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Article

The Experiences and Views of Employees on Hybrid Ways of Working

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Abstract: The contemporary post-COVID-19 corporate environment of instant response and hybrid work settings motivates employees to learn to adjust their expectations. This new corporate working model incorporates flex locations and flex schedules by working at home 1–2 days per week and staying connected for non-urgent requests, even outside business hours. This work setting empowers employees to prioritize work accordingly and to accommodate the fluid schedules of their coworkers. As a result, this new hybrid workplace requires leaders and their teams to face new challenges in terms of communication, coordination, and team connection to remain effective. This research examines the experiences of employees in an SME that applied a hybrid work policy following the post-pandemic crisis, bringing additional complexity to their modern work system. This study investigates employees' views on the changing work environment as important evidence for HR management to incorporate into future organizational practices. To understand the various principles at play and provide more granular results, this paper includes a business case study (N = 25) where semi-structured interviews were used to identify the views and concerns of employees regarding hybrid work settings. The scope of this case study was to collect empirical data regarding this new agile way of working while understanding participant thinking. The findings suggest that while there are clear benefits in terms of efficiency and flexibility in hybrid work settings, there are also challenges related to social interactions and non-verbal clues. This study enhances conceptual and empirical understanding and supports contemporary research on the future of work.

Keywords: hybrid work structures; SME; agile working; embodied presence; connected presence; digital social relations; digital communication



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1. Introduction

The aftermath of the pandemic brought changes in corporate work structures, creating a new normal hybrid work model with flexible schedules and locations (Hopkins and Bardoel 2023). This work model emphasizes flexibility, autonomy, purpose-driven tasks, and the integration of technology and human collaboration. Although work has become increasingly flexible, hybrid working employees remain susceptible to experiencing “remote burnout” (Costin et al. 2023). The Washington Post states that the prevalence of continuous digital communication in the modern workplace can potentially result in increased levels of stress and fatigue (Abril 2024). Research also indicates that workers consistently experience high levels of stress in their occupations following the pandemic, with a significant number of employees currently having a sense of detachment from business while burdened with a sense of overwhelming workloads (Abril 2024). This HR practice of hybrid working was introduced as an agile way of working to promote work–life balance and raise morale while allowing team members to function at top capacity on a consistent basis. Such new practices raise concerns about customizing organizational norms to adapt to the new normal and their impact on employees. A complete appreciation of the optimal development of the new workplace is still relatively unexplored.

1.1. Background

For the purposes of this study, the definition of the hybrid work setting refers to a mobile model of a workspace that is created by a physical office space with no identified desk for each coworker, but with shared social working spaces that can be used by all and a digital space where the coworker will work via a screen possibly from home or anywhere else wished. This research considers the emergence of the hybrid space to be essential, as the constant social presence in the digital space invites us to examine more thoroughly the changes that are taking place in terms of the way an employee experiences their existence in this new work environment and to consider the changes in the composition of the work environment itself. As Goffman (Goffman 1956) suggests, it is the interaction between the individual and the environment that shapes the “embodied presence” in digital and physical spaces and determines the ways in which individuals will express subjectivity. Goffman’s work (Goffman 1956) explores the idea that human interaction is a performative act, where individuals present themselves in various ways depending on the social context and environment they are in. This concept is rooted in the notion that individuals engage in a form of impression management, where they consciously or unconsciously shape their behavior to align with the expectations of the setting and the audience.

When applied to both digital and physical spaces, Goffman’s (Goffman 1956) theory suggests that the way individuals express their subjectivity, that is, their personal identity and sense of self, is heavily influenced by the interaction between themselves and their environment. In physical spaces, this might involve adjusting one’s body language, tone of voice, or attire to fit the social norms of a particular setting. In digital spaces, individuals might curate their online presence by selecting particular profile pictures, using specific language, or sharing certain types of content, to convey a desired image or persona. The “embodied presence” in this context refers to how a person’s sense of self is manifested and perceived in different spaces. In physical environments, this embodiment is direct and tangible, involving the physical body and face-to-face interactions. In digital environments, the embodiment is more abstract and mediated through technology, yet it still involves a complex interaction between the individual and the environment, shaping how subjectivity is expressed. Thus, Goffman’s perspective underscores the idea that both digital and physical spaces are performative arenas where individuals craft and project their identities, influenced by the dynamics of the environment and the expectations of others (Goffman 1956). The employee is taking advantage of this dynamic assimilation offered by the portability of devices, such as laptops and smartphones that are used to implement work, and which offer possibilities for social interaction the same way it is provided on a physical as well as a digital level.

