

Informal communication in hybrid working life: a blind spot in internal communication

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Corporate
Communications:
An International
Journal

Received 13 March 2026
Revised 26 June 2026
13 July 2026
Accepted 21 July 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This article advances understanding of internal communication in hybrid organizations by examining how informal communication practices are reconfigured across digital and physical contexts. It addresses two research questions: (1) how managers and coworkers experience informal communication in hybrid settings and changes in its conditions and (2) what new forms of informal communication emerge.

Design/methodology/approach – The study draws on qualitative data from three public organizations, based on eight group interviews with 26 lower-level managers and seven group interviews with 21 coworkers, conducted as part of a broader three-year project on leadership, coworker-ship and communication in hybrid work.

Findings – The study shows that although informal communication is clearly challenged, it does not disappear. Rather, it is transformed, with new forms of digital informal communication emerging. New digital practices emerge as managers and coworkers actively experiment with ways of maintaining interaction. Chat groups, for example, often function as substitutes for hallway conversations. While peer-to-peer communication is relatively easy to sustain digitally, it is more difficult across hierarchical levels and organizational units. Reduced physical co-presence is partly compensated for by deliberately scheduling informal interactions, further blurring boundaries between formal and informal communication.

Practical implications – As chat-based interactions increasingly replace face-to-face encounters, shared norms are crucial for preventing overload and maintaining effectiveness. At the same time, low-threshold interactions, such as brief messages, emojis and quick check-ins, should be supported, as they foster relational cohesion and facilitate collaboration.

Originality/value – The study shows how hybrid, digitally mediated work reshapes the temporal, spatial and relational foundations of informal communication.

Keywords Informal communication, Leadership communication, Hybrid work, Digital internal communication

Paper type Research article

Informal communication remains persistently overlooked in organizational research, despite being fundamental to everyday work processes (Methot *et al.*, 2026). Historically, it has often been regarded as marginal or of limited organizational value, sometimes dismissed as mere “watercooler talk” (Dirsmith and Covaleski, 1985). However, this view is increasingly being challenged, as a growing body of research highlights its significance in organizational functioning (Phan, 2025; Singh and Denner, 2025; Methot *et al.*, 2026). Informal communication occurs through everyday interactions such as hallway conversations, brief exchanges across desks, shared breaks and spontaneous encounters in common spaces. Typically, informal communication is unplanned and unstructured (Mandhana and Ballard, 2024) and plays a critical role in knowledge sharing, relationship building, coordination and socialization within organizations (Singh and Denner, 2025).

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Funding: The empirical material analyzed in this study was collected as part of a research project funded by the following Swedish organizations: Malmö City, Lund Municipality, Skellefteå Municipality, Svenska Kraftnät, the Swedish Tax Agency and the Swedish Transport Administration.



Corporate Communications: An
International Journal
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-6046
p-ISSN: 1356-3289
DOI 10.1108/CCIJ-03-2026-0102

In the post-pandemic era, the hybrid work model has emerged as the dominant paradigm (Bal and Izak, 2021; Prasoppokakorn and Prasittisopin, 2026). International surveys indicate that more than half of employees operate within hybrid arrangements, while fewer than one-third work exclusively from the office (Future Forum Pulse, 2022). Such arrangements allow employees to divide their time between remote work and on-site activities. This shift has fundamentally reshaped internal communication. In particular, the conditions for informal communication have changed significantly, raising concerns about its sustainability in digitally mediated environments (Begemann *et al.*, 2024). Scholars note that informal interactions are often more difficult to reproduce in virtual settings than in physical workplaces (Mandhana and Ballard, 2024). As a result, understanding how informal communication emerges, is sustained, or potentially dissolves in digital contexts is critical for both research and practice.

Despite growing interest in hybrid and digital work, several conceptual blind spots remain (Hoffjann, 2023). Informal communication is often treated as a by-product of work, with the implicit assumption that digital platforms can substitute for physical proximity (Tkalac Verčič and Verčič, 2025). Such assumptions overlook how digital environments reshape interaction patterns, influence relational dynamics and enable or constrain different forms of communication. Moreover, discussions of flexible work tend to emphasize efficiency and autonomy, while paying less attention to the relational processes that sustain coworkership (Kotera and Vione, 2020). Informal communication plays a crucial role in fostering belonging, trust and shared understanding – processes that cannot be taken for granted in geographically dispersed and digitally mediated work settings. Nevertheless, dominant models often rely on pre-digital assumptions about organizational interaction.

In this article, we aim to advance understanding of internal communication in hybrid organizations by focusing on how informal communication practices are reconfigured across digital and physical contexts. To this end, the article addresses the following two research questions: (1) How do managers and coworkers experience informal communication in hybrid work settings, and how do they experience changes in the conditions that shape such communication? (2) What new forms of informal communication practices emerge in hybrid and digitalized work environments? Drawing on qualitative interviews, the study examines how such practices are socially accomplished in everyday work and shaped by organizational, technological and relational conditions. The article contributes to strategic communication research by foregrounding the relational and processual nature of informal communication and illuminating its role in the ongoing constitution of organizing in hybrid work settings. Empirically, the study is based on research in three public organizations and forms part of a larger three-year research project on leadership, coworkership and communication in flexible working life. We use the concepts of coworker and coworkership to emphasize employees as active participants in collective leadership processes (Heide and Simonsson, 2011).

On informal communication in organizations

In this theoretical section, we present and discuss (1) a short historical overview of research on informal communication in organizations, (2) what informal communication is, (3) the value and functions of informal communication, (4) research on informal communication in hybrid organizations and (5) media richness and media affordance in digital settings.

