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Fostering alignment in the hybrid workplace: bridging the gap between employee experience and expectations

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Abstract: This research examines the congruence of employee experiences with expectations in hybrid work environments. Grounded in the social exchange theory, reciprocal exchanges between employees and employers are proposed to be influenced by communication, organisational culture, and technological infrastructure. A qualitative methodology was utilised, encompassing 22 semi-structured interviews with participants from various sectors in Thailand, including the healthcare, retail, and telecommunications sectors. Through thematic analysis, salient factors impacting this congruence were discerned, specifically transparent communication, technological infrastructure, organisational culture, and work-life equilibrium. Furthermore, adaptive management strategies such as flexible work policies and supportive leadership were determined to significantly augment employee experience and organisational allegiance. The findings of this research furnish pragmatic insights for policymakers, human resource practitioners, and organisational leaders regarding the cultivation of resilient, inclusive, and high-performing hybrid work environments.

Keywords: hybrid work; employee experience; employee expectations; social exchange theory; leadership support; work-life balance; WLB.

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1 Introduction

The hybrid workplace has become a prominent model in the post-COVID-19 era as it reshapes the ways organisations operate and manage their workforce. A common organisational response to the pandemic was the adoption of hybrid work arrangements and the integration of digital tools into operations, alongside support from different levels of employees in the organisation. Like most policies, hybrid work presents both benefits and challenges to employees and management.

If managed effectively, the hybrid approach would give workers greater control over their personal and professional lives (Aleem et al., 2023), thus increasing work-life balance (WLB) and satisfaction. Similarly, this approach offers employees flexibility and autonomy of managing their work, while allowing organisations to maintain operational continuity and resilience (Vyas, 2022).

On the other hand, the hybrid work model has also been found to pose significant challenges to supervisors, managers and employees. Some of these challenges were the result of the discrepancies between what they expected from their employers and what they actually experienced (Emmett et al., 2021; Kane et al., 2021). For instance, employees were found to face difficulties in mentally disconnecting from work-related issues outside of regular work hours, thus causing an overlap between their professional and personal spaces (Teng-Calleja et al., 2024). Deteriorations in relations between employees and supervisors were also found due to the less frequent physical contact at the workplace (Emmett et al., 2021).

To gain a deeper understanding of employee expectations and experiences in hybrid settings, this study aims to explore how communication, organisational culture, and technological support influence the alignment of employee expectations with their experiences.

In the next sections, we go through a literature review on the roles of communication, organisational culture, and technological infrastructure in effective hybrid work approach. Next, we identify the current gap in literature and state the research questions (RQs) of this study. We then explain the methodology and approach used. Finally, we discuss the findings of this study.

2 Literature review

The social exchange theory explains the importance of positive social interactions, such as support and clear communication from supervisors and managers, on employee perceptions (Blau, 1968; Chhabra, 2022). According to the theory, workplace relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges between employees and their organisations, where positive interactions foster trust, commitment, and engagement

(Blau, 1968; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). In hybrid work environments, the quality of these exchanges becomes increasingly significant as employees navigate through the complexities of flexible work arrangements (FWAs).

As a result, the three variables used to frame this study include communication, organisational culture and technological support.

2.1 The role of communication

Hybrid work environments have reshaped employees' perceptions in terms of their expectations from people in the organisation (Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022). These expectations are influenced by effective communication within the organisation in several ways. First, in organisations where communication is clear and consistent, employees are able to form realistic expectations. Effective communication creates transparency and clarity during organisational changes which is crucial in maintaining the trust of employees in their managers (Sull et al., 2020). Conversely, the feeling of trust from managers and among co-workers fosters an environment where employees feel valued and understood (Krosgaard et al., 2002; Plaskoff, 2017).

Second, when employees perceive clear communication from the supervisory and managerial levels, they experience high levels of support, and they are more likely to reciprocate with increased loyalty, higher performance, and proactive behaviours (Plaskoff, 2017). On the contrary, an absence of assistance or ambiguous anticipations can result in sentiments of disconnection and incongruence (Krosgaard et al., 2002; Ahmed et al., 2015; Riggle et al., 2009), resulting in a negative impact on employee experience.

2.2 The role of organisational culture

Organisational culture significantly impacts how employees experience hybrid work. A supportive culture that values flexibility and inclusivity can bridge the gap between employee expectations and experiences (Aleem et al., 2023). For example, employees in organisations that prioritise a positive work environment have been found to have higher levels of organisational commitment and lower turnover rates (Vyas, 2022).

