID-19 related pandemic restrictions. At the end of the project, the management group of Samverket (which consisted of the co-working and behavioral experts of the creation team) presented the ownership and economic models, as well as conceptual and design-related thoughts in a written report, presented as a Playbook (see Sandström et al., 2023).

According to the management group, Samverket aimed to provide a new co-working concept that supported networking, learning, and co-development between employees from different tax-financed organizations (e.g., judiciary, infrastructure, public transport, healthcare, police, municipalities, and education). Samverket was created to serve as a third workplace, supplementing existing office and home workplace environments. It was intended to be a neutral space without the constraints of traditional roles, titles, and processes, facilitating the creation of "loose ties" connections with individuals in both the public and private sectors. Furthermore, the management group stated that: "The spaces are designed to stimulate cooperation, learning, and creative working by providing environments that enhance psychological safety, transparency, and involvement in all the activities that take place there" (Sandström et al., 2023, p. 7). In line with the idea of Edmondson (2019) and Oldenburg (1989), to encourage interactions free from hierarchical constraints, all visitors were required to leave their job titles in the hallway (Sandström et al., 2023).

Samverket required public actors to purchase memberships to use its services. These memberships were initially tied to specific employees within each organization, ensuring a steady base of recurring users who could promote Samverket's culture and concept. To support the extension of networks, joint learning, and co-develop, Stockholm started with 125 members (with an indoor area of 450 m^2) and Östersund with 50 members (with an area of 120 m^2). However, these groups expanded during the project's duration (i.e., Stockholm: 155, Östersund: 60), and members were later allowed to bring their nonmember colleagues to Samverket. Towards the end of the project, member organizations were even allowed to have memberships that were not person-specific.

A distinctive characteristic of Samverket was its community managers. Compared to traditional co-working spaces, Samverket provided active facilitation for networking, learning, and co-development through the community managers, which (i) were the outward face of Samverket, its culture, and activities, (ii) had a helicopter view over relevant public sector challenges, (iii) planned activities to support networking, communication, and creativity, and (iv) monitored the digital member-community platform (Haaartland) and conducted administrative tasks (Sandström et al., 2023, p. 31).

Activities at Samverket were initiated, planned, and facilitated by the members, community managers, or

the management group of Samverket. These activities included networking events such as weekly breakfasts and after-work gatherings, as well as learning activities such as presentations, campfire discussions (where users talk about common issues and future directions), and "how-do-you-do" sessions (where a member asks a specific question, and the other users share their solutions). Additionally, there were creative activities for co-development, such as workshops. Most activities were free to attend, but activities that required a certain number of participants (e.g., workshops and hackathons) required prior registration. Also, there were several activities open to both public and nonpublic employees, as well as to the citizens.

Another distinctive characteristic was the design of the physical environment, described as an analogy of a forest path. The indoor area was divided into individual areas furnished differently to fulfill specific purposes. For instance, the area for campfire discussions was furnished with comfortable sofas, and lights were dimmed to create an ambiance promoting relaxed conversations. A supplemental area with basic workstations was provided to accommodate members who preferred not to or could not go back and forth between their office and Samverket in-between activities, which could be a few hours apart (e.g., a breakfast gathering at 8 a.m. and a campfire discussion at 11 a.m.). However, since the primary purpose of being at Samverket was to participate in activities (not working individually), this area was not central to the concept and only complementary.

Recruitment and participants

A total of 101 responses were collected throughout the three data collections. The creators and managers of Samverket provided lists of individual members whom we contacted, informed, and recruited by e-mail. The inclusion criteria were to be a public sector employee and a member of Samverket. In addition, for the second and third measures, the participants should have visited Samverket at least once. Since members of Samverket somewhat varied throughout the year (some left and new ones joined) and because participation was voluntary and anonymous, any given participant may have completed the first, second, and/or third survey; as such, we report the participants as cases. Proportionally to the distribution in the public sector, the 101 participation cases were aged 29–66 years ($M = 48$ years), with 62 identifying themselves as women and 34 as men, while five refrained from providing their gender identity. Forty-one cases were members at the Stockholm hub, 55 at the Östersund hub, four were using both hubs, and one refrained from providing their hub affiliation. Within the first measurement, when participants reported their organizational affiliation, 17 out of the possible 25 member organizations were represented (e.g., Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, County Administrative Board, Employment Agency, Formas, Östersund Municipality, Police Authority, Region Authorities of Jämtland/Härjedalen/Värmland, and Vinnova). For age and gender distribution at each measure, see Table 1.