A short historical overview

Informal communication is a classic concept in organizational communication research, with its significance already evident in the Hawthorne studies of the late 1930s (Cook and Nohria, 2025). In the same decade, Chester Barnard (1938/1968) emphasized the importance of informal communication for an organization in the classical management book *The Function of the Executive*. Organizational researchers in the human relations tradition, such as George

Elton Mayo and Fritz Roethlisberger, became interested in informal communication because formal communication was regarded as too slow and ineffective in meeting individual needs (Tichy *et al.*, 1979). Roethlisberger (1945) notes that informal communication acts as a very healthy function, as it binds managers and coworkers together, satisfies social needs and fosters a sense of belonging. Hence, these early researchers maintained that organizations function through informal networks as much as through formal structures. During the period of the 1960s–1980s, researchers became more interested in communication channels and the role of the organizational “grapevine”. Groundbreaking studies on informal communication by the management researcher Davis (1962) were published in the book *Human Relations at Work*, where the grapevine channel is understood as a combination of formal and informal communication. The sociologist Melville Dalton (1959) analyzed how informal communication channels and unofficial group dynamics facilitate coordination and the smooth functioning of organizations. These informal groups bypass formal, rigid structures and solve problems and get actual work done. During this time, informal communication was understood ambivalently. It was considered both as a vehicle for rumors and distortion and a constructive supplement to formal channels. Since the 1990s, there has been a shift toward understanding informal communication as a strategic organizational resource. Influential studies by Brown and Duguid (1991) and Wenger (1998) introduced the concept of communities of practice, emphasizing how informal interactions enable learning and facilitate the circulation of tacit knowledge.

During the 2000s and 2010s, researchers’ attention shifted toward relational and network-based perspectives. Researchers such as Cross *et al.* (2002) conceptualized informal networks as critical infrastructure that enables collaboration and knowledge exchange. At the same time, organizational communication scholars including Putnam *et al.* (2009) emphasized the constitutive role of communication in organizing, explicitly acknowledging its informal aspects. The expansion of digital communication technologies also prompted investigations into how email, instant messaging and enterprise social media reconfigure informal interaction patterns.

In the post-pandemic period, the move toward hybrid and remote work has revitalized interest in informal communication. Emerging research (e.g. Methot *et al.*, 2021; Mandhana and Ballard, 2024; Methot *et al.*, 2026) investigates how digitally mediated environments complicate spontaneous interactions and relational dynamics. Scholars are increasingly questioning the assumption that informal communication seamlessly transfers to digital contexts, highlighting instead how hybrid arrangements reconfigure when, where and how informal exchanges occur.

To sum up, we conclude that although informal, spontaneous communication is widely regarded as highly significant for organizations, we still know relatively little about its forms, content and functions, particularly in virtual work environments (Fay and Kline, 2012; Viererbl *et al.*, 2022). We can also conclude that it is astonishing that researchers in strategic communication have paid so little attention to informal communication, even though organizational researchers have emphasized its importance since the 1930s (e.g. Hoffjann, 2023; Mandhana and Ballard, 2024).

What is informal communication?

In organizations, communication is often described as comprising both formal and informal elements (Mishra, 1990). Formal communication typically occurs within defined professional roles and is oriented toward work-related objectives, such as setting agendas, allocating tasks, sharing information, providing updates and making decisions (Brennecke and Rank, 2016). It generally follows a standardized structure, has an official character, is often scheduled and is governed by explicit rules and expectations (Kraut *et al.*, 1990). Common examples include meetings, corporate newsletters, conferences, intranet announcements and project group interactions.

By contrast, informal communication is less tied to formal roles and hierarchical structures and often emerges through social relationships between organizational members. [Kraut et al. \(1990\)](#) describe this as interaction between “participants out of role.” Informal communication typically consists of spontaneous conversations that arise naturally in everyday interactions and frequently extend beyond strictly work-related topics ([Tautz et al., 2025](#)). At the same time, it may also concern work issues, albeit in a more relaxed, flexible and less-structured context.

The primary purpose of informal communication is not necessarily task completion but rather socialization, relationship building, sensemaking and the expression of thoughts and emotions ([Fay and Kline, 2012](#)). Such exchanges are usually undocumented and therefore more fluid, allowing messages to evolve and be reinterpreted as they circulate within the organization ([Mishra, 1990](#)). Informal conversations typically lack predefined agendas, clear boundaries or explicit endpoints and may range from brief interactions to extended discussions ([Kraut et al., 1990](#)). Examples include hallway conversations, informal chats over coffee, lunch discussions and digital messaging exchanges ([Orr, 1996](#)).

Taken together, these distinctions highlight that formal and informal communication are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they should be understood as endpoints on a continuum ([Koch and Denner, 2022](#); [Hoffjann, 2023](#)), with many organizational interactions combining elements of both in varying proportions. For example, in a meeting, both formal and informal communication occur simultaneously. Informal communication could then be communication that occurs between participants before the actual meeting starts, as well as digital messages from one participant to another during the meeting.

The value and functions of informal communication

Informal communication accounts for a substantial share of interactions within organizations, occurring both between managers and coworkers and among coworkers themselves. It has been estimated to constitute up to two-thirds of workplace interaction and serves as an important form of social glue that holds organizations together ([Methot et al., 2026](#)). Accordingly, informal communication plays a central role in the creation and maintenance of relationships and can be seen as a cornerstone of organizational coherence ([Weick, 1969](#); [Hosking and Morley, 1991](#)).

The significance of informal communication becomes particularly evident when considering its multiple functions ([Viererbl et al., 2022](#)). First, it serves a confirmatory function, making individuals feel acknowledged, heard and valued. Such interactions have been shown to foster creativity, innovation and performance ([Methot et al., 2026](#)). Second, informal communication contributes to social integration, strengthening employees’ sense of belonging within teams, the organization and its culture. Relationship-building exchanges and social support from colleagues positively influence both engagement and organizational identification ([Fay and Kline, 2012](#)).

