

Managing hybrid workers and teams in the public sector: from management by results to purposeful management

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Abstract

Purpose – Hybrid working has become “business as usual” in Australian public service (APS) organisations, however, limited guidance exists for managers in this sector. This paper aims to identify the management capabilities currently being used and those required for effective management of public sector hybrid workers.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is based on the APS as a case study. The research team collected data from 20 focus groups and interviews with 83 managers and supervisors in the APS to answer: What capabilities are public sector managers using to manage hybrid working teams? What additional capabilities are needed?

Findings – Participants demonstrated capabilities to effectively manage hybrid workers and teams in the areas of communications and managing for outcomes. However, capability was lacking in career development and skill-building support and making conscious decisions around where work was best performed. Further, findings show that a more purposeful management approach enables more effective management by results.

Practical implications – Our research highlights two important gaps in managerial capability, which we recommend be included in public sector capability frameworks and management development programs. These are the capabilities to prioritise conscious decisions on work locations and to provide purposeful support for career and skill development regardless of work location.

Originality/value – This study makes an original contribution by developing, defining and applying the concept of purposeful management. This concept expands the conceptualisation of effective management in hybrid workplaces by combining insights from the theoretical foundations of evidence-based management and management by results.

Keywords Purposeful management, Evidence-based management, Management by results, Hybrid work, Public sector, Management capability

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Organisations adopting remote and hybrid work policies rely on managers and supervisors to implement and manage these policies for successful outcomes (Deschênes, 2024; Park and Cho, 2022). However, survey data show there is a lack of confidence in management capability to manage remote workers within the Australian Public Service (APS) (APSC, 2023) – the site of our case study. This is particularly problematic given that managerial capability is critical to navigating evolving workplace expectations, including the challenges associated with hybrid work (APSC, 2025). Additionally, APS capability or competency frameworks and other comparable frameworks such as those in the United Kingdom and Canada (Gov.UK, 2025; Government of Canada, 2016) are largely silent on hybrid working. We note, however, that the



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New South Wales (NSW) Government (in Australia) does list capabilities required to support hybrid work, which includes intentional communications ([Public Service Commission, 2022](#)).

Research over the past two decades suggests that challenges in managing remote workers may be restricting the realisation of a range of potential benefits of remote work ([Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020](#)). With the rise in remote and hybrid working since the COVID-19 pandemic ([Wu et al., 2023](#)), it is important to consider how the scale and significance of this problem may have grown. Middle managers are responsible for the well-being, work-life balance, social connection, autonomy and engagement ([Eng et al., 2024](#), [Buick et al., 2024](#); [Dale et al., 2024](#); [da Silva et al., 2022](#); [Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023](#)) of their hybrid teams. This requires effective management (which we define below). Given that hybrid working is now “business as usual” for many knowledge workers across the globe, ensuring that managers have the capabilities to manage hybrid workers and teams is of paramount importance, yet academic literature on this topic is not extensive. Our research contributes to filling this gap.

Our research is underpinned by these two questions: (1) What capabilities are public sector managers using to manage hybrid working teams? (2) What additional capabilities are needed? Based on 20 focus groups (FGs) and interviews with 83 managers (who are tasked with higher-level managerial responsibilities) and supervisors (more junior managers), we examine management capabilities in the public sector and traditional management theories, which underpin effective management, to highlight gaps in capabilities needed to effectively manage hybrid workers and teams. We next examine the literature on effective management, followed by a discussion, on management responsibilities in a hybrid work environment, which includes emerging literature on purposeful management, to highlight the managerial capabilities needed. We then explain our methodology before moving on to our findings. In the findings sections we present areas where purposeful management is being practised, where it is not and where a form of purposeful management is emerging, before presenting our conclusion.

Effective management in the public sector

There are many definitions of what is meant by “effective management” in the literature. Common to these definitions are the concepts of strategic alignment of resources to achieve goals, managerial decision-making capability and accountability ([Holm et al., 2025](#); [Joyce, 2015](#)). Effective management is context-specific, with managers needing to respond according to contextual factors and degrees of complexity in the organisational environment ([Idler, 2023](#)). What constitutes effective management in the public sector is equivocal but comes from employee efforts resulting from human resource management (HRM) practices, which contribute to organisational performance, enabling organisations to serve the needs of the communities they represent ([Mostafa, 2021](#)).

