

Guest editorial: “Old habits, new normal, same patterns?” On health in hybrid workspaces

First – why do we need to talk about “healthy work (place) hybridity?”

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the world’s knowledge workforce has entered a new era – one that is marked by the “new normal” of hybrid labor and the disruption of old work patterns. The effects on (knowledge) workers’ satisfaction, workplace efficiency and society as a whole of this paradigm shift in thinking about and doing work are far-reaching (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021). It is rather critical to carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of hybrid work arrangements, with a focus on how they could influence workers’ health, during this period of change. You see, there’s more than just a change in logistics associated with the shift to hybrid work environments. It represents a radical reappraisal of the interplay between labor, health and the fine line that separates one’s private and public lives. There are several important concerns that this emerging paradigm raises: we should ensure that the transition to hybrid work models improves employee well-being without sacrificing it. But here’s the question – how can we do this? What are the distinct sources of stress linked to hybrid work, and how may they be reduced? And how can we reframe notions such as work-life balance, team cohesiveness and organizational culture within this new framework?

These questions are not merely academic; they have real-world implications for millions of knowledge workers worldwide. Recent studies have shown that while hybrid work can offer increased flexibility and autonomy, it can also lead to increased stress, burnout and feelings of isolation (e.g. Vaziri *et al.*, 2020; Şentürk *et al.*, 2021; Konovalova *et al.*, 2022; Drayton, 2024; Höcker *et al.*, 2024). The blurring of boundaries between work and home life can make it difficult for employees to “switch off,” potentially leading to longer working hours and decreased well-being (Schlachter *et al.*, 2018; Möhring *et al.*, 2021).

With that being said, one can note that the implications of hybrid work extend far beyond individual employees and organizations. They do touch upon broader societal issues such as urban planning, environmental sustainability and social equity. So, yes, as remote work becomes more prevalent, we may see shifts in population distribution, changes in commuting patterns and evolving expectations around work flexibility and autonomy (Batty, 2020; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2022). But discussing the latter, a couple of additional questions arise – how will these macro-level changes impact public health and well-being on a broader scale? For instance, reduced commuting could lead to decreased air pollution and increased physical activity, potentially yielding positive health outcomes at a population level (de Vos *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the hybrid work model presents rather idiosyncratic challenges – but also opportunities – for workplace health management. There may be a need to rethink long-standing methods of occupational health and safety in order to accommodate the increasingly varied settings in which people do their jobs.

Mental health considerations take on new dimensions as employees navigate the potential isolation of remote work and the complexities of balancing home and work life in the same physical space (Eddleston and Mulki, 2017; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2023). But how can organizations effectively support employee well-being across these varied work contexts?

In parallel, the role of leadership and management in facilitating healthy hybrid work practices cannot be overstated. As the boundaries between work and personal



life become increasingly blurred, managers should – and must – navigate new terrain in terms of communication, performance evaluation and team building (Wang *et al.*, 2021). With that said, a new set of questions arise: How can leaders foster a sense of connection and shared purpose in a distributed workforce? What new skills and competencies will be required of managers in this hybrid future? According to research, hybrid work models are likely to succeed under the guidance of managers who are adept at managing remote teams, encouraging a healthy work-life balance and preserving organizational values across different locations and platforms (Bartsch *et al.*, 2021; Allen *et al.*, 2024).

We are undergoing a long-term shift in our perspective on work and health as we try to answer these concerns, and the transition to hybrid work is clearly not a temporary fix. For years to come, the knowledge gathered during this time of change will most certainly dictate the way individuals operate. For those involved in workplace health management at the policy, practitioner and research levels, this poses a challenge as well as an opportunity. The intricacy of these matters highlights the necessity for multidisciplinary methods to investigate and oversee hybrid workplaces. To create all-encompassing plans to improve workers' health in hybrid workplaces, experts in fields such as organizational psychology, public health, ergonomics and IT, among others, will need to weigh in (Parker *et al.* (2020). Added to that, longitudinal studies are needed and should be viewed as crucial for understanding the long-term effects of hybrid work models on organizational and individual health outcomes. These studies will be necessary as hybrid work models continue to develop.