Third, informal interaction fulfills a recovery function, offering brief moments of distraction and psychological detachment that help individuals recharge during the workday ([Koch and Denner, 2022](#)). Fourth, it provides an important outlet for expressing dissatisfaction, allowing coworkers to vent frustration and process negative experiences. Such “complaint talk” can strengthen trust and collegial relationships and may even enhance identification and engagement when shared within supportive relationships ([Fay and Kline, 2012](#)).

Fifth, informal communication can function as a leadership resource. Through informal exchanges, managers gain insight into coworkers’ needs, concerns and personal circumstances, while simultaneously building trust, relationships and leadership legitimacy ([Lütjens and Felfe, 2025](#)). These interactions enable managers to make more informed decisions and take actions that positively influence motivation, performance and well-being ([Tautz et al., 2025](#)).

Sixth, informal communication plays a crucial role in knowledge sharing and learning. It provides access to practical, experience-based knowledge that supports decision-making and the development of expertise. This function is well established in research on communities of practice (e.g. [Brown and Duguid, 1991](#); [Wenger, 1998](#)). Empirical evidence further suggests that informal communication enhances individuals' sense of being well informed and improves their ability to perform tasks effectively ([Koch and Denner, 2022](#)). However, this relationship is not purely linear: what matters is not simply the volume of informal communication, but also with whom individuals interact and the topics discussed.

Finally, informal communication supports coordination and collaboration. Through ongoing interaction, coworkers develop a better understanding of one another's skills, preferences and working styles, which facilitates both task coordination and more practical matters such as scheduling meetings or exchanging information ([Koch and Denner, 2022](#)).

All in all, these functions illustrate that informal communication is not merely peripheral to organizational life, but central to how organizations actually operate. It complements formal structures by enabling relationship-building, sensemaking, coordination, and knowledge exchange in ways that formal communication alone cannot achieve. Rather than viewing informal communication as secondary or even disruptive, organizations should recognize it as a critical resource that underpins performance, cohesion and adaptability.

Informal communication in hybrid organizations

As already noted, it is difficult in practice to draw a sharp line between formal and informal communication, and in a virtual, digitalized work environment, the distinction becomes even more complex. For instance, an interview study with remote coworkers found that the two forms of communication often intertwine, with informal conversations frequently occurring immediately before or after formal online meetings ([Viererbl et al., 2022](#)). After researching internal communication in [our country] for more than 25 years, we would argue that informal communication has been largely neglected in the work of communication professionals (cf. [Singh and Denner, 2025](#)). Just like researchers, communication practitioners and other support functions seem to show limited interest in how informal communication operates within organizations or how it might be facilitated. However, the rise of remote work appears to have sparked renewed interest in informal communication ([Begemann et al., 2024](#)). Several researchers fear that informal communication is being weakened and that it is difficult to recreate the same dynamic interactions in virtual work environments as those that occur in the office (e.g. [Mandhana and Ballard, 2024](#); [Denner et al., 2025](#)). Project meetings, workplace gatherings and many other formal meetings now take place primarily online, and there is concern that informal communication and personal relationships will not regain their former strength as remote work has become the new normal. Research by [Denner et al. \(2026\)](#) examines how communication managers perceive informal communication in remote work settings. Among other things, the study shows that communication managers perceive both the disadvantages of informal communication in a digital setting, such as negative spirals and uncontrolled information sharing, and its positive functions. Other research by [Lütjens and Felfe \(2026\)](#) shows that coworkers working from home, compared with those in in-office settings, engage less frequently in informal communication and knowledge sharing with colleagues. That, in turn, is associated with lower levels of team commitment. These results imply that the decline in commitment is not primarily driven by physical distance itself, but rather by the absence of cue-rich interactions that support relationship-building and task coordination in co-located environments. Closely related to remote work is hybrid work, a work arrangement in which coworkers divide their time between the office and remote locations, e.g. home, holiday houses, cafés or coworking hubs ([Choudhury et al., 2024](#); [Lauring and Jonasson, 2025](#)). Research also suggests that remote work may reduce workplace interactions and limit communication, including informal communication ([Andel et al., 2021](#)). Further, research confirms that many coworkers are active in maintaining ties with peers

through various forms of communication across multiple channels (cf. [Tröster and Brosi, 2025](#)).

[Mandhana and Ballard \(2024\)](#) argue that previous research has primarily focused on the spatial and physical aspects of promoting informal communication. They emphasize, however, that temporal factors, such as time pressure, are equally important. This highlights the need to be mindful of informal communication that arises automatically when coworkers are in the office. However, we should not assume that informal communication is most easily conducted in physical spaces. A recently conducted interview study with remote coworkers in Germany highlights interesting differences between informal communication that occurs virtually compared with in-office settings. The study shows that remote work tends to generate fewer but tighter informal contacts, primarily with close colleagues. In the office, by contrast, coworkers engage in a wider variety of informal interactions, including exchanges across hierarchical levels. A Swedish study conducted during the pandemic reached similar conclusions, finding that coworkers primarily communicated with their closest colleagues and that contact with others decreased when working remotely ([Espersson et al., 2023](#)).

Media richness and media affordance in digital settings

A theory often used in this context is media richness theory ([Daft and Lengel, 1986](#)). It states that face-to-face communication is the richest form because it contains the greatest number of cues and opportunities for immediate feedback, which help participants interpret and understand messages. Richer media are particularly useful when dealing with complex or emotional messages. However, a recent study shows that media richness theory does not fully hold for internal communication ([Tkalac Verčič and Verčič, 2025](#)). It is not only the richness of a medium that determines its effectiveness, but also the context. According to this research, digital channels such as video meetings via Teams can sometimes function better than traditional face-to-face meetings. This is particularly the case when organizations need to share information that risks evoking strong negative emotions among employees. In a digital format, the message is often perceived as somewhat less emotionally charged, allowing recipients to focus more on the content of what is being said. In this way, it becomes easier to absorb and process the information. However, such an approach may appear rather calculated and not particularly empathetic. Another study shows a similar result ([Yusuf, 2025](#)). The participants in the study preferred email for uncertainty-reducing communication, which also challenges media richness theory. Yusuf suggests that this 1980's theory may need to be updated to reflect contemporary organizational practices.