In addition, research suggests that inclusive organisational practices, such as recognition programs and collaborative tools, play a pivotal role in establishing a culture of trust and engagement among employees (Gartner, 2023; Meluso et al., 2022). These practices help employees to feel recognised and supported, fostering a sense of worth and belonging (Newman and Ford, 2021).

2.3 The role of technological support

Technological support is a cornerstone of successful hybrid work environments as it provides the tools necessary for effective communication, collaboration, and productivity across diverse work locations (Kane et al., 2021). This area of support includes investments in reliable and user-friendly digital platforms which have been found to reduce the stress associated with remote work challenges (Sull et al., 2020). Studies have found that access to technological resources and training not only supports employees in their day-to-day tasks, but they also contribute to their sense of competency and job

satisfaction (Ghosh and Itam, 2020). By aligning technological support with employees' needs, organisations can better meet the expectations of a modern workforce (Aleem et al., 2023), particularly the increasing preference for FWAs.

FWAs are an effective response to the evolving needs of employees who seek greater control over their work schedules and locations. These policies – which encompass a variety of options such as remote work, flexible hours, and hybrid models – provide employees with the ability to balance their personal and professional lives (Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022).

Recent research show that organisations with well-structured FWAs report significant improvements in employee engagement and retention rates. Gallup (2022) found that employees with access to flexible work options were 35% more engaged and 20% less likely to leave their organisations compared to those with limited or no flexibility. This aligns with findings suggesting a direct correlation between perceived organisational support for FWAs and reduced turnover intentions (Chen and Fulmer, 2018).

Despite the advantages, the adverse outcomes of misalignment between FWAs and employee expectations should be considered. Organisations that fail to meet employee expectations in hybrid work settings have been found to experience a turnover rate that was 30% higher than those that effectively manage these expectations (Gartner, 2023). This evidence highlights the financial and operational impact of aligning employee experiences with organisational practices. By aligning flexible work policies with robust technological support, organisations can better meet employee needs, enhancing both work performance and overall well-being.

2.4 *Literature gap and RQs*

Despite existing empirical studies on hybrid workplace, a gap still exists in understanding the expectations and experiences of employees within a specific cultural context (Vyas, 2022). With a focus on the Thailand context, this study seeks to explore the experiences of employees whose organisations have implemented the hybrid work approach. These experiences are then compared to the expectations they had before the transition towards hybrid arrangements.

After identifying the variables in hybrid workplaces and the gap in literature, the following RQs were developed:

Main RQ How can organisations in a hybrid workplace foster alignment between employee experiences and expectations?

To address this overarching query, the study formulates three sub-RQs:

- 1 Sub-RQ1: “What are the defining characteristics of employee experiences in a hybrid workplace?” This question seeks to explore the specific aspects of day-to-day experiences that shape how employees interact with and perceive their work environment.
- 2 Sub-RQ2: “What are the specific expectations employees have for a hybrid workplace setting?” This question delves into the anticipatory desires and standards employees hold, providing insight into what they value in their hybrid work experiences.

- 3 Sub-RQ3: “What are the identified gaps between current employee experiences and their expectations in a hybrid workplace, and how do these gaps impact organisational alignment?” This question aims to identify and understand discrepancies that affect how aligned employees feel about their organisation’s practices.

Addressing these questions through a focused qualitative analysis would provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities of hybrid work environments, ultimately contributing to the academic discourse and offering practical recommendations for organisations striving to improve the alignment between employee experiences and expectations.

3 Methodology and approach

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how organisations can align employee experiences with expectations in hybrid workplaces. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of employees working in diverse hybrid work settings which are not easily captured through quantitative methods.

3.2 Participants and sampling

A total of 22 participants were recruited for this study using purposive sampling (Patton, 2014). Although the sample size of 22 participants may seem small, it was suitable for qualitative research as the objective of this study was exploratory. This number of participants was sufficient to reach data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerged from additional data collection (Guest et al., 2006). Consequently, this supports the robustness of the findings and the representativeness of the themes that were identified.

Participants were drawn from various industries, including healthcare, retail, telecommunications, and consulting, to capture a broad spectrum of hybrid work experiences. The term ‘wide range’ is used in the context of qualitative research to describe the diversity of perspectives rather than a statistically representative sample (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). Each participant was required to have at least six months of experience within their current organisation to ensure that their insights were grounded in a stable and relevant context. This qualifying criterion was crucial in capturing the experiences of employees who had sufficient exposure to their company’s hybrid work practices, ensuring consistency and depth in the data collected (Miles et al., 2018).