The rise of hybrid work models, where employees split their time between remote work and in-office work, has its roots in several key historical developments, influenced by technological advancements, cultural shifts, and global events. The foundation for hybrid work was laid in the late 20th century with the advent of personal computers, the Internet, and later, mobile technologies. The development of email, video conferencing, and collaboration tools like instant messaging and shared digital workspaces made remote work increasingly feasible. During the 1990s and early 2000s, companies began experimenting with telecommuting, particularly in tech and knowledge-based industries where physical presence was less critical. As technology enabled more flexible work arrangements, corporate culture attitudes towards work began to shift (Bailey and Kurland 2002). The desire for a better work–life balance became more prominent, particularly in Western countries where dual-income households and longer commuting times were common (Gandini 2016). The early 2000s saw a growing recognition that productivity was not necessarily tied to the physical office space (Baruch 2000). Companies like IBM and Yahoo initially embraced remote work policies, recognizing that it could lead to increased employee satisfaction and potentially lower operational costs. The 2008 financial crisis played a pivotal role in accelerating the adoption of remote work (Baruch 2000). Faced with economic uncertainty, many companies sought ways to reduce costs, including downsizing office spaces and

allowing employees to work from home (Baruch 2000). The most significant catalyst for the widespread adoption of hybrid work models was the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020. As governments imposed lockdowns and social distancing measures, businesses were forced to quickly transition to remote work to continue operations (OECD 2021).

The “Future of Work” movement is a broad and evolving concept that addresses how work will be structured, organized, and executed in the coming decades, introduced in the McKinsey (Madgavkar et al. 2021) Global Report in 2021. It encompasses changes in the nature of jobs, the work environment, the workforce, and the role of technology (Madgavkar et al. 2021), and future research is demanded to explore the radical difference in the way employees perceive and experience their common work environment. This paper discusses this modern experience of working and socializing in a hybrid workspace along with the needs of employees to adapt teams’ social interactions to the new work environment requirements.

1.2. Team Social Interactions

The adoption of team-based structures in the workplace has been increasing in recent times. Early research, focused primarily on groups (Cooley 1909) and work groups (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939), flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, driven by the practical requirements and investment of resources rooted in the war efforts of WWII (Driskell and Olmstead 1989). At that time, research investigating team-based functioning was influenced by Sociotechnical Systems Theory (Cummings 1978; Trist and Bamforth 1951). Team research has evolved significantly since those early studies, with increasing focus on project-based and virtual teams in recent decades, and a significant increase in the adoption of team-based structures by businesses resulting in a wide range of team-working operational models (Hartwig et al. 2020; McEwen and Boyd 2018; Sharma and Sharma 2016). Findings from the field of social neuroscience have confirmed that humans have a strong need to establish social connections and that these connections are a fundamental motivator of their actions and behaviors (Lieberman 2013). As early as the 4th century BCE, Aristotle asserted such findings in his book “Politics”, explaining that people are, by nature, social animals. Moreover, positive relationships at work are considered a competitive advantage within a corporate context and have received much attention (Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003).

Positive relationships in the workplace enhance communication and collaboration (Edmondson 1999). Dutton and Heaphy (Dutton and Heaphy 2003) defined these positive relations as “the dynamic, living tissue that exists between two people when there is some contact between them, involving mutual awareness and social interaction” (p. 264). The interaction among team members in these relationships creates an experience that encompasses both temporal and emotional aspects. Furthermore, this experience has the potential to evolve and change over an extended period (Dutton and Heaphy 2003). As business environments become more complex for many reasons, including interconnectedness, the emergence of uncertainty increases, and digital technology is a major driver of workplace transformation (Attaran et al. 2020). The evolution of organizational social structures points to the changing nature of professional relationships in hybrid environments. In such work settings, reimagining productivity and work processes reflects the need for new approaches to measure and manage work.

1.3. Employee-Embodied and Connected Presence in Physical and Remote Environments

The work environment as “*a condition sine qua non*—an essential condition” is represented in the interactions that create the experience and give it meaning, and so these hybrid spaces focus not on some objective spatial quality but rather on the particular social meanings of the social relations they host (Simmel 2004). According to Simmel (Simmel 2004), the interpretation of the various characteristics of the space and the values or properties attributed to it do not constitute an objective external reality but represent the result of a relational context that emerges in this specific space under specific circumstances. There-

fore, if this paper clarifies some basic properties of the hybrid space, it can provide evidence of the composition and qualities of these social relations, as well as the spatial properties that influence them. Such a result will be very useful clarification for understanding how the future workplace should be imagined. Shockley et al. (Shockley et al. 2021) highlight that while hybrid settings can democratize participation by reducing physical cues and hierarchies, they can also lead to communication barriers and misunderstandings due to the lack of non-verbal feedback between virtual and on-site team members. Korzynski and Senders (Sender and Korzynski 2020) support the importance of selecting appropriate digital tools that support inclusive communication, such as platforms that allow for real-time feedback, and diverse forms of expression (e.g., video, chat, emoji reactions). Additionally, Gajendran and Joshi (Gajendran and Joshi 2012) conclude that transparency in decision-making and frequent open communication from leaders are critical in hybrid settings, as virtual meetings specifically can both facilitate and hinder psychological safety.