It is also relevant here to mention the media affordances theory, introduced by the American psychologist [Gibson \(1977\)](#). The theory is based on the idea that we perceive technical tools and other artifacts in terms of the actions they afford; for example, stairs invite climbing and benches invite sitting. Similarly, the affordances of social media can be understood in terms of the perceived possibilities and constraints that different platforms offer users ([Ronzhy et al., 2022](#)). This concerns what users can do, are encouraged to do, or are prevented from doing through the design and functionalities of the platforms. In digital environments, for instance, the “like” button functions as an invitation to express appreciation, while comment sections encourage participation in discussions. Technology both enables and constrains certain forms of communication, but it is by no means predetermined how it affects us ([Holster et al., in press](#)). Rather, technology and humans are shaped in a complex interplay.

Methodology

The epistemology of this study is social constructionism, meaning that we focus on the process of enacting a socially constructed reality through humans' actions, interpretations and communication ([Berger and Luckmann, 1966](#)). Further, we draw inspiration from [Alvesson and Kärreman's \(2007\)](#) call to engage in a critical dialogue between theoretical frameworks

and empirical material. They conceptualize research as a process of “solving a mystery,” in which understanding advances through moments of analytical disruption and subsequent reconstruction. More broadly, the article aligns with scholars who argue for the analytical generalizability of qualitative research (Halkier, 2011). This notion of analytical generalizability resonates with the study’s reflexive constructionist approach, which seeks to integrate theory and empirical material through what Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) describe as disciplined imagination. Disciplined imagination means interpreting empirical material creatively while maintaining systematic and reflexive analytical rigor. In line with this epistemology, we conducted a qualitative case study capable of generating unique, context-dependent knowledge, which is particularly valuable for the development of new knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Furthermore, qualitative research should not only be understood as a technique for collecting empirical material. Rather, it is an approach based on the idea that reality is socially constructed (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

The empirical material presented in this article forms part of a larger three-year research project (2024–2026) conducted across six public organizations (three government agencies and three municipalities). All organizations studied are large and complex, serving diverse goals and stakeholders, and they allow employees to work from home for up to 49% of their working time. So far, we have conducted semi-structured individual interviews with senior managers, HR specialists, and communication professionals in all six organizations. In three organizations (one municipality and two public authorities), we also conducted eight group interviews with lower-level managers and seven with coworkers (separately), which constitute the primary empirical basis for this article. In total, 26 managers and 21 coworkers participated in the group interviews.

The interview guides for the different categories of interviewees have varied to some extent, but all have touched upon three major theme areas: (1) changing leadership and coworkership, (2) communication between managers and coworkers and (3) culture and informal communication. Thus, the interviews have not focused exclusively on informal communication, but it has been a vital part of most interviews. Examples of interview questions are: What does your contact with colleagues look like when you work from home compared to when you are in the office? How does what could be called “here-and-now communication” work remotely, when you need quick help from colleagues? Is it easier or more difficult to get in touch with and build relationships with employees from other departments and parts of the organization? How do you experience informal, spontaneous interactions – such as “coffee machine conversations” – in hybrid or remote work contexts?

We have selected interviewees using a purposive selection strategy (Patton, 2002; Palys, 2008; Lemmon *et al.*, 2018). The study comprises interviews with managers and coworkers who have chosen to take advantage of the option to work remotely, as we wanted to hear first-hand accounts of hybrid working. Thus, coworkers who have chosen not to work remotely or are unable to do so for various reasons were not included. This constitutes a potential source of bias, as the empirical material primarily reflects the experiences of those participating in hybrid working arrangements. Another strategy was to select interviewees from various parts of the organizations, as we wanted to capture experiences from different professions and working conditions. Most of the managers interviewed are first-line managers. That is, they work close to the organization’s core business and have more coworkers reporting directly to them. In the first stage, interviews were conducted with managers. In the next stage, we asked some managers to conduct a group interview with a few of their coworkers. The purpose of this “paired” constellation was to highlight the manager–coworker relationship from both parties’ perspectives. In a few cases, however, we were unable to achieve this interview constellation, so we grouped coworkers with different managers instead. On the other hand, this composition had the advantage that coworkers could compare and discuss experiences from different managers and work groups.

Most of the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams video conferencing – only a few were conducted in person. We have extensive experience in conducting interviews via

Teams, which has resulted in high-quality conversations. This is also supported by methodological research (see [Frey and Bloch, 2023](#)). The group interviews lasted approximately 120 min. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, the built-in recording and transcription tools were used. To further improve the quality of the transcription, a research assistant proofread the text manually and compared it with the recordings.

Our analysis work started with multiple read-throughs of the transcriptions to get acquainted with them and to search for interesting patterns or aspects (cf. [Weick, 1999](#)). In other words, we have conducted a thematic analysis, which is a systematic way of examining qualitative material to understand what is being said, how it is being said and why it matters ([Braun and Clarke, 2003](#); [Nowell et al., 2017](#)). Throughout the analysis, we continuously revisited relevant theoretical frameworks to make sense of the emerging patterns and to challenge our interpretations in line with a reflexive pragmatist approach (cf. [Alvesson, 2011](#)).

Results and analysis

In this section, we will present and discuss the findings of the analysis of the empirical material. We will focus on three thematic patterns related to the research questions: (1) Experiences of changing informal communication in hybrid work environments; (2) Emerging forms of informal communication in digital contexts and (3) Conditions enabling informal communication in hybrid organizations.