While the nature of public service organisations necessitates caution when applying managerial theories developed primarily on management in the private sector ([Mele et al., 2023](#)), such theories can still be instructive in understanding what effective management is in such settings. Theories that underpin the current understanding of effective management include evidence-based management and management by results, which both have their strengths, limitations and different foci. Evidence-based management utilises the best available empirical evidence from different sources to inform decisions and to advance management practice ([Rousseau, 2006](#); [Weber et al., 2024](#)). The concept of evidence-based management is dynamic and has the potential to reduce decision-making biases ([Criado-Perez et al., 2024](#)) because decisions are based on “scientific evidence and local business evidence” ([Rousseau et al., 2008](#), p. 481).

Limitations cited include a lack of practicality of evidence-based management due to impinging upon managers’ beliefs about personal freedom ([Rousseau, 2006](#)). Others argue that the notion of evidence-based management is incompatible with the changing contexts and pluralistic nature of organisations ([Reay et al., 2009](#)). Nevertheless, a compelling case has been put forward by scholars about the value of evidence-based management in helping

managers make better decisions compared to “traditional management” practice (Weber *et al.*, 2024, p. 66). Nonetheless, there has been limited use of evidence-based management to enhance management practice in the public sector (Newman, 2020).

Similarly, management by results, with its primary focus on end results (Asian Development Bank, 2012), was adopted in Australian public sector organisations during a period of reforms in the 1980 and 1990s (McDonald, 1990). The extensive increase in the use of management by results occurred in parallel with widespread use of New Public Management (NPM) in public sector organisations in many western countries (Barbieri *et al.*, 2025; Kure *et al.*, 2021). NPM focuses on achieving measurable outcomes, which remains a key feature (Franken *et al.*, 2024). Key strengths of management by results are clarity around accountability and focus on outcomes (Kure *et al.*, 2021). However, this singular focus on results and outcomes is also management by results’ greatest weakness due to a risk of focusing on easily measurable results, such as budget impacts, at the expense of important but less tangible outcomes, such as feelings of citizens regarding service delivery changes (Hatry, 2014) or of employees regarding what was rewarded, sometimes with unintended negative consequences (Behn, 2003; Maaranen *et al.*, 2020).

These problems are exacerbated in the public sector, where many service delivery outcomes are too complex and idiosyncratic to be measured by specific metrics (Kure *et al.*, 2021). A continued focus on improved decision quality and achievement of results is valuable to include in our understanding of what constitutes effective management in the public sector and what capabilities are required to be effective. In relation to hybrid working, achieving results and ensuring successful hybrid working is dependent on managers and supervisors (da Silva *et al.*, 2022). We next discuss these responsibilities.

Public sector managers’ capabilities and hybrid working

We acknowledge that some public sector managers have always practised purposeful management; however, as we show, purposeful management is not always being practised. Further, while some managers may not have been practising purposeful management prior to hybrid working becoming widespread, hybrid working brings particular challenges which necessitate more reflection and purposefulness. These include ensuring employee well-being, work-life balance and social connection, which have become more important since the pandemic (Buick *et al.*, 2024; Dale *et al.*, 2024; da Silva *et al.*, 2022; Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023). Employee engagement when working hybrid is also dependent on effective management, as employees may not have on-site engagement with colleagues (Eng *et al.*, 2024). Managers also oversee workflow and manage synchronous and asynchronous work (da Silva *et al.*, 2022; Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2022). Facilitating employee autonomy is also key to successful hybrid working (Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik, 2022; Winkler *et al.*, 2022).

Managers are also tasked with ensuring the office is purposeful enough to entice employees to attend (Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023; Puranova and Mitchell, 2025). Purpose is gained through collaborating and connecting with colleagues (Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023). Communication tools and styles also differ with some employees in the office and some at another location, further necessitating managerial oversight (Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023; Winkler *et al.*, 2022). Managers also need to consider where work is conducted, which tasks can be done on the employer’s premises, which can be undertaken at home and when these should be done (Buick *et al.*, 2024). Ensuring equitable access to opportunities and career development is also essential, including ensuring that proximity bias does not eventuate where those in the employer’s premise are favoured over those working at home (Williamson *et al.*, 2024). Managers therefore need a range of capabilities to effectively manage hybrid workers, including sound communication skills, decision-making skills, empathy, effective task allocation skills and oversight of work in different locations.