3.3 Data collection

Due to geographical limitations and pandemic measures during the COVID-19 period, online semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility in the conversation, enabling participants to share their experiences in detail while the interviewer guided the discussion to ensure all relevant topics were covered (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach is particularly valuable in

exploring complex topics as it provides participants the space to reflect on their personal experiences and express nuanced views that may be overlooked in structured surveys.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews focused on themes such as the nature of hybrid work, communication with supervisors, organisational support, and the challenges of managing WLB. Participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences and expectations.

Additionally, an online survey was used to collect basic demographic information and context about participants' work arrangements, including their job role, industry, and specific hybrid work practices. This survey was not the primary data source but rather supplemented the interview data by providing a structured overview of the participant characteristics. The survey data helped contextualise the qualitative findings and ensured that the sample included a diverse range of participants relevant to the study's objectives. The details of participant demographics (Table 1) are summarised.

Table 1 Demographic information of participants

<i>No.</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Year of experiences</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Job level</i>	<i>Position</i>
1	F	36–40	Married	10 years	Retails	Senior manager	Head of region sales
2	F	51–55	Single	10 years	Healthcare and hospitality	Specialist	Executive secretary
3	F	46–50	Married	3–5 years	Healthcare and hospitality	Senior manager	Head of human resources
4	F	51–55	Married	5–7 years	Retails	Senior manager	Head of people development
5	F	36–40	Single	5–7 years	Consulting firm	Specialist	Sustainability consultant
6	F	30–35	Married	More than 10 years	State enterprise	Specialist	Data analyst specialist
7	F	36–40	Married	1–3 years	Real estate	Manager	Head of business sustainability
8	M	41–45	Single	More than 10 years	Consulting firm	Specialist	Graphic design
9	F	41–45	Single	More than 10 years	Consulting firm	Specialist	Executive secretary
10	F	36–40	Single	More than 10 years	Hospitality	Manager	Accounting manager
11	F	36–40	Single	More than 10 years	Hospitality	Specialist	Secretary
12	M	30–35	Single	3–5 years	Hospitality	Manager	Finance manager
13	F	51–55	Single	More than 10 years	Telecommunication	Specialist	Administrative and HR supports
14	F	30–35	Single	3–5 years	Retails	Manager	Business development manager

Table 1 Demographic information of participants (continued)

<i>No.</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Year of experiences</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Job level</i>	<i>Position</i>
15	F	46–50	Single	5–7 years	Retails	Senior manager	Head of finance
16	M	46–50	Married	More than 10 years	Hospitality	Manager	Sales manager
17	F	46–50	Married	3–5 years	Hospitality	Senior manager	General manager
18	F	41–45	Married	5–7 years	Telecommunication	Manager	Human resource manager
19	M	51–55	Single	More than 10 years	Telecommunication	Specialist	Internal communication
20	F	36–40	Single	3–5 years	Energy	Senior Manager	Head of business sustainability
21	F	36–40	Married	5–7 years	Retails	Senior manager	Head of sales
22	F	36–40	Single	5–7 years	Hospitality	Specialist	Business development

3.4 Sampling technique

The study employed purposive sampling by selecting participants who have specific knowledge and experience with hybrid working (Patton, 2014). This method allowed for deliberate inclusion of individuals who could provide rich, detailed insights into hybrid work environments.

To further enhance the diversity of the sample, selective elements were incorporated within the purposive framework. This mixed approach involved identifying participants from varied industries, such as healthcare, retail, telecommunications, and consulting. In addition, participants were from different job roles and levels of responsibility. By blending purposive and selective sampling, the study captured a comprehensive range of perspectives on hybrid work, addressing key variables like organisational culture, job function, and the nature of hybrid work practices (Palinkas et al., 2015). Furthermore, the selection criteria also required participants to have at least six months of experience within their current company. This requirement ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to their organisational context, enabling them to provide informed reflections on their hybrid work experiences.