Experiences of informal communication in a hybrid work context

The interviews demonstrate that reduced physical co-presence and increased reliance on digital communication have clear implications for informal communication. However, the implications of the hybrid organizational structure are not entirely clear-cut, and the interviews show several nuances and complexities. One category of interviewees believes that digital tools have made informal interaction within the immediate group of colleagues easier and more intense. A senior manager explains:

Chat is now used much more frequently than before in my management team for both formal and informal conversations. It's a common platform for managers to talk to one another. 'Oh, right, I'm going on vacation next week. Where are you going?' I feel that people are using digital channels as a way to communicate with each other about both important and less important matters, and much more frequently. It wasn't like that before – people didn't call each other or pop into each other's offices very often.

As illustrated in the quote, the perception of increased informal communication primarily applies to a close-knit group of colleagues rather than to the organization more broadly or across hierarchical levels. Similar tendencies have been observed in studies conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic ([Viererbl et al., 2022](#); [Espersson et al., 2023](#)). [Espersson et al. \(2023\)](#) show that support and a sense of community were derived mainly from a small group of close colleagues, while the importance of other colleagues and organizational support diminished.

A more prominent category of interview responses aligns with prior research ([Viererbl et al., 2022](#); [Begemann et al., 2024](#)) suggesting that informal communication has generally declined in the absence of daily face-to-face interaction in the office. The interviewees particularly emphasize the loss of so-called “in-between spaces” or organizational gaps as significant. At the office, it is easy to bump into someone in the hallway, by the copier or at the coffee machine, which leads to natural and relaxed encounters. One manager explains:

If you're running between meetings in a building, you might be able to catch someone in between meetings. But if you've got a meeting in your calendar, maybe no one will dare to interrupt you.

Unlike in the office, where a coffee break may lead to an unplanned conversation with a colleague, moving from the living room to the kitchen while working from home rarely leads

to such spontaneous encounters. When colleagues cross paths in a corridor or at the printer, these moments often provide opportunities to ask a seemingly “stupid” question, soften a comment that may have come across as overly harsh in a previous meeting, or just chat a bit about what happened over the weekend. Both managers and coworkers believe it is hard to be spontaneous when working remotely. Digital tools make it possible to always stay in touch and to interact, but there still tends to be a barrier to bringing up minor or social issues spontaneously. A coworker’s voice:

There’s not much of a social aspect to written communication. [...] I don’t think I’ve ever been asked what I did over the weekend, either on Teams or in an email. (Coworker)

However, the interviews indicate that the issue is not solely related to remote work and digital communication, but also to office design. Since the pandemic, large parts of all the studied organizations have transitioned to activity-based offices without assigned workstations. This shift in workplace design makes it more difficult for coworkers to locate one another, contributing to a greater sense of anonymity within the office. Thus, even when working in the office, it can feel like working remotely. As one manager explains:

Certain aspects of the culture disappear [when we’re not there], but that’s also part of this activity-based workplace. As a manager, I’m in meetings almost all the time. I become completely invisible; no one knows where I am because I don’t have my own office and can sit anywhere. [...] If I had my own office, they could walk by and see that I’m here anyway, and then I could catch her for five minutes.

The interviews further suggest that interactions between colleagues and between managers and coworkers are generally perceived to have become increasingly focused on professional and directly work-related matters, that is, a shift toward increasing formal communication. According to the interviewees, the decline in informal conversations weakens interpersonal relationships. A manager describes this trend as follows:

We’re losing that sense of walking down the hallway. We’re losing the chance to meet in the lunchroom. We’re losing the chance to bump into people after sitting in a conference room. And so, we try to compensate for it through some kind of digital written communication, in chats and weekly newsletters in Teams channels, which we think is personal, but usually isn’t. We’re gradually losing these relationships and that sense of humanity. It’s hard for a manager to talk about a vacation experience in a chat, something you can easily slip into when you bump into each other at the coffee machine.

The quote above suggests that the difficulty of engaging in informal communication in digital settings is particularly acute for managers. In our previous research on digital communication during the pandemic, we found that while close colleagues quite easily created channels and began chatting via Teams, managers felt somewhat “sidelined” and were unsure of how much they should involve themselves in the communication taking place on digital platforms (Andersson *et al.*, 2022). In a similar vein, a study by Viererbl *et al.* (2022) showed that remote informal communication primarily occurs between peers at the same hierarchical level, whereas in office settings it takes place across a wider range of hierarchical relationships.

The manager quoted above also emphasizes that fewer opportunities for informal communication lead to weaker relationships and undermine the human dimension of working life. This experience is echoed by other interviewees, who describe an emerging negative spiral in which communication becomes increasingly task-oriented, while social relationships, friendliness and consideration are sidelined. As discussed in the theoretical section, informal communication has often been overlooked or regarded as of limited importance. Interestingly, when such communication no longer occurs as easily as before, the interviews reveal a growing awareness of its value – particularly for maintaining social relationships and integration, fostering a sense of belonging and open communication climate.

In search of informal communication online – emerging practices

Although informal communication becomes more difficult and tends to decline in hybrid organizations, it does not disappear. Rather, the interviews provide examples of how it gradually evolves, taking on new forms and emerging through digital platforms in hybrid work settings. This demonstrates not only resilience but also a strong willingness to maintain collaboration and informal relations even under changing conditions. In this section, we will present some examples of how managers and coworkers actively test and find new informal communication practices.