More specifically, in the context of digital communication, as long as we accept that the users interact with the digital object at the hardware and software level as bodies/subjects, we also accept that the digital space hosts any kinesthetic actions and, therefore, is essentially an extension of their living space. As characteristically noted by Paul Dourish (Dourish 2001), if we observe the digital environment and the idea behind the construction of a computer, we notice the relationship between the material elements of the machine and the meanings it conveys to the user, as created by programmers and designers with the simple goal of performing everyday user requests. On the other hand, the users/employees position themselves and focus their action on the digital situation through the screen of the device, which becomes their material lived space and frames its own contents. In this new spatiality, users can reshape their living space, as the computer takes the action of the user as a “condition of expression of the world” (Galloway 2020). In contact with this new situation, the employees acquire new skills, gradually developing the ability to navigate within this digital space and even taking advantage of the options to customize its content according to their own preferences. When the technical conditions allow a kinesthetic interaction with the employee, such as the touching of the screen, and social practices, such as discussions over an app like MS TEAMS, it becomes possible to acquire new physical abilities and skills within this digital space, which becomes a new intimate space shaped by the user, replacing the old office desk. As noted by de Souza e Silva and Sheller (de Souza e Silva and Sheller 2015), “hybrid spaces merge the physical and the digital in a social environment created by the mobility of users connected via mobile technology devices” (p. 263). The emergence of portable communication technologies has contributed to the possibility of being always connected to digital spaces and literally “carrying the internet wherever we go” (de Souza e Silva and Sheller 2015).

Additionally, digital social interaction also creates the expectation of digital connection at any time and in any place. It is therefore expected that such a sense of permanent availability may lead to a state of absolute absorption by the digital space. Therefore, it is important to know that the radical portability of the laptop or the smartphone essentially turns the concept of the digital space into something mobile and not static as we are used to so far. Christian Licoppe (Licoppe 2004) has introduced the term “connected presence” to describe this complex web of social relations mediated by new technologies and the integration of the computer into the material everyday life of the employee, simulating the material reality in the digital interactions. After all, when we focus on the act of social interaction through instant messaging applications, the very way of performing the multimedia written communicative act allows for a more immediate and easy assimilation of it in any environment, as opposed to, for example, a voice call or a face-to-face discussion. In a reverse perspective, we consider that the wide, daily, and almost continuous use of apps like MS TEAMS and instant messaging is a consequence of the easier co-existence of employees, which comprises their new material reality. The main reason why this paper focus on this matter, particularly the expectations for continuous availability, lies in the fact

that this framework, formed by the digital inter-corporeality described so far, is considered to be essential in the new corporate social and work experience.

This constant social presence in the digital space invites researchers to examine more thoroughly the changes that are taking place in terms of the way employees experience coexistence in shared digital spaces and the changes in the composition of these spaces. Goffman emphasized the complexity of human behavior as a response to stimuli and its predictable effect on the person and the environment to which the person is exposed (Goffman 1956), as digital technology is now more than ever an integral part of the everyday human experience. It is not in the form of some “technological determinism” but in terms of building a “system that depends on structured relationships between people” (Haraway 1991). Digital space is now possible to produce, host, and organize employee interactions on multiple levels using multiple complex processes and a variety of digital tools that do not require any extensive prior training to operate them (Dourish 2001). This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when humans relied solely on technology to continue to act on their routines, including shopping, working, learning, and connecting. This leap forward translates into a huge diffusion of the use of digital technologies, as well as the enormous penetration of its presence. Floridi (Floridi et al. 2018) points out that today, individuals find it difficult “to perceive [the notion of technology] precisely because it has already become so ubiquitous” (p. 28), in other words, because technology is always there and we hardly notice it anymore.

From organizations to academic institutions, technology has been incorporated as a mandatory business tool, and technological devices, i.e., personal computers, mobile phones, etc., have been irreversibly inserted into everyday reality. In 1998, Townsend, DeMarie, and Hendrickson (Townsend et al. 1998) discussed the notion of virtual teams as the new generation of information and telecommunications technology initiatives that introduced new workforce demographics. Post-pandemic, hybrid teams have led to a reconfiguration of the work environment and offer considerable potential for organizations that adopt them as they facilitate unparalleled levels of adaptability and reactivity (Powell et al. 2004). Previous research on virtual teams identified that their composition incorporated individuals from different functions of the organizations, known for their fluid membership, which brought challenges in establishing relationships, along with the development of social identity among team members (Powell et al. 2004). Virtual teams also possess the capacity to deviate from established formal structures and conventional reporting obligations. Consequently, individuals may be afforded significant levels of independence and may not be obligated to adhere to formalized regulations and protocols (DeSanctis and Poole 1997). This paper aims to identify employees’ perspectives on the agile ways of working and their challenges and recommendations. The purpose is to be able to identify those specific qualities that make the digital space, on the one hand, suitable for the embodied presence that we have described so far, and on the other hand, make the connected presence a context in which sociality can develop and work can be performed.

2. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to identify participants’ experiences and opinions of the phenomenon of hybrid work settings. The research tool that was deemed most appropriate for this study was the semi-structured interview, which included a basic question guide but offered flexibility for additional explanatory questions (Ryan et al. 2009). This approach was chosen to observe participants and also to discuss with them their behaviors and ideas in depth. The research tool consisted of 15 open-ended questions regarding the hybrid experience at the organization level, the team level, and the individual level. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the researcher spent six months as an observer in the researched organization, allowing for a direct personal experience of life as an employee in the firm. The aim was to collect information regarding the hybrid work model and discuss with participants their coping and resilience skills and the behaviors

that they considered fostered high performance. The information collected was then used to structure the interview guide.

The research was conducted at a Greek business consulting firm, which is a local franchise of a global brand established in the country in 2003. The employees of the firm have adopted the hybrid work HR policy following the pandemic lockdown, where they were required to work 3 days from the office and 2 virtually. Following a personal email to all employees with an invitation to voluntarily participate in “research on hybrid work”, 27 out of the 31 invitees accepted the terms and conditions of the research and participated in a 1 h online recorded discussion via MS TEAMS. The interviews were then booked, following management approval, to take place during working hours at times convenient for each participant. The interviews were conducted in the Greek language and recorded and then decoded using the program Happy Scribe. The transcripts were then translated into English by the researcher and thematic analysis was applied. The selected consulting firm possessed several characteristics relevant to the research objectives:

1. Small organizational size (31 total consultants, including management), facilitating access to a broader range of potential participants and enabling observation of interrelationships.
2. Substantial business growth and high employee performance rates over the preceding two years (2022–2023), allowing for the examination of high-performing teams.
3. Experience of significant turnover (30%) during the post-COVID-19 period (September 2021–May 2022), coinciding with the global “Great Resignation” phenomenon. This characteristic advantageously positioned the firm for studying resilience in the early stages of team formation, as many employees in our sample were relatively new to the organization.
4. Implementation of an official hybrid work policy (three days office-based, two days remote) in September 2022, enabling the study of both in-office and remote work demands.
5. Reliance on technology-mediated communication for task accomplishment.

Overall, the firm’s workforce included 31 full-time employees managed under a five-shareholder structure, with three shareholders serving in executive capacities. The demographic composition of the volunteer participant sample for this study consisted of seven men and eighteen women. Their age brackets include ten participants over 40 years old, seven between 30 to 39 years old, and eight participants under 30 years of age, giving this research a distribution of opinions on the generational side. Regarding their employment tenure, there is an even distribution between participants under 2 years and over 2 years of tenure, with five participants being new, under 1 year in the firm. Regarding their education level, half of the participants hold a bachelor’s degree, and the other half hold Master’s and Doctorate degrees; all of them have several skills and competence certificates. The demographics are presented in Table 1.

A thematic analysis was used in this study as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006) based on the Gioia methodology, which was recently codified by Gioia et al. (Gioia et al. 2013). The Gioia methodology allows for the systematic presentation of a first-order analysis (for example, by using interviewee-centric terms and codes) and a second-order analysis (for example, by using researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions), which were the building blocks for the provision of answers to the research questions. The process of thematic analysis was selected as it allows for the clear documentation of each step of the analysis, and researchers can provide a robust audit trail that enhances the credibility and reliability of the findings (Nowell et al. 2017).

Table 1. Demographics of consulting volunteers.

Demographic Characteristic	#
Men	7
Women	18
Age > 40 years	10
Age 30–39 years	7
Age > 30 years	8
Tenure < 2 years	10
Tenure > 2 years	10
Tenure < 1 year	5
Bachelor's degrees	12
Master's and PhD	13