With all this in mind, the special issue that follows this editorial aims to contribute to (our) understanding of these complex dynamics by presenting a collection of papers that explore various facets of health and well-being in hybrid work environments. The studies included (and narratively summarized in the following section) offer valuable perspectives on the intricate relationship between hybrid work and employee health, spanning different sectors, organizational contexts and methodological approaches. With that, the goal of these contributions and the special issue as such is to broaden the discussion on hybrid work and health by integrating many perspectives and empirical evidence. The idea is that this will help shed light on this burgeoning field and provide helpful data for future researchers and practitioners. To that end, this editorial compiles important points on the health viewpoint of hybridized work, its associated work settings and can be viewed as a starting point of the debate around health perspective(s) in hybrid workspaces.

Second – looking into the impacts of hybrid work

In short, a new age of workplace dynamics has begun with the advent of hybrid and remote work models, and more and more research revolves around investigating the many ways in which this shift affects employees' health and well-being. That said, the first three studies that make up this special issue shed light on the difficulties and potential benefits of this complicated terrain, highlighting the need for creative means and novel approaches to understand how knowledge work can be conducted.

To start, Hayashi (2024) provides a vital starting point by examining the impact of work-related ICT use during off-job hours on employees' emotional exhaustion. His study highlights the intricate interplay between boundary-crossing behaviors, coping strategies and employee well-being in remote work environments. Hayashi's findings reveal that work-related ICT use outside of work hours not only inhibits psychological detachment (PD) but also encourages positive work reflection (PWR), both of which contribute to increased emotional exhaustion (see also Ahmad and Zakaria, 2022 work on work-related ICT use outside work hours). This observation aligns closely with the work of Soucek *et al.* (2024),

who investigate the relationship between new ways of working, work intensity and psychological well-being. Their study of public administration employees undergoing a transition to new work methods reveals that flexibility and the dissolution of boundaries, while often perceived as benefits, can lead to increased work intensity. This intensification, in turn, is associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and decreased work engagement. The connection between these studies becomes apparent when we consider how the boundary-crossing behaviors examined by [Hayashi \(2024\)](#) might contribute to the work intensification observed by [Soucek et al. \(2024\)](#). Both studies underscore the potential negative impacts of blurred work-life boundaries on employee well-being, a theme that is further explored in [Dale et al.'s \(2024\)](#) research.

In their paper, [Dale et al. \(2024\)](#) provide a complex, somewhat segmented view of hybrid work, arguing that it is an asset and a need in the labor market. Their research sheds light on the complex (or to put it better – complicated) nature of hybrid work arrangements, which provide some benefits like more autonomy and work-life balance but also some drawbacks like increasing isolation and less clear borders between work and home and/or personal life. The finding around the latter resonates with [Hayashi's \(2024\)](#) observation that the frequency of remote work promotes boundary-crossing and moderates the relationship between PWR and emotional exhaustion. However, these studies also offer insights into potential mitigating factors. The aforementioned study by [Soucek et al. \(2024\)](#) identify job resources such as autonomy and boundary control that can act as buffering factors, moderating the relationship between new work methods and work intensity. Similarly, [Hayashi \(2024\)](#) emphasizes the importance of fostering PD and minimizing boundary crossing to promote employee well-being. [Dale et al. \(2024\)](#) take this concept further by proposing specific actions that organizations can take to support healthy hybrid work. Their research addresses a crucial gap in our understanding of how organizations can proactively foster employee well-being in emerging work models. With a rather clear aim of applying the job-demands resource theory, they provide a framework for understanding the balance between the demands and resources inherent in hybrid work arrangements.