One set of examples concerns *scheduled digital staff meetings with elements of informal communication*. A team within social services has introduced daily hybrid check-ins. Immediately after the lunch break, they gather for a 15-min hybrid meeting without a structured agenda, but to check in and review what happened during the morning and discuss where they need to help each other out. Those in the office gather around a laptop in the staff room, while those working from home join individually. The coworkers coordinate the meeting, but the manager participates as time and needs permit. As discussed in the theoretical section, informal communication supports coordination and collaboration, a function clearly illustrated by these hybrid check-ins.

Another element of informal communication in planned digital group meetings is the use of introductory check-ins, which open the meeting and focus on personal, relational, or emotional matters. For example, the manager can go around the group and ask participants to indicate their energy level or to share something that happened over the weekend. According to the interviewees, it might have felt a little strange or silly at first, but that feeling soon passed. The check-ins become a way to maintain relationships and make everyone feel seen and heard. The interviewees feel that digital meetings are often expected to be very focused and efficient, which makes it even more important to signal at the start of the meeting that there is room for dialogue and building relationships. As also argued by [Methot et al. \(2021\)](#), doing so can also help establish a constructive and positive tone for the work-related issues at the meeting.

Another pattern that emerges from the interviews is that managers are holding an *increasing number of one-to-one meetings* with their employees, usually online. There are different approaches to one-to-one meetings. Some managers schedule regular check-ins, for example on a biweekly basis, while others maintain lists of employees they have not spoken to recently and plan to reach out to them during the week. Other managers initiate contact more spontaneously when they notice that an employee is available, as indicated by a green status icon in Teams. A manager describes her approach:

In my leadership role, I pop up like a jack-in-the-box. If you're green and I'm green, I'll ping you and just say: How's the weather where you are today? How's it going?

While not all of these one-to-one meetings are as spontaneous as the example above, they can still be regarded as containing clear elements of informal communication, given their lack of a fixed agenda and their openness to both work-related and non-work-related discussions. A coworker describes these meetings:

Just fifteen minutes, half an hour, and we can basically say whatever we want. And I feel that this has been really important for me, and for my boss, too. Getting to know each other and having this space where we can say things that stay between us.

Some of the managers interviewed emphasize the importance of making spontaneous outreach feel natural. Engaging in such contact from time to time helps ensure that it does not become a significant event when the manager reaches out. Some also use emojis to lighten the tone and signal informality:

I usually just send a 'do you have a minute?' on Skype with a smiley or a little sun. It makes the contact less formal, and people have become used to me just dropping in.

This kind of informal communication marks a shift from random and spontaneous interaction to intentionally planned social contact. Hence, managers have an important role in facilitating informal communication and building an open communication atmosphere that promotes symmetrical communication (Phan, 2025).

A third example concerns *digital chat groups*, an emerging form of informal communication that operates across both on-site and remote work settings. Both managers and employees describe how the chat function on their digital platform has become a central communication tool. Interviewees describe how spontaneous micro-interactions have increasingly shifted to Teams chat groups. As one manager noted:

What we had before, when we sat together and just turned around and asked, “Hey, can I ask you something?”, is now part of chat groups on Teams.

Regardless of whether coworkers are working from home or in the office, these chat channels constitute a shared communicative space that bridges physical distance. They serve as a venue for sharing thoughts, asking brief questions, or signaling transitions in the workday, sometimes simply writing: “I’m going home now . . .”. While such exchanges may appear minor or even trivial, they play a significant role in building and maintaining relationships within organizations and work groups,

The use of these chat groups varies across teams, and their evolving norms point to an ongoing process of structuring what was previously entirely informal communication. One manager described how their team initially maintained a chat channel dedicated to everyday pleasantries, which quickly became overwhelming:

My group has a chat that I think is called “pleasantries,” and I’m not in it. When I started, there was a bit too much niceness in this channel. Everyone would say “good morning”, and you can imagine 17 such messages every morning . . . That doesn’t work, so we’ve structured it now.

This example illustrates how forms of informal communication that were once governed by tacit norms increasingly require explicit structuring and boundary setting in digital environments to remain manageable and meaningful. Alongside this, teams maintain chat groups that function as real-time coordination channels. Coworkers handling support requests, for example, use these chats to quickly ask colleagues for help when an issue arises, mirroring the quick questions that once traveled across desks in an open office.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate how digital platforms have become crucial infrastructures for sustaining the immediacy and accessibility of informal communication in hybrid work settings. The practices described here illustrate how coworkers and managers actively work to re-establish closeness, small talk and everyday care in environments where physical spontaneity can no longer be taken for granted. Notably, these channels blur the boundary between formal and informal communication: while some are oriented strictly toward task-related exchanges, others primarily facilitate social interaction and many function as hybrid spaces in which work-related and social communication are intertwined. Moreover, whereas some digital interactions are planned, others occur spontaneously. This hybridity suggests that digital platform tools not only support coordination but also sustain other key functions of informal communication, not least relational ties and organizational cohesion. At the same time, they require new norms and boundaries to function effectively, balancing the need for connection with the risk of communication overload.

In need of more facilitation and reflexive metacommunication

In the shift toward hybrid and digitally mediated work, there is an increasing need to deliberately organize and create conditions for informal communication. Interviewees emphasize that it must be more actively planned and allocated dedicated space. One manager even describes sustaining informal interactions as requiring “discipline”:

I need to contact my coworkers in the same way as I would if I had bumped into them in the corridor. But for that to happen, it requires a lot of routine and discipline on your part.

Some interviewees suggest that new silos – or even “bubbles” within existing silos – have emerged as opportunities for spontaneous, informal interaction have diminished. A manager emphasized the resulting need to actively create new meeting arenas to facilitate interaction across departmental and functional boundaries.

You must create structures, contexts, and occasions where the bubbles are forced to meet. [...] The answer rarely lies with me or those who see things the same way I do. The organization becomes very one-dimensional if you cannot manage to capture different perspectives.