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. General Observations

Participants confirmed that the firm's organizational structure includes three units that work in interunit project teams sometimes using external experts. All 25 participants who volunteered for this research were members of those three business units, working on projects as business consultants, and none were part of the Executive Team. The participants reported that this was their first time prior to the pandemic working remotely and that they had never before used a hybrid work setting. The employees adopted an optional hybrid work setting without specific rules following the pandemic lockdown. A couple of weeks prior to the research interviews, in September 2022, a new mandatory hybrid work organizational policy was introduced, where all employees had the option to work remotely only two days per week and they were required to be in the office for three days. For the remote part, employees needed to rely on technology-mediated communication to accomplish their tasks, requiring a computer, and as a communication tool, they used MS TEAMS with or without the use of a camera. Also, the subject of social etiquette in remote MS TEAMS communication was mentioned by many respondents who were concerned about how to simulate behaviors of face-to-face interactions in virtual settings. First, the discussion was related to “camera on/off” when in a meeting. Except for one participant, the rest mentioned that they want to keep the camera on while talking to others in a virtual meeting, to simulate a face-to-face conversation, but they would switch off the camera in larger group presentations. Also, participants mentioned that they prefer to have the camera on and look directly into it and not to the screen, in an attempt to simulate the notion of paying attention, which seemed important as a sign of showing interest in the conversation. Actions like eating, drinking coffee, and dressing unprofessionally were identified, but also, sitting in a way that the screen shows the face and shoulders and speaking closely to the microphone were also mentioned by all participants as being important and indications of professional behavior.

3.2. Thematic Analysis

The analysis reveals that the transition to hybrid work models has multifaceted implications for employees' work experiences. These impacts span several domains, including productivity, social dynamics, work–life balance, and psychological well-being. While the findings indicate clear benefits in terms of efficiency and flexibility, they also highlight challenges related to social interactions and non-verbal communication.

Table 2 presents a comprehensive overview of the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions that emerged from our analysis, along with corresponding interview references.

Table 2. Benefits of hybrid work setting.

First Order	Second Order	Aggregate Dimensions	Interviews
Remote meetings start and end on time	Enhanced focus and concentration	Productivity and work process optimization	18, 1, 23
Quiet work environment at home			13, 7, 12, 11
Time management efficiency			6, 11, 18, 23
Increased individual productivity			8, 6, 18, 12, 24, 11
Less social interaction in remote work	Shifts in social dynamics	Digital communication evolution	18, 1, 9, 23, 10, 17, 14, 19, 11
Difficulties in building relationships remotely			1, 8, 23, 6, 13, 12, 11
Challenges in remote social etiquette			3, 6, 25, 8, 18
Virtual team bonding efforts			20, 25, 4, 10
Importance of body language and face-to-face interactions	Challenges in verbal and non-verbal communication		14, 2, 12, 16, 25, 11, 23, 7, 4
Shift to text-based interaction and digital tools			6, 9, 15, 5, 22, 13, 19
Communication challenges	Technological adaptation and infrastructure	Transformation of workplace communication	8, 6, 5, 23
Privacy concerns addressed in remote settings			6, 7, 15, 19
Digital communication evolution			1, 23, 24, 3 9, 10, 15, 24
Screen interactions require more intentional focus	Intentional focus in virtual settings		17, 14, 16, 23, 6, 10, 7, 15, 16, 12, 4
Better work–life balance	Work–life integration	Redefinition of work–life boundaries	8, 23, 22
Reduced commute time and stress			1, 8, 23
Flexibility in handling personal matters	Flexible work arrangements		1, 8, 23, 6, 10
Hybrid model benefits			13, 17, 6, 4, 11, 22, 11
Screen provides a sense of safety in interactions	Impacts of remote work	Emotional and psychological aspects of digital work	12, 16, 9, 10, 7, 25, 12
Privacy concerns addressed in remote settings			15, 7, 6, 21
Increased self-awareness on camera			11, 5, 12, 6, 9, 10, 7, 25, 22
Challenges in maintaining team cohesion	Virtual leadership challenges	Emerging leadership paradigms in digital environments	23, 9, 7, 15, 24, 4
Adapting leadership styles for remote work			3, 7, 14, 6, 24, 25
Concerns about career progression in remote settings	Career development in virtual Settings		15

3.3. Examples of How the Interviewees Addressed the Above

Time management efficiency: “Allow me to say that the previous model [office work] was less efficient for me. I believe a lot of time was wasted in hallway conversations. With this model, you don’t have that. For me, remote is really efficient. The opposite was very disruptive; many times, especially when you need to close a door for quiet, I often found myself in a difficult position, at a breaking point where I couldn’t cope” (interview 6).

Increased productivity due to fewer interruptions: “Due to teleworking now everything is done so quickly just with an email or the chat” (interview 8). “There is great accessibility, availability of everyone at any time of the working hours, so we have no problem in finding each other in this hybrid environment” (interview 18).

Less social interaction in remote work: “It’s definitely not nice or pleasant that I can’t reach out and touch you. We’re not in a science fiction movie where I put my hand into the computer, and it comes out the other side. So yes, that’s definitely missing. It would certainly be desirable, let’s say, but it doesn’t exist” (interview 14). “We just lose a little of the social and maybe a little of the creativity” (interview 18).