While many of these skills are essential for managers of hybrid and non-hybrid teams, emerging research shows that for hybrid workers, managers need to be more purposeful (Buick *et al.*, 2024), deliberate (Dutta *et al.*, 2022) or intentional (Buick *et al.*, 2022). While these terms are similar, throughout this paper we use the term “purposeful”. We note that our study participants have not always used this term; however, for consistency, this is the term we have applied in this paper. Buick *et al.* (2024) argue for a more purposeful approach to managing hybrid work, which pays particular attention to place (where work is conducted), space (how workplaces are configured) and time (how time is allocated in hybrid settings). Similarly, Vartiainen and Vanharanta (2024) consider the elements of hybrid working to be physical space (location), virtual and/or digital space, social space (communication and social interaction) and time (when work is undertaken in different locations). These elements are influenced by the purpose of work in an organisation, hindering and enabling factors and available resources, which are reliant on leaders and managers (Vartiainen and Vanharanta, 2024).

In practice, we define purposeful management as managers being reflective about where work is conducted, how workplaces are configured and when work is performed. In contrast, we define “business as usual” as managers and teams continuing to work in the same way as pre-COVID and the widespread shift to working from home and then hybrid working. We do not examine time and space but instead focus on work processes, an adjacent feature. Work processes and practices are impacted by time, space and place, making this an important and necessary next feature to examine.

Further, public sector management is a distinct form of management which brings its own set of challenges and opportunities. Even though decades of NPM aimed to make the public sector similar to the private sector to increase accountability, effectiveness and efficiency (Mostafa, 2021), differences still exist. Public sectors are heavily regulated, bureaucratic and hierarchical, more so than most organisations in the private sector. This can impede managerial autonomy, including when managing employees (de Vries and Vermeeren, 2021; Desmarais and de Chatillon, 2010). Public sectors are also path dependent, with institutional practices being deeply embedded and resistant to change (Teague, 2009). However, “critical moments” can result in “pathway departure” (Teague, 2009, p. 501). The pandemic could be considered such a moment. This is evidenced as the APS was extremely responsive during the pandemic, with “strong capabilities and leadership” (APSC, 2021, p. 4) enabling a rapid response to meet the challenges of the pandemic. While the management capabilities discussed in this article may be applicable to managers in any sector, we contend that the public sector environment is unique, and this context shapes the capabilities being examined.

Methodology

Research context

This study involved an in-depth examination of how APS managers and supervisors managed their hybrid workers and teams in 2023. The APS is one of Australia’s largest employers, with over 185,000 employees across all Australian states and territories in a wide range of occupations in 101 agencies (Australian Public Service Commission APSC, 2024). The research team collected data in 20 one-hour FGs with 78 APS middle managers and supervisors in 37 agencies and conducted five one-hour interviews with senior executive service officers (i.e. senior managers). The participants were managing employees working hybrid at the time of the study or for a period of at least six months in the previous 18 months. The FGs were of mixed composition, with participants from different agencies and different supervisory and middle management employment levels, with group sizes kept small (ranging from two to six participants per group) to assist participants in feeling comfortable to share their thoughts (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009).

Participants were recruited based on their involvement in previous studies examining hybrid working in the APS led by one member of the research team. These earlier studies, conducted in 2020 and 2021, surveyed over 10,000 APS employees and managers to understand public servants' experience of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in the 2021 survey, at the time of that project, were asked if they would be willing to participate in FGs for further discussion of their experiences with hybrid working. Approximately 600 people indicated they would like to participate and provided their contact information. These individuals were emailed in 2023 and invited to participate in this subsequent research project.

The table below summarises our FG participants broadly to indicate the range and type of public sector agencies represented in our study. We do, however, acknowledge the absence of more detailed demographic information is a limitation of our study, as provision of these details could have helped readers to assess the diversity of perspectives and the potential influence of participant characteristics on the findings (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Details of participant workplaces

Agency type ¹	Description	Number of participants
Policy	Agencies involved in the development of public policy	14 - Department of Education, Australian Institute of Marine Science, Department of Health, Department of Social Services, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Department of Industry, Science and Resources, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts
Smaller operational	Agencies with less than 1,000 employees involved in the implementation of public policy	1 (Agency name withheld for participant anonymity)
Larger operational	Agencies with 1,000 employees or more involved in the implementation of public policy	45 – Australian Taxation Office, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Department of Defence, Department of Home Security, IP Australia, National Disability Insurance Agency, Services Australia
Regulatory	Agencies involved in regulation and inspection	2 (Agency names withheld for participant anonymity)
Specialist	Agencies providing specialist support to government	9 - Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Research Council, Commonwealth Grants Commission, National Health and Medical Research Council
National cultural institutions	Agencies that maintain collections of material and offer public programs relevant to Australia's cultural heritage	1 (Agency name withheld for participant anonymity)
Undisclosed	Participants indicated "Prefer not to say"	11
		Total: 83