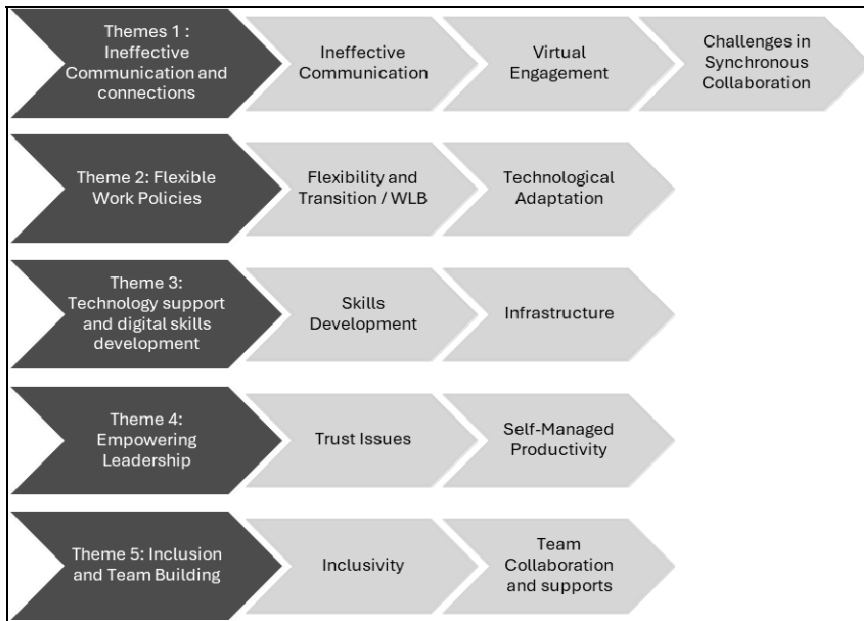
3.5 Data analysis

The data analysis employed thematic analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Byrne, 2022). The process began with familiarisation, where researchers immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts. This step was crucial for

understanding the depth of the participants' responses and setting the foundation for subsequent coding.

Table 2 Example of data structure

<i>Raw data</i>	<i>Empirical theme</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Concept</i>
Participant #4: "I often feel left out of important updates. The communication is either too slow or missing entirely, which makes it hard to keep up with what's expected of me."	Communication and collaboration Sub-theme: • Effective communication • Virtual engagement • Challenges in synchronous collaboration	20 out of 22 participants emphasised the importance of clear communication	Ineffective communication and connections
Participant #10: "Flexibility is great, but the transition felt chaotic. We weren't given much guidance on how to manage our time or balance our workload."	Adaptation to hybrid work	18 out of 22 participants appreciated flexible work policies	Flexible work policies
Participant # 16: "The tech we use has made it easier to work flexibly, but it's only helpful if you know how to use it. Training was inconsistent, and that added stress."	Sub-theme: • Flexibility and transition • Technological adaptation		
Participant #12: "We were given new tools to use, but there was little training on how to use them effectively. It was a lot of trial and error."	Technological adaptation and learning	17 out of 22 participants discussed the need for technology and infrastructure support	Technology support and digital skills development
Participant #6: "The tech failures are constant – it's hard to stay productive when you're constantly troubleshooting."	Sub-theme: • Digital skill development • Infrastructure		
Participant #2: "Being trusted to handle my tasks without micromanagement gives me confidence and motivates me to do my best."	Productivity and trust Sub-themes: • Trust issues • Self-managed productivity	15 out of 22 participants valued empowering leadership	Empowering leadership
Participant #5: "I feel more motivated when I know my voice is heard, and my input is valued, especially in virtual meetings where it's easy to feel overlooked."	Organisational culture and support Sub-theme: • Inclusivity • Collaboration and support	12 out of 22 participants highlighted inclusion and team building as essential	Inclusion and team building

Figure 1 Themes and sub-themes

Initial coding was conducted manually on a line-by-line basis to capture significant statements and insights related to the study's main themes, such as employee experiences, organisational support, and WLB. This coding approach ensured that the data were thoroughly examined and that the emerging codes were closely aligned with the RQs. Codes were then organised into broader themes that represented recurring patterns, such as 'trust and support', 'technological adaptation', and 'alignment of expectations'. These themes were critically evaluated and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and contributed meaningfully to the study's objectives.

To validate the findings, participant quotes were used as supporting evidence, and each quote was distinguished by unique participant codes (e.g., 1, 2, SS) to maintain credibility and transparency (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Williams and Moser, 2019). The use of direct quotes helped illustrate the themes and provided a rich, narrative account of participants' lived experiences (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018).

The rigor of the analysis was further enhanced through a dual-coding process, where two researchers independently coded the transcripts. Inter-coder reliability was strengthened through regular discussions to reconcile any differences in coding interpretations, which minimised researcher bias and added depth to the analysis (Saldana, 2018). This collaborative approach ensured that multiple perspectives were considered, bolstering the credibility of the thematic findings.

An iterative approach was employed to refine the themes. This involved repeated reviews and adjustments to ensure that the themes accurately captured the essence of the data. This iterative process led to the development of a thematic map, visually representing how the themes interconnected within the broader context of hybrid work. The analysis concluded with a detailed write-up of each theme, integrating illustrative quotes from participants to substantiate the findings and offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of hybrid work environments (Nowell et al., 2017).