Difficulties in building relationships remotely: “We don’t see reactions as and many times the clients don’t have their cameras on; they turn off their cameras because they’re using their mobile phones or for other reasons. It’s more challenging, but live interactions yield better results. Productivity depends on the situation.” (interview 1).

Challenges in remote social etiquette: “Normally you should be with your feet down and you should be more upright, more serious, present your hands freely, fix yourself in the camera, have a proper camera” (interview 3). “The eyes are very important because they are the only point that I can draw a conclusion from when I talk over the screen” (interview 18), “you get used to collaborate through camera” (interview 8). “Keeping the element of communication from getting lost with texting” (interview 3).

Virtual team bonding: “Sometimes we arrange with the team e-aperitivos after work hours and discuss off office hours our news, just to do something altogether as we are never all at the office at the same time. I am looking forward to these bonding moments” (interview 25).

Importance of body language in face-to-face interactions: “A lot of times when remote I struggle to stay positive, as I think I am missing what is happening in the office, I am afraid of the proximity bias as my manager doesn’t like remote work” (interview 25). “I try to control my negative thinking patterns of what I am missing when working for long time remote” (interview 2). “MSTeams can serve as a bit of a protective shield, providing a sense of security, while in-person communication allows you to see everything more clearly” (interview 12).

Shift to text-based interaction and digital tools: “I always sent a message in teams -can I call you? Maybe he is talking I don’t know” (interview 13).

Communication challenges: “Maybe I should talk to you now, and you just say yes, I hear you. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. At some point, I would get annoyed. But maybe when we’re in person, face to face, you wouldn’t do that because I would tell you, ‘Okay, that’s enough’, and you would stop. It’s a bit different communication” (interview 23).

Privacy concerns addressed in remote settings: “By seeing the privacy of the others’ home, it creates an impression subconsciously about them that doesn’t help the interaction. It is also unprofessional. The virtual background eliminates such feelings and keeps the focus to the presenter” (interview 19).

Digital communication evolution: In the beginning it was hard to connect, but the mindset of people gradually changed” (interview 1). “The immediacy of saying a joke etc. It’s different because in TEAMS I won’t, for example, call my colleague to talk for 10 min about football yesterday and one and the other, that I will do in person, but in the morning before we start and waiting for the others we do talk about this even online” (interview 3). “A Teams message can distract you when you’re working from home, but after a while you get used to it” (interview 15).

Screen interactions require more intentional focus: “I observe more easily on the screen because I have a focused visibility. It’s specific you look in the screen.” (interview 16). “In any case, I don’t want unnecessary thoughts to intrude at that moment. At that moment, I want to focus on discussing and collaborating with the other person, and everything else is of secondary importance.” (interview 19).

Better work–life balance: “Boundaries are blurry for better or for worse in the digital age. We often check emails in the evening, I may not answer but I will look into it, but also I have time to do the laundry and cook a meal during my break” (interview 22).

Reduced commute time and stress: “There is a greater balance now, i.e., I will finish at 6.30, I will leave office and be home, well now it is getting dark at 6.30 but I will be home, I will do my exercise, I will take my bath and finally I will not have the traffic. the car is very tiring. So it’s an hour and two hours that you lose on the road in traffic, you’ll wake up earlier, while when you’re home you’ll wake up half an hour earlier and you’ll be ok.” (Interview 8).

Flexibility in handling personal matters: “At some point, the kids finish school and come home around four or four-thirty. So, when I know I’ll be working from home, I make sure that the work requiring quiet is done from the morning until four. From four to around six-thirty or seven, I do things that can be done with less focused attention, like a call or a conversation” (interview 6).

Hybrid model benefits: “We have said Wednesday we want to be all in the office. I’m not saying that we necessarily have to come as we have a hybrid system. But since most of us come two or three times a week to the office, we try to come all the same day, and we also communicate remotely. We usually talk about work on Teams. But we sent each other messages or funny videos in our group chat in WhatsApp. When in office we will go down to eat lunch together. Friday in the office is a more relaxed day, and more social. Unfortunately, many times I can’t come even though it’s nice” (interview 6).

Screen provides a sense of safety in interactions: “One can hide a lot behind his true self the screen, at first it was very difficult to understand” (interview 12).

Privacy concerns addressed in remote settings: “Yes, I always use the company’s [background], primarily out of habit, so I don’t have to keep putting it on and taking it off when I have candidates or clients. For example, if we’re talking and my battery runs out, I have to get up to plug it in. There’s no need to make you see my whole house, which may or may not be tidy. Also, I don’t think it’s very professional. Even in the office, regardless of where I am, I’ll have my Teams background. There might be my pot-plant or not, depending on the angle I place my chair.” (interview 21).