Note(s): ¹ Categorised according to Australian Public Sector Commission's "functional clusters" per 21 October 2025, <https://www.apsc.gov.au/aps-agencies-size-and-function>

Source(s): Authors' own work

Data collection

We collected data using FGs and interviews. This approach generated data in the form of responses to questions posed by the research team and subsequent exchanges between participants (Wilkinson, 1998). The nature of FG discussion has many benefits including being less threatening to participants, enhancing the efficiency of data collection and providing an environment where participant interaction creates further data (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009). In the last decade, FGs have extended from face-to-face to include online or virtual contexts (Stancanelli, 2010) to provide increased accessibility for participants in a broader range of geographical areas, including participants working hybrid, ensuring inclusion for everyone (Olliffe *et al.*, 2021).

While the use of FGs was considered appropriate for this study for reasons discussed above, the research team acknowledge that the small size of some groups may have impacted the group interaction. Small groups are more susceptible to having one or two participants dominate the discussion, which can suppress the voice of other members (Smithson, 2000) and therefore skew the data (Ning *et al.*, 2024). The online nature of the FGs aimed to address this dynamic, with such groups less susceptible to dominant participants than face-to-face groups and more likely to have active participation of diverse people (Abrams *et al.*, 2015). An additional mitigation was ensuring that the groups were more homogenous (Smithson, 2000) in terms of seniority by interviewing senior managers separately. We also recognise that dynamics in smaller groups can obscure more controversial perspectives where peer pressure may be more intense (Smithson, 2000). Smaller groups can also reduce interactional richness; however, we found this instead often yielded deeper individual insights (Ning *et al.*, 2024), likely due to the shared experiences of leading remote and hybrid teams in the public sector during and post-COVID.

The FG data were supplemented with data from individual interviews with senior executives. In addition to assisting with making the FGs more homogenous, there were two further reasons for conducting interviews with this cohort. Firstly, interviews provide an opportunity for participants to share their experiences of workplace phenomena including their feelings and opinions (Dunwoodie *et al.*, 2023), which they might sometimes feel uncomfortable sharing in a group setting (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009). Secondly, acknowledging that employees are often reluctant to speak up in the presence of senior leaders (Clark, 2023), the research team felt it was preferable not to include these executives in the FGs and instead collect their insights separately through individual interviews. Given the focus of the research on hybrid working and the geographically spread locations of the APS workers, an online approach to data collection suited our research focus.

Our research team developed an FG and interview protocol collaboratively (Wilkinson, 1998). Two members of the team proposed questions based on the literature; the other two members reviewed these and suggested changes and additional questions. The team then met to discuss and approve the wording of each question before ethics approval was sought. All four researchers participated in the FGs and interviews, data analysis and writing of this article. FGs and interviews were conducted by the researchers in pairs. Participants were asked a range of questions around their organisation's hybrid working policy; application of policy; use of hybrid working arrangements in their team; assigning work and workflow; measuring work outcomes; trust and autonomy in teams; access to career development opportunities and additional training needed for managers. One researcher asked questions and engaged with participants, and the second researcher made notes to capture key themes. The online FGs and interviews were recorded and auto-transcribed using MS Teams software. A research assistant reviewed and amended transcripts for accuracy, assigning pseudonyms to participants to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

We undertook transcript-based analysis to ensure rigorous engagement with our data (Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009). We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach of familiarising ourselves with the data, developing codes, identifying, reviewing and defining

themes and telling the emergent story, although we approached this iteratively. Coding was undertaken in multiple iterations. In the first round, the research team took an inductive approach, considering insights from note-taking throughout fieldwork (Naeem *et al.*, 2023). The research team reached a consensus prior to the development of the codebook (Cascio *et al.*, 2019). We then adjusted the codebook for consistency with the FG protocol. This ultimately resulted in an inductive-deductive hybrid coding approach (Cascio *et al.*, 2019; Thomas, 2006). Next, the research assistant reviewed the codebook to ensure a shared understanding across the team (MacPhail *et al.*, 2016). A research assistant used NVivo to code two transcripts, and then a member of the research team coded the same transcripts to establish intercoder reliability (MacPhail *et al.*, 2016). We determined intentional and purposeful management practices to be a strong first-order code. Our use of this inductive-deductive coding process ensured we captured exploratory aspects of our research.