The thematic analysis provided a comprehensive exploration of participants' perceptions, identifying subthemes that further elaborated on the main themes. The findings highlighted the gap between employee experiences and expectations in hybrid work settings, offering actionable recommendations for organisations in Thailand. These insights support the development of targeted interventions aimed at aligning employee experiences with organisational practices, addressing the core RQ of the study. The analysis identified five themes and 11 sub-themes that are illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 1.

4 Findings and discussion

This section integrates the analysis of qualitative data with existing literature to address the main RQ: "How can organisations in a hybrid workplace foster alignment between employee experiences and expectations?" The findings are structured around key themes that emerged from the data: communication and connection, flexible work policies, technological support, empowering leadership, and inclusion. These themes reveal how effective organisational practices can bridge the gap between employee experiences and expectations, offering insights into enhancing hybrid work environments.

4.1 *Theme 1: ineffective communication and connection*

This theme addresses sub-RQ1 by identifying ineffective communication as a defining characteristic of employee experiences in hybrid workplaces. Participants frequently reported that gaps in communication, such as delayed responses and unclear directives, hindered their ability to perform effectively and stay connected. One participant noted, "I often feel left out of important updates. The communication is either too slow or missing entirely, which makes it hard to keep up with what's expected of me" (participant 4). This aligns with social exchange theory, which underscores the importance of communication in building trust and maintaining reciprocal relationships in the workplace (Blau, 1968; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Ineffective communication diminishes trust, leading to disengagement and reduced organisational commitment.

4.1.1 *Virtual engagement and synchronous collaboration challenges*

Participants highlighted that virtual engagement often lacked depth, making it difficult to build strong connections. "Virtual meetings feel like a checkbox exercise – there's no real engagement, and it's hard to connect with my team like we used to" (participant 11). This issue mirrors findings in the literature, where virtual engagement is often described as superficial, negatively impacting employee morale and team cohesion (Newman and Ford, 2021). Quantitative studies support these insights, showing that employees in organisations with poor virtual engagement report 25% lower job satisfaction and 20% higher turnover intentions (Gallup, 2022).

Challenges in synchronous collaboration, such as coordinating across different time zones and technology issues, further exacerbate these disconnections. "We struggle to find meeting times that work for everyone, and it often feels like some voices are missing because of tech issues or timing conflicts" (participant 8). This reflects broader challenges noted in the literature, where asynchronous communication gaps and

technological barriers contribute to reduced effectiveness and engagement in hybrid teams (Kane et al., 2021).

The combined findings emphasise that ineffective communication, virtual engagement, and collaboration barriers create significant misalignments between employee experiences and expectations. To address these issues, organisations must enhance their communication strategies, invest in engaging virtual platforms, and develop structured approaches to synchronous collaboration. Literature reinforces that improvements in these areas can lead to higher trust, better engagement, and stronger alignment between organisational goals and employee needs (Sull et al., 2020; Ghosh and Itam, 2020). For instance, companies that actively enhance communication and engagement practices report up to 30% higher employee retention rates, highlighting the tangible benefits of addressing these challenges (Gartner, 2023).

4.2 Theme 2: flexible work policies

This theme addresses sub-RQ2 by exploring employee expectations around FWAs and the impact of these policies on their experiences in hybrid workplaces. Participants highlighted that FWAs, including remote work and adjustable schedules, were crucial for meeting their personal and professional needs. However, the effectiveness of these arrangements often depended on how well organisations managed the transition and provided necessary support.

4.2.1 Flexibility and transition

Participants valued the ability to work flexibly but noted that the transition to hybrid work required clear guidance and support from their organisations. One participant shared, “Flexibility is great, but the transition felt chaotic. We weren’t given much guidance on how to manage our time or balance our workload” (participant 10). This reflects findings in the literature, where poorly managed transitions to flexible work can lead to confusion and inefficiencies (Chen and Fulmer, 2018; Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022). The lack of structured support during the transition often undermined the benefits of flexible work, highlighting a critical area for organisational improvement.

4.2.2 Work-life balance

WLB was a major concern for participants, who reported that FWAs, while beneficial, sometimes blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. One participant noted, “I appreciate being able to work from home, but it often feels like I’m always working. There’s no clear separation anymore” (participant 5). This aligns with literature suggesting that while FWAs can enhance WLB, they can also lead to burnout if not properly managed (Chen and Fulmer, 2018; Vyas, 2022). The need for clear boundaries and organisational support in managing WLB was consistently highlighted as a key expectation.

