IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Working and learning in a hybrid workplace: challenges and opportunities

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Even after the lifting of lockdowns and other restrictions, many companies continue to offer remote working or hybrid working arrangements, usually to the satisfaction of their employees. For this reason, in Issue 1 of Volume 31, we explored the possibilities of working and learning in a hybrid workplace and highlighted the associated challenges and opportunities. In this special issue, Alves & Thiebaut (2024) have taken one such opportunity during the 2021 lockdowns in France and explored how both individuals and organizations contribute to creating a learning culture. The need to understand what kind of resources and support stimulate hybrid work and lead to positive outcomes for employees led Mishra & Bharti (2024) to further research in this area. They focused on whether social support from family and colleagues can help mitigate the psychological stress caused by hybrid work arrangements. When employees have a high level of affective commitment or emotional attachment to the organization, investing in high-performance work systems can increase employees' learning orientation. Yadav, Yadav, & Vihari (2024) found that this is even more pronounced in the hybrid workplace than in purely offline work. Oppong Peprah (2024) decided to investigate the prevalence of this form of work and employees' attitudes toward it in the Greater Accra region of Ghana. The study revealed several positive aspects of virtual/hybrid working for employees, but also disadvantages for employees and challenges for the organization, with a focus on team learning. Naqshbandi, Kabir, Ishak, & Islam (2024) studied the effects of teleworking on the work performance of college employees in Nigeria, while Suravi (2024) explored the possibilities for training and development in the hybrid workplace. Saini & Baba (2024) analyzed blended learning as technology-mediated teaching that combines face-to-face teaching and digital learning opportunities, with a focus on the role of multimedia.

Challenges of developing a learning culture

Many organizations struggle to develop as learning organizations. If the development of a learning organization means that such organizations consist of people who have mastered the learning disciplines, according to Senge (1990), the problem seems even greater. The idea of the learning organization has also been criticized as too idealistic, romantic and elusive and, above all, difficult to implement (Rupčić, 2017). However, the difference between these organizations and those that were not developed according to the principles of this philosophy could be felt. To make matters worse, the ideas of the learning organization paradigm are often implemented under different names, such as "agile and adaptive systems" or "collaborative partnerships" (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2017).

For this reason, many organizations are focusing on developing a learning culture with the aim of facilitating the learning process of their employees and the implementation of knowledge in their value creation process to improve productivity, efficiency and effectiveness. The reason for this could be that employees do not exhibit consistent learning behavior. Grossman (2015), for example, cites a report by a corporate executive board that only 20% of employees exhibit effective learning behavior at work. However, the reason for this could lie in the fact that only 10% of companies have succeeded in creating a learning culture, according to the same report. In this report, a true learning culture was defined as "a culture that supports an open mindset, an independent quest for knowledge, and shared learning directed toward the mission and goals of the organization" (Grossman, 2015).

This means that the learning process is strategically determined, integrated into work tasks, but also in parallel, systematically guided and directed, and that employees create and look forward to learning opportunities, freely engage in experiments with many trial-and-error cycles, enjoy sharing information and knowledge, have a collaborative mindset, apply critical reflection and cultivate a positive and constructive attitude. They see work as learning and learning as work. They respect each other, support each other and provide a safe space for dialog and the exchange of ideas.

In this special issue, Alves & Thiebaut (2024) examined how both individuals and organizations contribute to the creation of a learning culture. In other words, the question was how organizations can create an environment that fosters employees' willingness to learn, share knowledge and maintain a positive attitude toward learning. In other words, the problem is how organizations can truly make learning a core corporate value that is visible not only in their mission statements but also in their daily work. Every learning organization is based on the individual desire to learn, the general curiosity, the thirst for knowledge and the fact that every situation is used as an opportunity to learn something new, however the opportunity presents itself. In other words, in addition to the learning opportunities offered or prescribed by the organization, they learn themselves out of intrinsic motivation.

One of the best situations to study how people learn formally and informally, share knowledge, engage in dialog and think critically are crisis situations. Alves & Thiebaut (2024) used such an opportunity during the lockdowns in France in 2021 and studied such processes in organizations that do not consider themselves learning organizations with the aim of determining the level of their learning culture. This period allowed employees to invest time and effort in learning. This was also an opportunity for employees to review how self-organized, competent and disciplined they are in terms of their own learning. Many companies offered such opportunities by providing books, videos and other training material. In this way, employees felt less isolated and were more productive, especially if the material was varied and offered free of charge.

Alves & Thiebaut (2024) found that some people took advantage of the learning opportunities offered but also showed the initiative to seek out learning content themselves. It is likely that people were able to catch up on missed learning tasks or learn what they personally found interesting and valuable during this time when they saved time that they would normally spend commuting. However, not everyone took advantage of this opportunity, probably due to increased stress levels and other personal and family commitments during this time, such as homeschooling their children. Companies helped by adapting their materials for online learning and offering those working in vacation homes or other locations the opportunity to access content anytime, anywhere. Some companies had their own learning management platforms and offered support to their employees. They encouraged their employees to share experiences by supporting communities of practice.

Some companies offered content not only about the new working environment (teleworking) but also about personal well-being.

Despite all the advantages, however, the collective learning experience was undoubtedly lacking. This problem was particularly pronounced among younger workers, who were supposed to be involved in the transfer of knowledge by their older colleagues, only to be abruptly interrupted. Many also had difficulties because they needed guidance in the learning process and learning materials that they could not obtain or could only obtain inadequately. Many had problems with self-organization and discipline. Many struggled with working conditions at home due to the new circumstances and heavy workload, leaving not much time for other activities such as learning. Many longed for the feeling of being able to study freely and relaxed, which was not the case due to unforeseen circumstances for which they were not prepared.