This is reminiscent of what is sometimes referred to as “strategic serendipity”, that is, creating spaces for communication where, by chance, new solutions or “discoveries” emerge through conversation with one another (Knudsen and Lemmergaard, 2014). Serendipity has played a crucial role in many scientific breakthroughs (e.g. the discovery of penicillin), and the unplanned or unpredictable can thus be seen as an important component of an organization’s strategic communication. The interviews also indicate that strategies have emerged to compensate for the loss of direct, spontaneous communication. Some organizations have scheduled more onsite management meetings than before, sometimes adding a lunch or a social activity as a compensatory measure.

Another pattern emerging from the interviews is that participants highlight the importance of explicitly encouraging informal communication and articulating its value. They emphasize that interpersonal, relationship-oriented encounters and activities need to be actively prioritized and, to some extent, made visible and measurable. A coworker reflects:

I can only speak for myself, but we’ve discussed this very point, that we should somehow highlight relationship-building as a concrete action that’s allowed to take time. People at an agency are usually very happy to discuss assignments, different projects, or various trips and things like that. But they tend not to talk about these more abstract things, even though from a social and psychological perspective, those things are very important for anything to work.

Along similar lines, both managers and coworkers emphasize the importance of explicitly negotiating communication practices in the hybrid work environment and establishing shared agreements on how communication should be organized. Thus, metacommunication, communication about how communication should occur, appears as a routine organizational practice (cf. Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). In a work environment where we do not know where others are and where we have a variety of channels and ways to communicate to choose from, we need to create clarity and predictability. A manager explains:

We don’t see each other all day. It doesn’t matter if we’re in the same building or working from home, what matters is how our interactions work. So, if I want to reach someone and talk to them, I want some kind of predictability, some kind of agreement. If I message you via Teams, email, or text, which communication channel should I use, and how quickly can I expect a reply? [...] So establishing those ground rules is much more important.

Related to metacommunication and the need for ground rules, the analysis also points to the importance of reflexivity: the ongoing, critical examination of how communicative routines shape collaboration, relationships and well-being (cf. Falkheimer and Heide, 2016). Reflexivity and metacommunication entail not only agreeing on rules for chat use but also periodically questioning whether those rules still serve their intended purposes (e.g. preventing overcommunication, and preserving psychological safety). In line with this, managers and coworkers interviewed, highlight the importance of reflecting together on the role of informal messaging: What counts as “social matters” in a given channel? Which topics belong where? Who tends to be overlooked by current routines, and how can outreach practices be redesigned to include them? By institutionalizing such *reflexive conversations*,

through regular retrospectives, communication charters or brief check-ins, organizations convert implicit habits into explicit, revisable agreements. This reflexive layer helps prevent the drift toward either communication overload (interruptions, duplication, diffusion of responsibility) or communication scarcity (missed support, weakened ties, loss of situational awareness).

In sum, while informal communication remains essential for cohesion and support, it now depends on two intertwined capacities: metacommunication, to set clear, shared norms and expectations; and reflexivity, to continuously assess and recalibrate those norms as contexts and needs evolve.

Concluding discussion

This article offers new insights into the role of informal communication in the workplace and highlights the specific challenges posed by the growing prevalence of remote and hybrid work, which have become enduring features of many people's working lives. Our analysis detects a transformation of informal communication practices in organizations as digitalization, hybrid work arrangements and evolving office designs reshape interaction and communication patterns. Although informal communication is clearly challenged, it does not disappear. Instead, new forms of digital informal communication are emerging. While informal communication among peers appears relatively easy to sustain digitally, it is more difficult to maintain across hierarchical levels and organizational units. Moreover, hybrid work requires managers, in particular, to adopt a more structured approach and invest more time and effort in maintaining relationships with employees.

Addressing the first research question – How do managers and coworkers experience informal communication in hybrid work settings and how do they experience changes in the conditions that shape such communication? – the practices identified in this study illustrate how managers and coworkers compensate for reduced physical co-presence by actively scheduling informal communication, thereby further blurring the boundaries between formal and informal communication, as suggested in previous research (Viererbl *et al.*, 2022). Planned digital touch-downs, rolling one-to-one meetings and check-ins as part of weekly meetings act as micro-practices that recreate social interactions (“how are you, how is it going?”) in contexts where unplanned encounters have become rare (cf. Lin and Carrillo, 2021). Participants experienced these changes as both necessary and beneficial for maintaining social connectedness and awareness of colleagues, and as a transformation of the conditions under which informal communication occurs. This shift means that informal communication becomes more structured, planned and explicitly norm-driven: contact lists, explicit rules for chat use, and clear expectations for responsiveness are increasingly needed to avoid both overcommunication and social blind spots. In this sense, informal communication becomes more formalized; spontaneity is reduced, while the social and personal dimensions are maintained. At the same time, it is worth considering the implications of having to plan for informal communication. Can it still retain its relaxed character, or does it risk becoming more predictable and resembling formal communication?

In response to the research question of what new forms of informal communication practices emerge in hybrid and digitalized work environments, our analysis points to the development of digital chat groups, hybrid touch-downs, socially focused check-ins, and low-threshold communicative signals such as emojis, short pings and availability indicators. Digital chat groups, for example, are compared by some interviewees to hallway conversations. Hybrid touch-downs and socially focused check-ins are further examples of what can be described as new micro-practices in hybrid work settings (cf. Nicolini, 2012). The analysis also highlights the value of low-threshold signals, which function as substitutes for the gestural cues and micro-interactions previously afforded by physical proximity. When combined with brief, recurring meeting formats and chat channels, these signals can support both relational cohesion and micro-coordination. Thus, in hybrid work settings, where

co-presence is reduced, informal interaction becomes increasingly mediated through digital technologies, giving rise to new communication practices and micro-practices through which coworkers and managers actively shape and reshape organizational reality.