Procedure and material

Data were collected via the online survey platform Qualtrics. Before actively consenting to participate in the study, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, that participation was anonymous, and that data was handled in compliance with GDPR. All national and international laws and ethical regulations were followed.

The surveys included demographic questions such as age, gender identity, organizational affiliation, and frequency of use. However, the question about affiliation was removed from the second and third measurements because participants expressed concerns about providing honest answers when indicating affiliation in organizations with only one membership. Open-ended questions were held about the concept, the use of Samverket, and outcomes. Within the first measure, open-ended questions were in a broad sense about the conditions for using Samverket, such as the assignment of memberships (e.g., *If your organization has several memberships, describe the assignment process.)*, plans of use (e.g., *Have you planned and formalized the use of the*

Table 1. Age and gender distribution for each measure.

Measure	M1		M2		M3	
Gender	*n*	Age *M* (range)	*n*	Age *M* (range)	*n*	Age *M* (range)
Female	19	48 (30–60)	17	50 (32–62)	26	47 (29–57)
Male	8	44 (35–52)	8	53 (33–66)	18	46 (34–62)
Refrained[a]	0	n/a	3	n/a	2	n/a
Total	27	46 (30–60)	28	50 (32–66)	46	47 (29–62)

[a]Reflects participants unwilling to disclose gender identity ($n = 5$). To protect their anonymity, the mean age and age range are not provided separately for these participants but are reflected in the total mean age and age range.

memberships at Samverket? If so, how?), and first impressions of the physical and social environments (e.g., *What are your first impressions (or expectations) of the organizational and social environment at Samverket?)*. Within the second measure, questions covered the role of the community managers (e.g., *If so, how does the community manager affect your use of Samverket?*), members' initiation and participation in activities (e.g., *Have you or someone in your organization, initiated any activities at Samverket? If so, tell us about it*.), and perceived outcomes (e.g., *Tell freely what the membership has brought to your organization and/or the citizen/society so far*.). Within the third measure, questions were related to Samverket as a co-working, learning, and innovation workplace (e.g., *Tell freely what you think and feel about Samverket as an innovation hub for public activities*.), and as if any outcomes on a cross-organizational and/or societal level had been experienced (e.g., *Tell us if you experienced that the membership has given (or is about to give) results at a societal level*.). To follow up on aspects highlighted in the data during the first and second measurements, some questions were repeated within the second (e.g., membership assignments, routines for use, and knowledge transfer) and third measures (e.g., participation in activities and outcomes).

Data analysis

Demographic data were compiled using IBM SPSS statistics 29, while qualitative data were analyzed through the six interactive phases of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) suggest. After each data collection, the first phase was conducted by familiarizing the data and presenting a data compilation for Samverket's management group. In the second phase, after the final data collection, respondents who did not fulfill the inclusion criteria were removed, and initial coding was conducted. In phase three, shared patterns or concepts were analyzed, with codes being clustered (and re-clustered) into groups. In the fourth phase, candidate themes were created, and the dataset was reread. In phase five, themes were further refined, labeled, and conceptualized to present distinct, informative, and meaningful *stories* of the participants' perceptions and experiences. Furthermore, quotes were extracted and translated from Swedish to English and used to visualize the participants' voices. The first author conducted phases one to five, while in the sixth and final phase, all authors contributed to the report's writing. In the Results section, quotes are attributed to the order of the measures (i.e., M1, M2, and M3) combined with the participants' number (i.e., P#) within each measure, such as "M2-P12" refers to a quote from participant 12 of the second measurement. Note that a given participant (e.g., P12) at M1, M2, and M3 is not meant to refer to the same individual. Also, since the result of an RTA is a patterned meaning across participants' responses and the researchers' interpretations, quotes are examples of respondents' descriptions, not case-by-case evidence for the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Accordingly, the results should be read as a story about members' perceptions of Samverket, a story created from both the patterns of responses across the dataset and the researcher's interpretation. Consequently, there is no quantification of the result, except when a "few" (i.e., 1–5) participants express relevant aspects that add value to the shared story about Samverket.