In the second round, we took a closer focus on intentional or purposeful management practices as a key theme. The first codebook was reviewed by a member of the research team with a research assistant for codes relating to these management practices, drawing on insights and keywords from the literature review. This process ensured the inductive aspects of our approach to the first coding round were used to inform subsequent analysis for our conceptual model (Naeem *et al.*, 2023). This resulted in a new codebook being developed with seven primary and 26 secondary codes relating to purposefulness in management practices. Descriptions were provided in the codebook to explain the relationship of each code to purposefulness, and these were checked by another member of the research team before the research assistant again used NVivo to code all the transcripts.

These codes constituted themes, and thematic analysis was then conducted by the researchers. Themes relating to intentionality and/or purposefulness were pre-eminent, and the specific sub-themes form the basis of this paper. Throughout the paper, we indicate the FG which contained the cited material as (FG) followed by the number of the FG, e.g. (FG10), and similarly with interviews, e.g. (I1). We next detail our findings.

Findings

The public sector is a unique workplace, where middle managers and supervisors are navigating embedded institutional work practices while recognising opportunities for purposeful changes to management in a hybrid work environment. To understand these responses to hybrid work conditions and their implications for capability building, we firstly examine attitudes about work location and policy-informed limits to managerial autonomy specific to the public sector. Managing hybrid teams with a “business as usual” approach highlighted ways work practices had not changed since pre-2020. We then consider emerging approaches that showed opportunities for deliberate engagement with managing hybrid teams before highlighting clear evidence of capability building through purposeful communication and outcome delivery.

Business as usual

(1) Managing work location and policy consistency

The APS demonstrated initial responsiveness to significant external changes in public sector workplaces from early 2020 onwards, but we found that underlying path dependency upheld a range of pre-2020 working practices as “business as usual” for many APS managers despite the move to hybrid working. This lack of action to adjust work processes had a limiting effect on how managerial capabilities were enacted across all elements of hybrid work.

Managers indicated very limited consideration about how best to address work location as an opportunity to support different types of work. Practices of “deliberate decisions about where work should take place” did not feature strongly in participant responses, with only ten

references made in eight FGs. Indeed, the only explicit mentions of different types of work being done in different locations described physical reasons an employee needed to be in the workplace, such as providing face-to-face service to members of the public:

... if you're in the office, it's expected that you're part of a team that managed the front counter, and whatever else needs to be done. And if you're at home, then you're doing all the assessment work, you're answering phone calls, you're doing all of that from home. And so that's kind of how it's shared out. (FG4)

This manager framed this as an understanding between themselves and their team, and other managers shared similar examples in agencies with workplace health and safety guidelines for minimum staff on-site – these were described as “inflexible requirements” and were not questioned by participants. These descriptions portrayed this as “business as usual”, where no specific changes had been made to adjust for hybrid working.

Other managers held the understanding that their team were doing the same work regardless of location, with one manager stating, “(Y)ou just do what you need to do, and that's pretty much the same type of work, whether you're at home or in the office” (FG19). One manager stated:

Everybody uses Teams, that's the main way that we meet. And so that's actually meant that for my team, I don't care where they are, it makes absolutely no difference to us (FG3).

This response indicated that the work locations of the team were effectively deemed irrelevant to this manager and given no specific consideration. While emerging research suggests different locations can and should be leveraged for different work functions in the public sector (Buick *et al.*, 2024), this “business as usual” mindset further demonstrated persistent limits to managerial approaches to hybrid working.

Limited engagement from managers about work location was further explained through responses to inconsistent policy application. These inconsistencies were described in the codebook as “inconsistencies between work location policy and actions, stated or implied” and featured prominently with 37 references made in 14 FGs. One manager stated:

Sometimes there's line managers that have a different interpretation or, somebody feels like they've been told something, that's not actually the policy, that type of thing. So, all different issues come into the conversation that aren't actually related to the policy and that affects people implementing the policies (FG10).

Most responses focused on a specific example to illustrate inconsistency of interpretation. For these managers, this inconsistency appeared to function as a barrier to managerial autonomy, often describing this as a frustrating but unchanging aspect of their work. However, we found very limited indication these managers were advocating for policy change, despite the challenges presented. General acceptance of policy, even when inconsistently applied, speaks to organisational path dependency.