4.2.3 Technological adaptation

The ability to adapt technologically was also crucial to the effectiveness of flexible work policies. Participants emphasised the importance of having access to the right technology

and the necessary training to use it effectively. One participant stated, “The tech we use has made it easier to work flexibly, but it’s only helpful if you know how to use it. Training was inconsistent, and that added stress” (participant 16). This finding supports existing research, which underscores that technological adaptation is vital for supporting flexible work models (Kane et al., 2021). Without adequate technological infrastructure and training, the advantages of FWAs are significantly diminished.

The findings demonstrate that while flexible work policies are highly valued by employees, their success depends on structured support, clear communication, and effective technological adaptation. These insights directly address the main RQ by highlighting how FWAs must be thoughtfully implemented to align with employee expectations. Literature confirms that organisations with well-managed FWAs see higher job satisfaction and retention, as these policies help employees feel supported and empowered in their work (Ghosh and Itam, 2020). To foster alignment, organisations need to prioritise clear guidance during transitions, enforce boundaries to protect WLB, and invest in technological adaptation and training, aligned with study of Emmett et al. (2021).

4.3 Theme 3: technological support and digital skills development

This theme addresses sub-RQ3 by examining how technological support and digital skills development impact employee experiences in hybrid workplaces. Participants frequently cited the importance of access to reliable technology and ongoing skills development as critical factors for maintaining productivity and engagement in a hybrid work environment.

4.3.1 Skills development

Participants expressed that having the necessary skills to use technology effectively was essential for adapting to hybrid work. However, many highlighted inconsistencies in the availability and quality of digital skills training provided by their organisations. One participant noted, “We were given new tools to use, but there was little training on how to use them effectively. It was a lot of trial and error” (participant 12). This finding aligns with literature emphasising the need for continuous skills development to keep employees competent and confident in their roles (Kane et al., 2021). Without structured training, employees often feel unprepared, which can lead to frustration and decreased job satisfaction.

4.3.2 Infrastructure

The quality of technological infrastructure emerged as a critical concern, with participants reporting that outdated or unreliable technology disrupted their workflow and increased daily stress. One participant explained, “The tech failures are constant – it’s hard to stay productive when you’re constantly troubleshooting” (participant 6). This sentiment is echoed in the literature, which identifies inadequate infrastructure as a significant barrier to effective hybrid work (Ghosh and Itam, 2020). Despite this, studies such as Kane et al. (2021) often overlook the importance of updating workplace technology to meet the needs of a geographically dispersed workforce post-pandemic.

Participants emphasised the necessity for organisations to keep pace with technological advancements to support evolving work models. As one participant noted, “The world is progressing, and our technology needs to keep up. Without modern tech, it feels like we’re falling behind” (participant 13). This observation underscores the vital role of continuous technological upgrades and support in enabling successful hybrid work arrangements. The findings urge organisations to prioritise integrating modern technology into their workplace environments, which is crucial for effective collaboration and maintaining competitiveness in an increasingly digital landscape. Reliable technology is not just a convenience; it is a necessity that underpins the entire hybrid work model. The lack of robust infrastructure often left employees feeling unsupported, impacting their overall work experience.

The findings highlight that for hybrid work to be successful and align with employee expectations, organisations must prioritise both technological infrastructure and digital skills development. The need for reliable technology and consistent training directly addresses sub-RQ3 by highlighting specific gaps between employee needs and organisational practices. Literature supports that investing in these areas leads to higher productivity, better engagement, and greater alignment between employee experiences and expectations (Gartner, 2023; Kane et al., 2021). For organisations to foster alignment, a commitment to providing up-to-date technology and equipping employees with the necessary skills is essential.

4.4 Theme 4: empowering leadership

This theme addresses sub-RQ3 by exploring how empowering leadership practices influence employee experiences in hybrid work environments. Participants consistently highlighted the value of leaders who demonstrated trust, allowed autonomy, and supported self-managed productivity, linking these traits to enhanced motivation and job satisfaction. Empowering leadership emerged as a crucial factor in fostering a positive and productive hybrid work environment.

4.4.1 Trust and autonomy

Participants emphasised that leaders who trusted them to manage their own work fostered a more motivating and supportive atmosphere. One participant stated, “Being trusted to handle my tasks without micromanagement gives me confidence and motivates me to do my best” (participant 2). This observation aligns with social exchange theory, which suggests that trust in leadership enhances reciprocal relationships, promoting employee commitment and engagement (Blau, 1968). The literature further supports that trust and autonomy are particularly valuable in hybrid settings, where employees often work independently and need the freedom to make decisions about how to manage their time (Heinonen, 2023; Vyas, 2022).