Results

The qualitative analysis was focused on public sector employees' perceptions regarding the conditions for cross-organizational learning and co-development at Samverket and their experiences of outcomes that benefited public service users (i.e., citizens). Four themes were formed: 1) Samverket was perceived to have accessible locations and an interactionally supportive physical environment, 2) Samverket was perceived to offer a safe social climate with active facilitation for networking, learning, and collaboration, 3) Conditions within the member organizations supported or limited the use and outcomes of Samverket, and 4) Outcomes of increased visibility, learning, networking, and co-development were experienced.

Samverket was perceived to have an accessible location and an interactionally supportive physical environment

Respondents preferred their new workplace to be in a "neutral" venue with a geographically accessible location (i.e., near the bus and train stations). A neutral place was perceived as providing a more socially available environment in which a new organizational climate and culture could be fostered. Respondents held that, in a new workplace, no one is a host or a guest. Instead, all users can be there on equal terms and are of equal importance: "I think it is valuable that it is in a neutral venue where, in many ways, we make the place the members. You are not a guest; you take your empty cup away and put it in the dishwasher. Here, we co-create" (M3-P9). However, a few respondents would have preferred Samverket to be located within a public

actor's building to cut tax-financed costs and prevent empty office spaces.

The interior design was described as a home-café-office hybrid, which respondents enjoyed and longed for. For example, respondents described those different parts of the areas as supportive of different activities such as deep conversations, collaborations, and creative meetings. Also, Samverket was considered to offer a positive alternative to their traditional work environment. A few respondents highlighted deficiencies within the physical environment, such as special-abled persons having limited access to participate at Samverket in Östersund: "I feel that the environment does not strengthen participation for all people based on the physical design. Narrow stairs, lots of doors, quite crowded to get around, the sound, cognitive impressions, signage, etcetera" (M3-P33). Samverket in Stockholm was compared with an airplane hangar (by M3-P20) in which the vast areas challenged the sociability and "coziness." Also, due to the lack of "workstations" with good ergonomics, it challenged the idea of a co-working place in which ordinary work tasks could be conducted during the intermissions of Samverket activities.

In addition to the onsite environment, the respondents highlighted some digital exchanges, such as weekly newsletters, described as extensive but valuable to the members, their colleagues, and the organizations. There were two different patterns in using the digital community platform (Haaartland). On the one hand, there were respondents who rarely or never used Haaartland since it caused them to feel overwhelmed and exhausted: "I have not been able to go into Haaartland. I know I should, but there are already so many digital tools to monitor and communicate through" (M2-P27), and "Haaartland not at all. It is a pain to have to manage another platform" (M2-P19). On the other hand, respondents expressed appreciation for the functions provided in the platform, such as the calendar, bulletin board, and interactive spaces.

Samverket was perceived to offer a safe social climate with active facilitation for networking, learning, and collaboration

Positive feelings were held for the social environment, such as respondents feeling relaxed, safe, welcomed, and included. They also described the conversational climate as open, trustful, and easy-going. Respondents perceived everyone's contributions to the conversations were equally important since they all strived for collaboration and learning. Further, respondents expressed that a social milieu designated for problem-solving and new ideas positively affected their creativity, curiosity, energy, and enthusiasm. Also, the social climate inspired respondents:

> I feel inspired and connected when I think of Samverket as my third place. I now know that if I get "stuck" at work, I could go and sit down at Samverket, vent my thoughts, experiences, and ideas, and then get lots of new information and inspiration. (M3-P1)

The respondents highlighted the role of the community manager extensively. "It is helpful to have a community manager who can guide activities and create an understanding of the function of Samverket, how we can act as an organization and as members" (M2-P28). The community manager was described as the glue of Samverket, the carrier of culture, relationship builder, solver of practical tasks, and communicator. For instance, the community manager created a welcoming atmosphere by greeting all members when arriving at Samverket. Also, by asking the members to wear a clothespin with their first name and organizational affiliation (not their role/title), the community manager facilitated the contact between the members and supported a nonhierarchical culture. In addition to the community manager, respondents expressed that members also need to be carriers of the culture at Samverket by investing time and effort to contribute and participate in activities.

The descriptions of Samverket as a concept often included favorable terms, such as: "I love the thought and the idea of Samverket and to come here. I am revitalized by meeting others and always finding new contacts and common points where questions can be raised, and the organizations work more closely together" (M3-P7). However, there were also a few respondents expressing that the concept seemed good in theory but was hard to implement; others stated that the goals of Samverket were diffuse. Also, respondents held that since building functional cross-organizational work takes time and persistence, one year was not enough to test a new workplace concept.