In contrast with APS middle managers, one APS senior executive highlighted the need for a more deliberate conversation and conscious decisions about what work was done where:

I would like to see the APS mature its conversation about hybrid working away from set ratios and percentages to actually helping our staff and managers understand when is the best to come together and work in the office and when is the best to work from home and actually giving them the tools and technologies to support that. (I1)

This appetite for change was not reflected at lower levels, further demonstrating a tendency for our participants to defer to “business as usual”. Our findings suggest the need for more agency and sector-wide support to develop capabilities for purposeful management of hybrid teams across multiple work locations, particularly in relation to making conscious decisions about where different types of work are best performed.

(2) Emerging approaches to purposeful career and skill development

While managers took a “business as usual” approach to where work was conducted, we found purposeful approaches to managing team development and career progression to be in an emerging phase. Elements of deliberate action sat in tension with continued evidence of a “business as usual” approach. Despite few mentions of career progression in the APS (10 references across eight FGs), managers still provided examples of deliberate action to promote employee visibility in a hybrid team. One manager described:

I take whatever opportunity I can to get them in front of [the executive] virtually. So, if they’ve done a good piece of work or set up a meeting, and they can show it off, you’ve just got to be more cognisant of it, I think. And it needs to go up the chain that way as well (FG5).

This manager’s purposeful approach indicates the potential to enable development opportunities including visibility to senior management for their team members. Other managers described recognising staff by copying them into emails, “shouting out” their work in emails to more senior managers and purposefully ensuring their achievements were made visible. Enabling visibility for career progress is a management capability we found to be emerging in managers of hybrid teams.

However, we found that managers did not extend this approach in the same way for their teams’ training and skill development. Managerial support, described as “explicit support for development of skill and career of workers” in the code book, did not feature strongly in participant responses (eight references made in six FGs). One manager described access to virtual training as a development opportunity:

I’ve approached it the same way, as if everyone would be in the office, and if there is a virtual opportunity for training, then encourage everyone to take it? I suppose my approach to the hybrid teams is, I’m not fussed, whether they’re home or they’re in the office physically . . . it’s making sure that everyone has the opportunity to develop on aspects that they want to. (FG17)

While this approach indicates some prioritisation of training opportunities for their team, less purposeful engagement or conscious decision-making specific to the hybrid context was indicated. Other managers similarly noted that hybrid working increased training options, but as reflected above, organising training was a work practice undertaken as if everyone was in the office – “business as usual”. Purposeful approaches to skills building were not discussed with the same specificity used by managers to describe promoting team visibility for career development.

While emerging approaches to staff development in hybrid work environments were evident, opportunities remain to build capabilities for purposeful support of staff skill building and career progression.

Purposeful management

While we found a tendency for public sector managers to maintain “business as usual” work practices regarding work location, policy interpretation and staff development, we also found examples of purposeful management at work in the APS. Firstly, managers described a range of purposeful communication skills, and secondly, we found that managers delivered outcomes by purposefully building a trust culture with their teams. These capabilities indicate the potential for purposeful management to address ongoing challenges of a hybrid working environment in the public sector.

(1) Purposeful communication

Managers emphasised the importance of maintaining consistent connection with their teams in a hybrid working environment. Deliberate managerial practices of support were strongly represented in the data, with 48 references made in 17 FGs. Many managers focused on practical aspects of communication, such as the status of projects and allocated work, and others described how they ensured consistent team communication regardless of work location. One manager explained:

We have a couple of deliberate ways of keeping in touch, weekly catch up, but also a weekly email that goes out to all of the teams that we're working on. (FG13)

This practice of being deliberate was also articulated by another manager, who said:

You've got to make a more conscious effort to make sure that the entire team, or at least those who need to know or might need to know, are kept in the loop. And sometimes it's just general kind of matters of policy interest as well. (FG9)

Managers often highlighted this conscious effort when describing differences between managing staff in-office in contrast to at-home workspaces. They also described how they aimed to adapt informal in-person work communication practices in an online context to ensure consistent connection with their teams. Highlighting policy interest matters as a general but important dimension of purposeful communication shows the flow of information is essential to public sector teams working hybrid. Managers discussed communication practices as essential for interpersonal connections and were consciously working on effective communication strategies to maintain these connections. One manager explained:

We put infrastructure in place early on to look after people, but also to make sure that things were going okay, we have daily check ins, we have meetings all day. I'd have more conversations now with my team, and more meaningful conversations than I ever had in the office. (FG5)

Another noted:

You have to communicate better, clearer, and on many different levels. I have a small team. So, Mondays we meet face to face and talk about the week ahead and priorities. They mostly work from home for the remainder of the week. One is part-time, and one has health issues, but we have a Zoom meeting every day, like in the mornings, just to connect, chat up and see how things are going, and then at the end of the week, we have weekly achievements in terms of an email about how you've progressed, or met your deadlines, your actions, which is useful to keep on track of everything. (FG7)

Here, managers have prioritised meaningful conversations as part of their communication capabilities. Integrating work concerns with interpersonal relationship building required constant consideration. The importance of making this effort was also evident in discussions of onboarding and managing new team members. One manager described the consideration needed:

We had new people that joined us during that period, and they did say that they felt it more difficult to start to get to know their team members. We had to make a concerted effort to include those people that were brand new to our team. (FG20)

Managers emphasised effort, consideration and specific approaches to communication to meet the challenges arising in a hybrid work environment. These approaches were consistently highlighted as a conscious thought process. Managers used their communication capabilities for the purposeful management of hybrid teams.

(2) Delivering outcomes

Managers also explained how they took a purposeful approach to delivering outcomes with a hybrid team. Getting the work done, described as "performance is measured by outcomes, objectives, deliverables and trust culture" in the code book, featured strongly in participant responses, with 45 references made in 16 FGs. Many managers focused on how delivering outcomes could be supported for a hybrid team. One manager explained part of their role was:

Making sure that it shifted from a "you have to be in the office" type regime, to "we need these outcomes achieved" and everyone's flexible on how you achieve those. So long as this is the deadline, and people are a bit more communicating of that. And that's where they've shifted to, which I think is a really great approach. (FG17)

Delivering outcomes remained unchanged as a key managerial capability, but the specifics of *where* and *when* were approached with increased flexibility and reflection, with managers responsible for making and supporting these adjustments. Another manager explained that this adjustment required a stronger understanding of what outcomes meant for their team as part of the public sector:

For some managers who didn't closely monitor the output and the outcomes of their staff, but took being in the office as a measure of success, there's been a greater requirement to measure outcome and to understand outcome and to evaluate outcome with people working at home. And I actually think that's been excellent for the public service generally. Because it's meant that managers have had to be better managers, where they weren't paying that close attention. (FG3)

Rethinking of how a manager defines work outcomes in the APS represented a learning process. For managers of hybrid teams, delivering on work outcomes also required a purposeful increase in attention towards their team members by establishing trust. One manager reported:

There's a need and requirement and hopefully a shift towards putting more trust in people. So that, if you're tasking someone to do something, and they know how to do it, you trust that they're actually going to do it and get to the outcome they need to, by the time you need to get it. And you need to also have that trust, that if they don't know how to do that, they are going to ask, "how do I do this?" (FG9)

Trust between a manager and their team was described in terms of employees being trusted to deliver their outcomes. Managers also considered how employees trusted them for support when it was needed. Managers spoke about the purposeful approaches they took to demonstrate trust, with one manager describing "giving them responsibility for managing their work" resulting in team members that "stepped up and demonstrated skills they would otherwise not have demonstrated" (FG8). Another described a specific strategy:

[B]uilding that rapport between you and the employees. That's really critical, I think, and you sort of give that trust to say, I have faith in you to be able to deliver this. (FG17)

Managers described the importance of purposefully building trust through clear communication of expectations. Within their agencies, managers were ensuring they consistently met work requirements – this demanded a purposeful approach to managing hybrid teams.

Discussion

In this paper, we asked: What capabilities are public sector managers using to manage hybrid working teams? What additional capabilities are needed? To answer these questions, we identified management practices which are purposeful, considering these alongside practices which are "business as usual". In this section, we consider how managers navigated the challenges of hybrid working through purposeful management and also consider the capabilities needed for effective management in this context.

Previous research on the purposeful management of hybrid workers has focused on space (physical, virtual and social), place and time (Buick *et al.*, 2024; Vartiainen and Vanharanta, 2024). We have extended this research by identifying and highlighting the deliberate and conscious approach to employee management practices which constitute purposeful management. Purposeful management is recognisable by indicators of deliberation, reflection and evident effort through an intentional approach from managers. It involves using well-developed capabilities to foster strong communication, promote employee development and make informed decisions about work arrangements. Using these capabilities will lead to effective management based on people management processes that foster employee effort to contribute to organisational outcomes and performance to enable agencies to serve the communities they represent (Mostafa, 2021). Not practising purposeful management, conversely, can impede the performance of hybrid workers and teams,

ultimately impacting organisational performance. The importance of purposeful management, then, cannot be underestimated.