Collectively, these studies paint a comprehensive picture of the challenges and opportunities presented by new ways of working. They underline the need for organizations to be mindful of the potential for increased work intensity and boundary-crossing behaviors and their impact on employee well-being. At the same time, they highlight the importance of providing adequate resources and support to help employees navigate these new work environments. Yet organizations are facing a plethora of new issues and possibilities as a result of the shift to hybrid work models. This shift is impacting different levels of the workforce in their own distinct ways. Due to the latter, the three further studies that the following special issue holds under its wings offer vital insights into these dynamics, providing a comprehensive view of the complexities involved in managing hybrid work environments.

[Teng-Calleja et al. \(2024\)](#) focus on the critical role of middle managers in facilitating the transition to hybrid work. Their study uncovers the challenges faced by these key personnel in managing when and where work occurs, balancing demands from upper management and team members and facilitating the transition to onsite work. The research highlights the strategies employed by middle managers to balance deliverables and employee needs while demonstrating compassionate leadership. Importantly, the study reveals that managers also engage in self-care, reframing and seeking support to cope with their own challenges.

This focus on middle managers complements the findings of [Höcker et al. \(2024\)](#), who examine the impact of hybrid work on burnout among German office employees. Their research demonstrates that a higher share of remote work is associated with lower burnout and higher work autonomy. Moreover, they find that work autonomy partially mediates the effect of remote work on burnout, suggesting an overall burnout-reducing effect of hybrid

work. The connection between these studies becomes apparent when we consider how the strategies employed by middle managers, as identified by [Teng-Calleja et al. \(2024\)](#), might contribute to the increased work autonomy and reduced burnout observed by [Höcker et al. \(2024\)](#). Both studies underscore the importance of thoughtful management and work design in hybrid environments to promote employee well-being. Further, [Tommasi et al. \(2024\)](#) add another layer to this discussion by examining the effect of diversity and equality management practices on discrimination in remote work contexts. Their longitudinal study of remote workers reveals that when managers invest in equality and diversity practices, employees perceive their workplace as more inclusive, which in turn reduces subtle forms of discrimination. This finding aligns with the emphasis on compassionate leadership highlighted in [Teng-Calleja et al.'s \(2024\)](#) study of middle managers.

What is important here is that the combined findings of the above studies provide a detailed picture of the pros and cons of hybrid work arrangements. They highlight how important it is for organizations to help middle managers become change agents, create workplaces that encourage independence and reduce stress and put policies in place to combat prejudice and promote inclusion in online communities. The research by [Teng-Calleja et al. \(2024\)](#) highlights the importance of developing leadership programs that address managers' social and emotional needs during workplace transitions. This aligns with [Höcker et al.'s \(2024\)](#) suggestion that organizations should allow continuous remote work and provide work autonomy to potentially reduce employee burnout. [Tommasi et al.'s \(2024\)](#) findings further emphasize the need for managers to invest in equality and diversity practices to create an inclusive environment in virtual workplaces.

These studies collectively contribute to an evolving understanding of how hybrid work impacts various aspects of organizational life. They highlight the importance of balancing the flexibility offered by hybrid work models with strategies to support managers, prevent burnout and foster inclusive work environments. As organizations adapt to this new environment, the findings from this research can guide the creation of policies and practices that optimize the advantages of hybrid work while minimizing its possible disadvantages. However, there is another significant issue that has to be considered. Organizations that aim to improve employee well-being and optimize work design face new difficulties and possibilities in the ever-changing hybrid work landscape. Two concluding studies provide light on this changing scene: one describes a large-scale organizational transition to a hybrid paradigm, while the other focuses on a focused intervention for professional well-being.

[Schwarz et al. \(2024\)](#) delve into the potential of online interventions to enhance well-being, particularly in demanding and resource-constrained work environments. Their study focuses on flight attendants, a professional group often facing unique stressors and irregular schedules. The researchers developed and evaluated "*Happyfly*," an online intervention program designed to improve the art of living and overall well-being. The program's success in enhancing well-being, even with relatively short training durations, highlights the potential of online interventions to provide accessible and effective support for employees in diverse settings, including those engaged in hybrid work arrangements.