Conditions within the member organizations supported or limited the use and outcomes of Samverket

Beyond the design and management of Samverket, respondents described diverse organizational and personal conditions related to their use and goals of Samverket. For instance, *the formalization of use differed*. On the one hand, there were respondents with dedicated work time, set days for Samverket, and set activities to arrange and participate in. Within these organizations, respondents described how they

continuously planned and evaluated their use of Samverket while involving colleagues (nonmembers) to participate in activities. On the other hand, there were also respondents describing an individual-based ad-hoc use of Samverket, which sometimes caused stress: "I think about [the use of Samverket] a lot and have not found a good way myself yet" (M1-P12), and "It is a great opportunity, but it is stressful never to be able to prioritize the membership" (M1-P19).

Over time, a shift toward a more formalized use of Samverket occurred, where members described how they scheduled attendance for activities and tried to have set workdays at Samverket. Still, there were also respondents that only used Samverket whenever they had a gap in their calendars: "Need to try to re-prioritize to be more present, have difficulty finding time" (M2-P25). Accordingly, the amount of time spent at Samverket varied, with most members attending once a week or 2–3 times a month, others once a month or less.

Members and methods for assigning membership changed during the project period. Respondents held that common reasons for changing members were changes in work assignments and lack of time and/or interest in using Samverket: "First, the allocation was based on various functions at the authority, but some did not have time to use their membership, so they changed [the assignment method] to have interested people signing up" (M2-P4).

Member organizations differed in their goals with Samverket and routines for knowledge transfer. For instance, there were participants who expressed organizational goals of reaching extended collaboration and collective learning with several public actors. However, there were also participants who solely had personal goals such as being inspired, participating in creative meetings, and expanding networks. Regardless of the goals' level, they were abstractly formulated (e.g., increased collaboration) and not concrete enough to be measurable (such as SMART goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant/realistic, and time-bound). There were also a few respondents expressing a total absence of goals.

As with the formalization of use and goals, routines for knowledge transfer to the member organizations varied from non-existent to very rigorous procedures. Initially, the routines for sharing information or outputs from Samverket tended to be lacking or imprecise, leading to little or no knowledge transfer back to their organizations. However, respondents expressed a continuous increase of information (e.g., weekly newsletter) and knowledge (e.g., from activities) transfer to colleagues and leaders via mail, meetings, and lunch breaks. Respondents also used their intranet to distribute information to the whole organization. In the third measure, respondents tended to diversify their sharing methods, such as adding "firsthand experiences" where managers and nonmember colleagues participated in activities and meetings at Samverket. In addition, respondents from organizations with explicit goals and membership evaluations also tended to have detailed routines for sharing new contacts, information, and learnings from Samverket:

> As members of our organization, we have a standing weekly meeting where we reflect on experiences and lessons learned and plan for future steps and activities. (. . .). A theme in these reflective and summarizing occasions is to reason about implementation in our organization, which prerequisites, resources, and risks are there to consider. We have tried to document our activities and participation at Samverket. (M2-P28)

Even if there were good examples of knowledge transfer, respondents also expressed that they did not know "how" to transfer new contacts, learnings, and inspirations to their organizations: "The part of bringing back [pieces of knowledge] is the hardest and most challenging" (M2-P20), and "Continuous reports [from activities at Samverket] is given to the workgroup. The difficulty lies in sharing it with the organization as a whole" (M2-P11). Some respondents' internal workplace climate decreased their willingness to share learnings and contacts since their colleagues signaled suspicion about Samverket, expressing that Samverket was a "mutual admiration club" and that only economically measurable outcomes were relevant. To others, low use and little knowledge transfer were not followed up on and did not lead to any repercussions (e.g., withdrawn memberships).

Outcomes of increased visibility, learning, networking, and co-development were experienced

Using Samverket led to increased visibility and knowledge for public actors. Respondents described that using Samverket gave them a channel to inform other public actors about their work. Since there were several occasions where the media paid attention to Samverket, they also perceived that their organizations became more visible to people outside the public sector. In addition, through activities where different groups (e.g., youths, the business community) were invited to Samverket, the public actors became more visible to the local citizens, and they learned from them: "Increased knowledge of how we can be relevant as an authority for young people in the future, both as an employer and as a public service provider for the citizens" (M3-P45).