Our participants demonstrated a number of capabilities that exemplify purposeful management. We found *purposeful communication*, a conscious and deliberate approach to building and maintaining consistent connection between the manager and their team, as a well-established capability. This was evidenced by explicit effort to connect. We also found that providing *purposeful support to deliver outcomes* was a well-established capability. Managers engaged with employees purposefully by demonstrating consideration, reflection and then deliberate action to build trust and deliver outcomes with the team. We also found *purposeful staff development* was an emerging capability. Managers detailed growing understanding of how to make the work of their teams visible to senior executives and to champion staff for progression opportunities in a hybrid working context.

We also identified where the capability for purposeful management was limited by “business as usual” approaches, a key insight further evidenced by our examination of work location and policy inconsistency. A lack of capability for *purposeful management of work by location* was evident, including identifying the role of policy interpretation in a prevailing “business as usual” approach. Study participants did not consider how and where work should be conducted. This finding suggests that APS agencies may not be capitalising on more deliberate considerations of what types of work are best done in different locations. It also suggests that the organisations are path dependent – working practices in public sector institutions are so deeply embedded that change is resisted, either consciously or unconsciously. The pandemic may have enabled “pathway departure” (Teague, 2009, p. 501) for some managerial practices, but evidently, not for all.

In order to identify the management capabilities our public sector managers used when managing hybrid teams – and thereby also revealing which capabilities are needed – we reviewed existing literature on what constitutes effective management. We discussed evidence-based management and management by results, with the latter being particularly salient. Our participants practised a form of management by results, with a strong focus on outcomes. Maaranen *et al.* (2020) and Kure *et al.* (2021) discuss weaknesses of management by results, particularly in relation to the risk of focusing on easily measurable results, which can be problematic in the public sector where outcomes often defy being defined in specific metrics (Kure *et al.*, 2021). Implementing a purposeful approach to communication, culture building and decision-making can contribute to achieving results such as work being done more effectively in locations best suited to both employee and organisational needs. Purposeful management is therefore an enabler of management by results, leading to more effective management and reducing the likelihood of unintended negative consequences (Behn, 2003; Maaranen *et al.*, 2020). Such negative consequences can include employee or client dissatisfaction, which can result in public sector organisations not meeting their mandate to serve their communities.

While Australian and international public sector capability frameworks are largely silent on the managerial capabilities needed for hybrid working, our research highlights two important gaps: firstly, the capability to prioritise conscious decisions on work locations and, secondly, to provide purposeful support for career and skill development regardless of work location. Our findings provide guidance on the gap identified by Buick *et al.* (2022) as requiring attention to enact a more conscious approach to managing hybrid work, particularly in relation to capability. We recommend that these two focus areas be incorporated into management and leadership capability frameworks for public sectors internationally to make the frameworks fit for purpose for public sector hybrid workplaces. We also recommend that these additional capabilities be built into development programs to ensure that the human capital required to manage remote and hybrid teams is given the attention it warrants (Elyousfi *et al.*, 2021; Wesemann, 2023). Given the widespread use of such frameworks to articulate required capabilities and support the recruitment, promotion and performance management of managers at all levels as part of public sector HRM frameworks internationally (Mau, 2017), we believe this has significant practical implications.

Inclusion of a capability specific to purposefulness of communication, such as that included in the NSW capabilities to lead and manage hybrid teams, “be intentional and deliberate with your communication and actions” (Public Service Commission, 2022), is also critical in other public sector capability frameworks. Noting that hybrid is becoming the preferred flexible working model in public sectors (Costa *et al.*, 2024) and given the importance of capability frameworks within public sector HRM frameworks (Mau, 2017), inclusion of the recommended capabilities can have a profound impact.

Conclusion

Our research provides useful insights for knowledge-working sectors with widespread use of hybrid working arrangements. This research helps develop a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by hybrid working arrangements and how more purposeful management practices can help managers effectively manage. We suggest some areas of focus for inclusion in public sector management capability frameworks and manager training. Specifically, capabilities are required to enable managers to make conscious decisions on work locations, based on considerations such as what types of work are best done in different locations. A capability uplift to promote equitable career and skill development for all employees working hybrid would also contribute to managing hybrid teams more effectively, leading to increased organisational effectiveness. While we suggest these capabilities are needed in the public sector case study under examination, organisations in other sectors may also benefit from our findings and suggested improvements.

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