Increased self-awareness on camera: “I used to be concerned, you know, about being proper. I would check my appearance. But over time, you get used to it and realize that the other person has also gotten used to it to some extent. They don’t focus so much on your hair, glasses, lipstick, shirt, etc. And you have a nice conversation. Once you get past those first 5–10 min of checking, I don’t think anyone stays focused on that if you have a genuinely nice and serious discussion with someone.” (interview 6). “It’s interesting to see yourself. And I’ll tell you what I think affects how you see yourself. I believe it has to do with your self-confidence and how self-aware you are. How you might appear to others and how much that matters to you. Yes, sometimes, like today, I don’t feel very well. I could say, ‘Oh, I look terrible. Don’t look at me’, and all that. But honestly, I don’t care. That’s why I mentioned self-awareness earlier. This is who I am. I’m dressed and made up, looking more presentable, but I’m also worn out, and I see it.” (interview 22).

Challenges in maintaining team cohesion: “When someone declares teleworking and sees that an entire team is missing, it should be coordinated” (interview 4).

Adapting leadership styles for remote work: “Employees and managers develop trust as micromanagement is not possible in hybrid environments” (interview 3). “There is sufficient communication between us in this work model. It’s easy to reach your colleagues and manager when you need them. With this hybrid model it is also more direct. because I can write something in MS Teams and my manager will reply immediately, at any time

of the day” (interview 14). “This model made it possible for managers to have greater confidence, as they don’t need to constantly follow up on the employee to do the work, since they understand that the result is what matters, and they can count on their team.” (interviews 7, 24, 25).

Concerns about career progression in remote settings: “How much does proximity bias play a role, especially in cases of remote work, and how many managers, mainly decision-makers, perceive it, and how much does it influence their decisions? What do they prefer more for themselves and their teams? Essentially, it’s the idea that if I have you nearby, I feel more secure that you are being productive, that I can monitor you better, and observe your progress and performance, and whether you meet deadlines. All of this constitutes a significant bias, a new bias essentially, and it increasingly influences how we form our opinions about remote work.” (interview 15).

3.4. Discussion

The results identify pluses and minuses regarding hybrid work HR practices and suggest that while there are clear benefits in terms of efficiency and flexibility in hybrid work settings, there are also challenges related to social interactions and their connected presence, along with employee and non-verbal clues and their embodied presence. The analysis yielded six aggregate dimensions:

1. **Productivity and Work Process Optimization:** Participants reported enhanced efficiency in remote work, citing factors such as punctual virtual meetings and quieter home environments. However, some struggled with home office setups, indicating variability in productivity outcomes.
2. **Digital Communication Evolution:** The shift to remote work resulted in decreased social interaction and creativity, with participants reporting difficulties in building relationships remotely. However, some teams developed virtual bonding strategies to mitigate these challenges.
3. **Transformation of Workplace Communication:** Respondents noted an increased reliance on written communication and digital tools, accompanied by challenges in adapting to new technologies and communication norms in digital environments. Also, screen interactions were reported to require more deliberate attention, suggesting a need for heightened cognitive engagement in virtual work contexts.
4. **Redefinition of Work–Life Boundaries:** Participants experienced evolving work–life dynamics, with many reporting improved work–life balance due to reduced commute times and increased flexibility. The hybrid model was perceived to offer a balance between office and remote work benefits.
5. **Emotional and Psychological Aspects of Digital Work:** Virtual interactions were found to have complex psychological impacts, including increased self-awareness on camera, and a sense of safety provided by screen-mediated communication. Privacy concerns in remote settings were also noted.
6. **Emerging Leadership Paradigms in Digital Environments:** Leaders faced challenges in maintaining team cohesion and adapting leadership styles for remote work. Concerns about career progression in remote contexts were also expressed.

Scientifically, our findings present a basis for further research on the future of hybrid work structures and how they can become “places for building relationships, creative forms of collaboration, and strengthening a sense of shared purpose and culture” (Babapour Chafi et al. 2021). At the team level, the findings support Duarte and Snyder (Duarte and Snyder 2006), that virtual teams may experience team stages differently due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and special attention should be given to building trust and ensuring effective communication in virtual environments, as proposed by participants. Particularly, the research provides evidence on behavioral aspects that teams employ to respond to adversity, such as effective communication, coordination, and adaptability, and supports Kozlowski and Ilgen’s (Kozlowski and Ilgen 2006) results that adaptive team behaviors are crucial for maintaining performance in dynamic environments. The emergence of