While [Schwarz et al. \(2024\)](#) focus on a specific intervention, [Lazarus and Nalepka \(2024\)](#) provide a real-world example of a large organization navigating the complexities of transitioning to a hybrid work model. Their practitioner paper details the experiences of the *711th Human Performance Wing of the United States Air Force* in developing and implementing the Mission-Focused Agile Work Environment (MFAWE). This case study underscores the importance of employee-inclusive practices, robust communication strategies and a deep understanding of employee needs and preferences in designing successful hybrid work models. The juxtaposition of these two papers reveals a vital insight for organizations navigating the hybrid work landscape: a multifaceted approach is essential. While targeted interventions like "*Happyfly*" can provide valuable support for

employee well-being, they are most effective when integrated into a comprehensive approach to hybrid work design. This approach, as exemplified by the MFAWE case study, should prioritize employee input, clear communication and a deep understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by different employee groups.

Third – essential takeaways for modern (hybridized) work

With the papers summarized and outlined, the following special issue has five key takeaways. These key lessons from the several research studies given provide a succinct summary of the available knowledge of mixed work settings and their effects on employee well-being. Every lesson captures a fundamental element of the changing workplace landscape and offers insightful direction for practitioners and scholars negotiating the complexity of contemporary work configurations.

First (1), we are bound to talk about the double-edged sword of hybrid work. Remember the general excitement around remote work within the pandemic environment and questioning if remote work is here to stay? Workplace health has been largely affected by the trend towards remote and hybrid work patterns. Employees experienced both good and bad outcomes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's hastening the adoption of flexible work arrangements (see Wang *et al.*, 2021; Kähkönen, 2023). Flexibility has the ability to improve job satisfaction, work-life balance and overall health, but it has also led to higher work demands and a fuzziness of the boundaries between home life and the workplace. The papers such as Soucek *et al.* (2024) and Hayashi (2024) from the following special issue show how complex this change is and how different elements like job design, organizational support and individual characteristics affect the many ways in which hybrid employment affects workers' health. It is critical for employers to find ways to use flexible work to their advantage while minimizing hazards to employees' health and safety as they adapt to this new normal.

Second (2) and following the work by Soucek *et al.* (2024), there's a need to further understand work intensity. The level of work intensity plays a crucial role in influencing the connection between innovative work methods and mental well-being. Study evidence indicates that the implementation of flexible work arrangements and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life are linked to heightened work intensity. This intensification goes beyond simply working longer hours and includes qualitative changes such as increased mental and emotional demands, a greater need for self-regulation and higher pressure for planning and decision-making. The heightened work intensity, in turn, is linked to negative outcomes like emotional exhaustion and reduced work engagement. However, the relationship between work intensity and well-being is not straightforward, as some studies also report positive associations with engagement. The intricate interaction between various factors highlights the need for an advanced understanding of workload within the framework of changing work practices.

Third (3), it's all about leveraging job resources through autonomy and boundary control as buffers in the "new work paradigm." Job resources play an important role in moderating the impact of new work arrangements on employee well-being. Specifically, autonomy in the workplace and boundary control emerge as key factors that can mitigate the negative effects of increased flexibility and blurred work-life boundaries on work intensity. Autonomy allows employees to have greater control over their work tasks, pace and scheduling, potentially reducing the pressure associated with intensified work demands. Similarly, boundary control enables individuals to manage the interface between work and personal life more effectively, potentially alleviating the stress associated with constant connectivity and extended availability. That being said, findings behind Dale *et al.*'s (2024) and Soucek *et al.*'s (2024) studies suggest that organizations should focus on enhancing these job resources, as they implement flexible work policies to ensure positive outcomes for employee health and well-being.