4.4.2 Self-managed productivity

The ability to self-manage productivity was another key aspect valued by participants, who appreciated the autonomy to set their own schedules and prioritise tasks. One participant explained, “I feel more productive when I can plan my day according to what works best for me, rather than following a rigid schedule set by someone else”

(participant 7). This reflects findings in the literature that identify self-management as a critical component of effective hybrid work, as it empowers employees to tailor their work approach to maximise efficiency (Kane et al., 2021). Participants noted that leaders who supported self-management without constant oversight enabled them to achieve better work outcomes and maintain higher levels of job satisfaction.

However, the need for balance was also emphasised. Participants expressed that while autonomy was empowering, occasional guidance and feedback from leaders were crucial to keep them aligned with organisational goals. “I appreciate the freedom, but it’s also important to have regular check-ins to ensure I’m on track and meeting expectations”, said participant 10. This perspective underscores the literature’s emphasis on the need for a balanced leadership approach that combines autonomy with structured support (Sull et al., 2020).

The findings demonstrate that empowering leadership, characterised by trust, autonomy, and support for self-managed productivity, plays a vital role in aligning employee experiences with organisational expectations in hybrid work settings. Leaders who foster trust and enable employees to manage their productivity independently contribute significantly to a positive work environment. Literature confirms that such leadership practices enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and alignment with organisational goals, directly addressing the main RQ (Heinonen, 2023). For organisations to foster alignment, it is essential to cultivate leadership styles that emphasise trust, empower employees, and provide the right balance of autonomy and guidance.

4.5 Theme 5: inclusion and team building

This theme addresses sub-RQ1 by examining how inclusion and team-building practices shape employee experiences in hybrid work environments. Participants emphasised that feeling included and having opportunities for team collaboration were critical to their sense of belonging and organisational commitment. However, achieving effective inclusion and collaboration in hybrid settings presented distinct challenges that needed to be managed actively.

4.5.1 Inclusivity and team collaboration

Participants reported that inclusivity was vital for fostering a sense of connection and engagement, even when working remotely. One participant noted, “I feel more motivated when I know my voice is heard, and my input is valued, especially in virtual meetings where it’s easy to feel overlooked” (participant 5). This observation aligns with the literature, which highlights that inclusive practices in hybrid work settings are key to maintaining employee morale and engagement (Aleem et al., 2023). Virtual platforms often make it difficult to replicate the spontaneous interactions that occur in physical offices, which can lead to feelings of exclusion and isolation if not carefully managed.

Team collaboration also posed challenges, as participants often felt that hybrid setups created barriers to effective teamwork. “Collaborating virtually is not the same as being in a room together; sometimes, it feels like we’re not on the same page”, explained participant 8. This reflects findings in the literature that suggest team dynamics can suffer when interactions are primarily digital, leading to decreased cohesion and productivity (Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022). Effective collaboration requires intentional

efforts to create inclusive environments where every team member feels connected and valued, regardless of their work location.

4.5.2 Team collaboration and support

Support from colleagues and leaders were identified as a critical factor in enhancing team dynamics and overall inclusivity. Participants valued support structures, such as regular check-ins, team-building activities, and open communication channels, which helped maintain a sense of team unity. “Knowing that my team is there for me, even if we’re working apart, makes a huge difference. It’s the little things – like virtual coffee breaks or just checking in – that keep us connected”, said participant 9. This aligns with research indicating that structured support and deliberate team-building efforts are crucial in hybrid environments to foster collaboration and a sense of community (Meluso et al., 2022).

The need for organisational support extended beyond team interactions, as participants also sought resources that facilitated inclusive practices. “Inclusivity isn’t just about being in meetings; it’s about feeling like you’re part of the bigger picture, and that requires active support from the organisation”, noted participant 11. Literature supports that creating inclusive work cultures requires sustained organisational commitment to supporting all employees, particularly in hybrid settings where isolation is more prevalent (Sull et al., 2020).

The findings underscore that inclusivity and team-building are essential for aligning employee experiences with organisational expectations in hybrid work settings. Organisations that actively promote inclusive practices and support team collaboration help bridge the gap between remote work challenges and employee needs. The literature confirms that fostering inclusivity and providing structured support leads to higher engagement, better teamwork, and greater alignment between employee experiences and organisational goals (Aleem et al., 2023; Panneerselvam and Balaraman, 2022). To foster alignment, organisations must prioritise inclusive strategies and support systems that keep employees connected, motivated, and fully integrated into the team dynamic.