From the perspective of media richness theory (Daft and Lengel, 1984), it is often argued that spontaneous interactions are difficult to replicate digitally, as they rely on rich relational cues that are often lost in mediated settings. However, today's digital media, including video meetings and synchronous chat channels, are considerably richer and offer a wider range of affordances compared to earlier forms of digital communication, such as email (cf. Tkalc Verčič and Verčič, 2025). Katsoudas and Patel (2022) argue that digital technologies are still primarily used for information exchange and that digital communication often follows a predetermined agenda. A crucial distinction emerges, however, when digital platforms are used for collaborative work – such as engaging with colleagues' ideas and insights – and when spontaneity and serendipity are successfully incorporated into communication. They further suggest that a true game-changer will occur when random interactions can be integrated into the virtual environment, enabling individuals to “bump into” one another organically without sharing a physical space. In other words, there is a need to better leverage digital technologies in ways that foster spontaneity, dialogue and social relationships.

However, the interview findings suggest that not only is the role of digital technology changing, but also the role of the office. Rather than functioning primarily as a “workplace,” the office is increasingly becoming a place for social interaction – a space for relational connection, informal exchange and collaborative sensemaking (Weick *et al.*, 2005). The office seems more and more to be valued as a site where employees meet to recharge their social batteries, exchange experiences and foster a sense of belonging. By contrast, operational tasks, particularly those requiring focus and concentration, are increasingly carried out at home via digital platforms. However, the shift from the office as a workplace to a “social place” should not be understood as a binary transition, but rather as a shift in balance in which the office is partly taking on a new role. While the office has always served as an important site for social interaction, its significance in this regard appears to be growing in the context of hybrid work. This is supported by a 2025 survey of 2,013 office workers in Sweden, showing that 86% believe the office is important for their social life, compared with 76% in 2024 and 68% in 2023 (Castellum, 2025).

Another central observation from the interviews is the emergence of a new form of communicative awareness, in which coworkers and managers increasingly discuss and reflect on how they communicate, not only what they communicate. As already noted, this development aligns with theories on metacommunication (i.e. communication about communication) (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967), which emphasize that effective collaboration depends on the ability to collectively reflect on communicative processes. Such reflexivity helps illuminate communication patterns, identify misalignments and enable strategic adjustments. Interestingly, this heightened awareness of communication appears to have led to a stronger focus on the importance of informal communication and social relationships. While informal communication has been relatively neglected in research, our experience suggests that it has also been largely overlooked by managers, communication professionals and HR specialists. However, the interviews clearly indicate that as informal communication no longer occurs as naturally as before, it is no longer taken for granted but has instead become an explicit concern on the organizational agenda.

However, the broader research project which this study is part of reveals a limited organizational change awareness among senior managers and support functions such as communication and HR professionals and managers (Heide and Simonsson, 2025). While first-line managers and coworkers struggle to transform communication practices, top management does not approach the hybrid organization from a strategic change perspective. Certain tactical measures such as rules and guidelines for remote work have

been implemented, but there is a lack of a strategic approach to flexible, hybrid working life. The senior managers interviewed do not discuss to any great extent what the hybrid workplace means from a management perspective, i.e. how systems, structures and processes need to change at an overall organizational level in order to manage the challenges and opportunities of flexible, hybrid working life. In a similar vein, HR and communications professionals have not made any major changes when it comes to strategies and leadership support. It is, for example, vital that such support functions facilitate and allocate additional time for so-called in-between spaces and for informal communication. Support functions can also contribute by establishing mechanisms that facilitate “digital coffee-machine” interactions.

Practical implications

In conclusion, our study demonstrates how digitalization and hybrid work simultaneously generate opportunities for increased communicative awareness while also introducing challenges related to informal communication and digital competence. To navigate these developments, organizations must adopt a strategic and reflective approach to communication, one that continually supports and reassesses both formal structures and informal communicative practices.

One implication is that informal communication in hybrid settings requires both structure and interpretive flexibility. Informal communication, which previously was regulated by tacit and self-sustaining norms, now requires explicit agreements. Too little structure risks fragmentation, exclusion and missed opportunities for social support. And too much structure risks turning informality into yet another obligation in an already saturated schedule. Practices such as digital touch-downs and check-ins appear effective because they are short, recurrent and flexible enough to capture live moods and needs. As digital chat groups increasingly function as substitutes for corridor conversations, it becomes essential for teams to establish shared norms for how these channels are used. Without such agreements, chat spaces can quickly become overloaded, which undermines their purpose and leads to communicative fatigue. Differentiating between channels for social interaction and those intended for work-related coordination helps create clarity, ensuring that managers and coworkers know where to turn for different kinds of exchanges.

At the same time, organizations should encourage low-threshold forms of contact, quick check-ins, emojis and short messages that sustain relational cohesion across distance. These small cues help recreate the immediacy of in-person interactions and convey accessibility in a way that supports trust and everyday collegiality. Presence indicators, such as the familiar “green dots” in chat platforms, can also be used intentionally to enable spontaneous digital encounters that resemble the ease of stopping by a colleague’s desk.

To prevent this form of communication from contributing to overload or stress, managers should make space for informal exchanges rather than treating them as interruptions. Recognizing chat-based micro-interactions as legitimate components of collaboration can strengthen team cohesion and support effective problem-solving. For newcomers, clear introductions to a team’s chat culture and channel structure can facilitate smoother onboarding and reduce the risk of misinterpretation or exclusion. [Mandhana and Ballard \(2024\)](#) highlight that unplanned conversations depend not only on spatial conditions but also on temporal ones. In line with this, the interviews underscore the importance of deliberately creating time and space for informal communication.

Taken together, these implications highlight the need to actively curate and maintain digital communication environments so that they effectively substitute for the spontaneous interactions that hybrid work has made less frequent.

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