uncertainties resulting from the rapid advancement of technology as implied by Gorod et al. (Gorod et al. 2018) and Rzevski (Rzevski 2015) were confirmed by our participants as an escalating complexity of the environment, which is linked to digital technology, and thus digital literacy was reported as a core skill. The concept of “rethinking project management” as proposed by Winter et al. (Winter et al. 2006) focuses on adapting to the changing landscape of work, technology, and business needs. Academically, there is limited knowledge regarding the effective implementation of a hybrid workforce strategy that may offer professionals the needed degree of freedom to choose their work location in the post-pandemic era. However, if organizational practices refuse to adapt their HR practices, these research findings align with the literature, which supports that such actions could lead to a significant increase in resignations among employees who are seeking more flexible working models in the modern work environment (Barrero et al. 2021; Serenko 2022). Lastly, the research findings support research by Shockley et al. (Shockley et al. 2021), that virtual meetings can both facilitate and hinder psychological safety. The research findings propose that while hybrid settings can democratize participation by reducing physical cues and hierarchies, they can also lead to communication barriers and misunderstandings due to the lack of non-verbal feedback between virtual and on-site team members. As a result, the importance of selecting appropriate digital tools that support inclusive communication, such as platforms that allow for real-time feedback, and diverse forms of expression (e.g., video, chat, emoji reactions) can enhance psychological safety as per Korzynski and Sender (Sender and Korzynski 2020). These research findings also support Gajendran and Joshi (Gajendran and Joshi 2012), that transparency in decision-making and frequent open communication from leaders are critical in hybrid settings, as virtual meetings specifically can both facilitate and hinder psychological safety (Shockley et al. 2021).

3.5. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The focus on a single Greek consultancy firm limits the generalizability of the findings. Several limitations can affect the validity and reliability of the findings of semi-structured interviews, as they often rely on participants’ memory of events or behaviors, and thus recall bias can occur and participants inaccurately remember or misreport information, which can lead to incorrect data. Also, the responses are inherently subjective and based on the individual’s perceptions, which may not accurately reflect reality. Lastly, the demographics of the group with significantly more women in the sample is a limitation of the findings. It can also be noted that the participant profile of a management consultant can be industry-specific, and the results need to be tested in other industries as well. Future research could expand to a broader range of organizations and cultural contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could help elucidate how the perceptions and experiences of hybrid work evolve over time. Future research could also investigate how different organizational cultures influence the development of teams in hybrid settings. This could reveal sector-specific challenges and best practices. The long-term effects of hybrid work on work–life balance and its relationship to team resilience are still open questions. This could provide insights into sustainable hybrid work practices. Lastly, it would be useful to develop and validate quantitative measures specifically designed to assess team performance in hybrid work environments. This could facilitate more robust comparisons across different teams and organizations.

4. Conclusions

The transformation of workplace communication emerges as a central theme in our qualitative results, encompassing challenges in digital communication, changes in interaction patterns, and the need for work–life boundaries. More specifically, the examination of the perceptions of hybrid work among 25 consultants in a Greek consultancy firm revealed multifaceted implications for employees’ work experiences. The research confirms Goffman’s work (Goffman 1956) on the idea that human interaction is a performative act,

where individuals present themselves in various ways depending on the social context and environment. The research highlights several key insights and findings that contribute to the growing body of literature on hybrid work models, particularly in the context of knowledge-intensive industries such as consulting. Those include:

1. Productivity and efficiency gains are significant benefits of hybrid work, though they can be moderated by individual circumstances such as home office setups.
2. The shift to hybrid work has transformed social and communication dynamics, necessitating new strategies for relationship building and team cohesion.
3. The digital transformation of workplace communication requires intentional focus and adaptation to new tools and norms.
4. Hybrid work models are redefining work–life boundaries, offering improved balance for many employees but also blurring the lines between professional and personal spaces.
5. The psychological and emotional aspects of remote work, including increased self-awareness and privacy concerns, play a crucial role in employees' experiences.
6. Leadership paradigms are evolving to meet the challenges of virtual team management, with implications for career development and progression.

These findings have important implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, they contribute to our understanding of how digital spaces and physical workplaces interact to create new forms of “connected presence” in professional settings. The results also underscore the need for further research into the long-term effects of hybrid work on organizational culture, employee well-being, and career trajectories. From a practical standpoint, our findings suggest that organizations, particularly in the consulting sector, should:

1. Invest in technology infrastructure and training to support effective remote work.
2. Develop strategies to foster virtual team bonding and maintain organizational culture.
3. Provide guidance on maintaining work–life balance in hybrid settings.
4. Adapt leadership and management practices to address the unique challenges of hybrid work environments.
5. Consider the psychological impacts of increased screen time and develop support mechanisms accordingly.

In conclusion, as hybrid work models become increasingly prevalent, understanding their nuanced impacts on employees and organizations is crucial. This paper identified specific qualities that make the digital space, on the one hand, suitable for the embodied presence, and on the other hand, make presence a context in which sociality can develop and work can be performed. This study contributes to this understanding, offering a foundation for future research and practical guidelines for implementing effective hybrid work strategies in knowledge-intensive industries.

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