Members expressed that they learned much about other public actors through the organized thematic activities and the informal social occasions (e.g., weekly breakfast). For example, respondents held that it became clear that public actors have a lot in common (e.g., attracting and keeping personnel), yet work under different conditions for solving their missions (e.g., being governed by different legislation): "That we face the same issues in principle, even if the areas of responsibility and details differ." (M2-P7) and "New thoughts and insights about how my colleagues at other authorities work" (M2-P13). Also, through increased knowledge of the work within other organizations, the respondents held that it became more apparent how their organization fit into the larger public sector puzzle and how to co-create: "Access to informal contacts with other authorities has enabled an exploration of points in common (rather than the starting point being in a problem), making it possible to find synergies" (M2-P16).

Member interactions led to outcomes of learning. Respondents described how gathering employees within the same occupation from different organizations led to a tremendous exchange of experiences, perspectives, and ideas. For instance:

> We have learned what others are doing in various processes/improvement work and considered how to share knowledge more clearly and collaborate internally within the organization. (. . .). This has given us increased knowledge of others' missions and the need to collaborate more to improve service to our citizens. (M3-P19)

Accordingly, the members described the exchange of knowledge and expertise between the members from different actors as a new way to gain collective learning within the public sector. Additionally, respondents held that outcomes from the meetings between the members (e.g., inspiration, creativity, and sometimes innovation) were to the benefit of society since they were brought back to their colleagues for direct improvements to their public services. Also, respondents expressed relief when it became clear that they did not have to "reinvent the wheel" but could learn from the success of other public actors and, therefore, save time and tax money.

Using Samverket led to outcomes of extended networks and co-development initiation between public actors. Respondents described how building new relations and networks with employees from different public actors led to important outcomes. For instance, they held that the new networks enabled novel ways of handling societal challenges and hoped it would bring better and smarter authority decisions in the future: "People you would have otherwise emailed to meet, you now run into every day. Processes have felt like they are going faster, but above all, it feels like I have gained closer cooperation with people who work in the same field" (M3-P9). One respondent described their work challenges and the possibilities that Samverket provided to tackle those challenges:

> I work with issues that concern private individuals, associations, companies, municipalities, government authorities, etc. There is rarely a clear responsibility (or budget). Everyone is affected, but it is difficult to coordinate and collaborate with those you need to reach. Success in these matters is primarily based on well-established networks of contacts. Samverket is one of the best ideas I have seen so far in contributing to such necessary networks. (M3-P30)

Through these new ties, respondents described how they planned and, to some extent, conducted cross-organizational collaborations and projects. For instance: "In at least one case, we have started concrete work with another authority where we solve a government task together in a new way. I find that very exciting" (M3-P4). Another respondent described an outcome of a cross-organizational project like this: "We have found challenges where the individual/citizen/customer gets stuck between our processes or falls between the cracks. This will be taken forward and prioritized with the ambition to develop new joint services and processes" (M2-P16).

Cross-organizational collaborations: a "wicked problem" or possible to solve? There were respondents expressing difficulties in seeing how cross-organizational exchanges at Samverket would benefit the citizens and bring about changes on a societal level. Also, a few respondents held that shortcomings in outcomes occurred due to other members not having adequate knowledge or skills and not investing enough time and energy into the collaborations. Respondents expressed that cross-organizational collaborations were impossible to achieve within one year (or less). They argued that results at a societal level require persistence, especially within the public sector, which can rarely act quickly when it comes to innovations of systems or services. However, these members expressed that positive outcomes for the citizens would emerge in the future if networks and initiated collaborations at Samverket continued.

Discussion

This study investigated how public sector employees perceived the conditions for networking, learning, and

collaboration at Samverket and whether their use of Samverket was perceived to bring any outcomes that benefited society. Our results indicate that a co-working place with an explicit stance toward cross-organizational collaboration and active facilitation has the potential to innovate the work of the public sector, thus benefitting society. However, according to the respondents, it was not wholly problem-free, as some conditions hindered positive outcomes from Samverket.