Fourth (4), we are obliged to start a debate around the evolving role of not only the top but also middle managers in the hybrid work era. Leadership and middle management face new obstacles when their organizations adopt hybrid and remote work models. In order to effectively oversee remote teams, middle managers, in particular, need to adapt their leadership approaches and methods. This involves learning new ways to communicate virtually, keeping the team together and treating remote and on-site workers fairly. Providing necessary technology, clear procedures and training for managers and staff are all examples of how organizational support may ease this shift, as discussed in the articles. Along with this, the research from [Teng-Calleja et al. \(2024\)](#) highlights the need for a multifaceted strategy for managing health in the workplace, taking into account employees' psychological, social and physiological needs in the setting of hybrid workplaces.

Fifth and final (5) – as demonstrated by [Tommasi et al. \(2024\)](#) – there's a need to ensure equity and inclusion in remote and hybrid work environments. In these flexible employment arrangements, issues of diversity, equality and inclusion have become increasingly significant. Their research also suggests that such arrangements may introduce new forms of discrimination or exacerbate existing inequities. Certain communities may struggle to effectively balance work and personal life or lack the necessary resources for remote work. What is more, biases may emerge in how remote workers are perceived and evaluated compared to their in-office counterparts. In light of these findings, organizations should adopt hybrid work policies and practices that prioritize diversity and inclusion. That being said, it's necessary to ensure equitable access to flexible work options and foster an inclusive atmosphere that values and supports all workers, regardless of their work structure or location. The combined insights from [Schwarz et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Lazarus and Nalepka \(2024\)](#) underline the importance of a dual approach: implementing targeted online interventions to support employee well-being while developing all-inclusive, employee-inclusive strategies for successful large-scale transitions to hybrid work models. With that being said, there appears to be a lot of space for future research, mainly given various topics that arose throughout the outlined research.

To close – future research on health in hybrid workspaces

We'll need to close this editorial by continuing to question the state of knowledge around health in hybrid workspaces. The evolving landscape of work demands a more nuanced understanding of the health implications associated with hybrid work patterns. While existing research has largely concentrated on short-term effects or relied on cross-sectional data, there is a pressing need for longitudinal studies to unravel the temporal dynamics of workers' well-being in hybrid environments. Future research work should not only assess stress and mental health but also delve into physical health markers, including musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular health and sleep patterns. How do these factors interplay over extended periods? Moreover, the intricacies of various hybrid work arrangements warrant thorough exploration. Do health outcomes differ significantly across diverse setups, such as those equally split between office and remote locations versus those heavily skewed towards one or the other?

The health and well-being impacts of hybrid work arrangements are likely to exhibit substantial variation across demographic groups, occupations and industries. A complex understanding of these phenomena necessitates a meticulous investigation of their heterogeneity. How effective are virtual team-building activities and digital wellness initiatives in fostering a sense of community and promoting health in hybrid environments? In such innovative workspaces, what effects do policies encouraging work-life balance have on employees' overall well-being? The intersection of hybrid work models and programs promoting diversity, equity and inclusion presents a crucial area for further inquiry. Do

hybrid models exacerbate or alleviate workplace inequalities? How can organizations better accommodate diverse demographics within hybrid work settings?

In hybrid work environments, organizational culture is definitely a major factor in determining health outcomes. How leadership styles, communication techniques and corporate rules impact employee well-being in these complicated contexts should be the focus of future research. How can we design and test new instruments to measure the well-being and productivity of workers in hybrid work settings when conventional evaluation techniques may not be enough to capture the complexities of the task? Could the complex relationship between hybrid work arrangements and employee health be better understood by using an interdisciplinary approach that brings together knowledge from fields such as organizational psychology, public health, ergonomics and technology studies? In light of the complex issues brought about by the merging of conventional and remote work settings, an integrative viewpoint may lead to better methods of promoting wellness in today's fast-changing (knowledge) workplace.

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