5 Conclusions

This study explored how organisations can align employee experiences with expectations in hybrid workplaces, addressing key areas such as communication and connection, flexible work policies, technological support and digital skills development, empowering leadership, and inclusion. The findings highlight the concept that achieving alignment in hybrid environments requires deliberate strategies that address specific challenges faced by employees.

The findings for sub-RQ1 highlight that communication gaps and inconsistent virtual engagement often lead to employee frustration and disengagement. To address this, clear communication strategies that promote transparency and regular updates are essential for maintaining trust and connection in hybrid settings.

Sub-RQ2 revealed that while employees appreciate FWAs, they require structured support and clear boundaries to avoid the risks of overwork and blurred WLB. Flexibility without structure can lead to burnout, making it essential for organisations to offer well-defined guidelines and support systems for managing remote work.

For sub-RQ3, the study identified technological support, digital skills development, and empowering leadership as critical to hybrid work success. Reliable technology, continuous training, and leadership practices that foster trust and autonomy directly influence employee satisfaction, productivity, and alignment with organisational goals.

6 Originality, contribution, and implications for practice

This study offers significant contributions to both theory and practice, enhancing the understanding of how organisations can align employee experiences with expectations in hybrid workplaces. The research expands the application of social exchange theory within hybrid work contexts, highlighting that trust, effective communication, and empowering leadership are essential for fostering reciprocal relationships between employees and organisations. By focusing on relational dynamics, the study deepens theoretical insights into how these factors drive engagement, satisfaction, and alignment in non-traditional work settings.

The study's originality lies in its highlighted examination of FWAs, technological support, and leadership practices within hybrid environments. The previous studies often emphasise the benefits of flexibility, this research identifies specific challenges such as blurred work-life boundaries and inadequate technological adaptation, emphasising the need for structured support and clear guidelines. These findings contribute to the broader literature on hybrid work by offering a balanced view of both the opportunities and complexities associated with flexible work models.

Practically, the findings provide actionable recommendations for organisations. Enhancing communication strategies to ensure transparency and engagement is critical for maintaining connection and trust in hybrid settings. Organisations should develop clear, consistent communication protocols that include regular updates, feedback mechanisms, and inclusive engagement practices to keep employees informed and valued. Investing in up-to-date technology and continuous skills development is equally important, as reliable infrastructure and training directly influence productivity and job satisfaction. Moreover, structured support for FWAs, including clear boundaries and defined expectations, helps employees manage their responsibilities effectively while maintaining a healthy WLB.

Empowering leadership styles that emphasise trust, autonomy, and guidance are essential for aligning organisational goals with employee experiences. Leaders who empower their teams by providing autonomy and supportive feedback foster higher motivation, engagement, and alignment with organisational objectives. Finally, promoting inclusivity and fostering team collaboration through deliberate team-building activities can strengthen employee connections and enhance overall organisational cohesion. By implementing these strategies, organisations can create a resilient and supportive hybrid work environment that meets the evolving needs of their workforce, enhancing both employee satisfaction and organisational performance.

7 Limitations and future research

This research comes with several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it primarily draws on qualitative data collected from specific industries and regions, which

may limit the broader applicability of the results. While the sample is diverse within its scope, it may not capture the full range of employee experiences across various industries or cultural contexts. Additionally, relying on self-reported data from interviews poses risks of bias, such as participants providing socially desirable responses or inaccuracies due to memory recall, potentially impacting the reliability of the findings.

Another limitation is the study's focus on immediate perceptions of hybrid work without considering long-term outcomes. The findings provide a snapshot of current experiences but do not capture how these dynamics might evolve over time. Lastly, this research did not extensively explore demographic factors such as age, gender, or job roles, which may influence how individuals experience hybrid work differently.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by expanding the scope to include a broader range of industries and conducting cross-cultural comparisons to explore variations in hybrid work experiences. Employing mixed methods, including quantitative surveys or observational data, could help validate the qualitative findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of employee experiences.

Longitudinal studies are recommended to examine the long-term impact of hybrid work on productivity, engagement, and well-being, offering valuable insights into the sustainability of these work models. Additionally, future research should investigate demographic variables to understand how different groups uniquely interact with hybrid work environments.

Exploring the broader societal implications of hybrid work, such as its impact on community engagement and the digital divide, would also provide a more holistic perspective. Understanding these broader effects can inform strategies that optimise hybrid work not only for organisations but also for society.

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