To begin with, the respondents expressed positive experiences and emotions of Samverket as a workplace for cross-organizational exchange. For instance, in line with the third place idea (Oldenburg, 2002; Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), the physical milieu was held as inviting, including, and cozy. Respondents' descriptions of safe communication suggest an interpersonal group climate with a high degree of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019; Granovetter, 1973; Sandström et al., 2023). Since the facilitation of psychological safety seems vital to learning and co-development, this could explain why traditional co-working places, which lack community managers as culture carriers and facilitators, do not foster cross-organizational collaboration. Given that the community managers had a decisive role as facilitators and carriers of the concept of Samverket, it becomes important for future research to investigate what characteristics make the community managers successful and whether others can meet these standards equally successfully.

In addition, since special-abled people had limited access to the venue in Östersund, this was a deficiency regarding the idea of the third place being accessible (Oldenburg, 1989) and Swedish legislation against discrimination (SFS, 2008). Accordingly, in the future, it is essential to ensure accessibility for all public sector employees. This could easily be provided by using a public actor venue, since they fulfill the criteria for accessibility. Yet, this first needs to be thoroughly investigated since members being hosts or guests can counteract the benefits of a neutral site. Also, respondents expressed that personal and organizational conditions supported (e.g., dedicated time for collaboration) or hindered (e.g., lack of goals) positive outcomes from Samverket. Hence, our results indicate that, outside the management of Samverket, member organizations need to facilitate cross-organizational interactions by setting goals and formalizing their use and knowledge transfer. However, further research is required to reach a best practice for this.

Furthermore, positive outcomes were reported, such as expanded networks of public sector employees, learning that improved processes within the work of different public actors, and co-developments aimed at limiting the gaps *between* public actor services. Also, through media attention and activities at Samverket, citizens gained knowledge about their local public actors and services. However, in line with previous research (Lidman, 2023), respondents were finding it hard to see "what" kind of innovations could emerge or "how" to implement them in their organizations. Differences within respondents' expectations and perceptions of outcomes (e.g., extended collective learning or mainly creating thin ties) could depend on the fact that the members of the authority network in Östersund were acquainted with each other and committed to common goals. Thus, their road to cross-organizational collaborations was more straightforward. AbouAssi et al. (2023) found that collaborative outcomes within the public sector are supported when public actors agree and commit to collective goals. Consequently, before evaluating the full effect of a co-working place like Samverket, it seems crucial to adjust the expectations to the prevailing situation, create common goals that members can commit to and are congruent with their organizational goals, and allow time for networking, learning, and co-development.

Limitation and future research

As with all research, this study had limitations. Since this was an exploration of a new co-working concept, a qualitative method was used, allowing to explore the members' perceptions and experiences of Samverket broadly and open-mindedly. To offer all users of Samverket the possibility to participate in the research and, at the same time, protect their anonymity, online surveys with open-ended questions were used. It is well-established that online surveys offer anonymity and can provide rich datasets (Braun et al., 2021). Nevertheless, an interactive method for data collection, such as focus groups, could have brought complementary information. Furthermore, further research, particularly using a quantitative framework, will be necessary to determine whether these experiences are generalizable, whether there are differences between actors using and not using the concept, and, importantly, whether the concept indeed provides added value to the citizens and benefits society. Another crucial future research direction is investigating the ownership and financial models to reach a cost-effective cross-organizational collaboration within the public sector. Finally, since this study aimed to broadly investigate the conditions for public

sector collaborations and outcomes benefiting society, a deeper understanding of the psychosocial environment and outcomes on an individual and workgroup level is an important future direction.

Conclusion

One can wonder if Samverket is only a "fancy playground" for public employees or whether this new co-working concept really can help bridge the gaps within and between public actors. Our results suggest that without the help of a community manager, the concept would indeed have risked turning into a "fancy playground." However, based on the users' experiences, the active role of the community manager elevated Samverket from a co-working place where people work in the same space to a community where exchanges between public actors emerged. Through their actions, the community manager created a place where psychological safety was fostered and where the goal to innovate the public sector was central. As such, it was possible to achieve networking, learning, and collaboration *between* public actors. Accordingly, the concept of Samverket could provide a new tool for improved public services, both nationally and internationally. However, researchers, decision-makers, and practitioners need to explore the concept of funding and long-term outcomes further for the benefit of society.

Note

1. The name "Samverket" combines two Swedish words that can refer to both a collaboration site and a collaboration outcome.

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