The results show that learning culture hardly develops by itself but must be supported, guided and controlled, and that is the task of management. Even if some employees are well self-organized, self-motivated and able to learn on their own, the majority of them need guidance in the form of learning objectives and support in using existing resources, as well as other types of support as needed. They also need to be motivated to learn, they need to be encouraged to take risks in their learning and they need feedback. They also need established communities of practice, managed by management, where they can feel free to share information and knowledge, engage in dialog and think critically. Only such an approach can lead to a productive and rich learning dynamic for most. In this way, the importance of effective, available and collaborative leadership is reaffirmed.

Can we achieve a work-life balance and be happy in a hybrid work environment?

Imposed lockdowns forced the whole of humanity to rethink their way of working and living, trying to somehow maintain or at least mimic the previously established patterns. In both areas, the virtual world seemed to be a good option, despite many unanswered questions about its functioning and possibilities. However, after initial discomfort and misunderstandings, many previous activities were resumed, albeit in a different environment and setting, with both positive and negative effects and consequences. For one sector, however, the transition to the virtual working environment has been much easier than for others – the IT sector. Their work is usually virtual or, in other words, not limited in space and time. This sector is also very knowledge-intensive and depends on effective learning, knowledge sharing and knowledge management. The IT sector and its products have also been the key factor in maintaining productivity in other sectors, which have been able to quickly switch to virtual mode and allow workers more flexibility and autonomy (Haneberg, 2020).

Even after the restrictions were lifted, many companies have continued to maintain or allow flexible working arrangements that enable both office and remote working, usually from home. This way of working has both positive and negative effects. The fast and dynamic pace of work in most sectors contributed to problems such as burnout, especially through digital exhaustion and the spillover of work activities into private life and personal space (Gratton, 2021). However, this form of work also contributed to a better work-life balance and, thus, higher employee satisfaction. By saving commuting time, employees have more time for their private interests, family, pets and hobbies. But also, better control of work priorities, more privacy and better concentration without distractions in the office enable both higher productivity and greater job satisfaction.

The level of satisfaction depends on the established corporate culture that promotes flexibility in work and communication, as well as the organizational support provided for these purposes. The need to understand what kind of resources and support stimulate hybrid work and lead to positive outcomes for employees prompted Mishra & Bharti (2024) to conduct further research in this area. In other words, the question was whether social support from family and colleagues can help mitigate the psychological stress caused by hybrid work arrangements. Social support is especially important because many organizations either nurture and maintain the learning organization or are developed as learning organizations and promote learning, knowledge sharing and knowledge management in a virtual environment. In other words, dynamic work environments and continuous intervention requirements should allow workers to choose the time and manner of learning and knowledge sharing with other, often dislocated, workers and stakeholders.

However, this form of work also allows them to search for better work opportunities and conditions from home or other remote locations. Over time, they can learn to build virtual social networks as places that provide help with work but also social support that can extend beyond work relationships to coping with family and other problems. In this way, social support in the virtual environment can help prevent or reduce fatigue, dissatisfaction, exhaustion and burnout due to overwork or work-related uncertainty, ambiguity, vagueness or unclear expectations. Therefore, social support can be considered a key factor in achieving and maintaining work-life balance (Oludayo & Omonijo, 2020).

Mishra & Bharti (2024), using a sample of Indian IT companies, confirmed the crucial role of social support in achieving work-life balance in a hybrid work environment. It was also shown that employees who receive higher levels of social support are also more satisfied with their lives. It should be noted that social support could come from family members, friends and colleagues. Therefore, it is suggested that practitioners, especially managers, promote informal organization and its manifestations, but also provide social support and encourage their employees to provide social support to their colleagues, but also to other people regardless of their social role, so that the whole society benefits and we get happier and more satisfied employees and people in general.

How strong is our emotional bond to our organization?

Almost all daily activities present some level of challenge and require new learning and the development of new skills. Unexpected events with a high degree of disruption, such as lockdowns, pose an even greater challenge and require quick responses and immense learning in a short period of time to ensure a seamless transition or transformation. These activities are highly dependent not only on the wisdom and knowledge of leaders but also on the flexibility and ability of employees to learn, act and adapt. However, a key element that can stimulate these activities is the level of emotional attachment or bond to the organization, also known as affective commitment. It fosters employees' sense of belonging to the organization and enables stronger goal identification. For this reason, managers should work toward developing and fostering employees' affective commitment to the organization by treating them as valuable individuals.

Employees with a greater affective commitment or emotional bond to the organization are more likely to engage effectively in learning activities, which enhances the learning orientation of the organization. For this reason, after developing employees' affective commitment, organizations should provide rich learning opportunities such as training and mentoring programs, workshops and other knowledge-sharing activities, especially informal learning. These activities can be offered both onsite and online or in a hybrid

mode. The hybrid mode enables the benefits of offline learning, such as flexibility, but also face-to-face interaction on site, which can also help to strengthen effective commitment (Jordan, 2009).

The missing link in this scenario could be a strong organizational commitment to learning, which is fostered through the development of high-performance work systems, also known as high-performance work practices, high-engagement work systems, or high-engagement work systems. When employees have high levels of affective commitment or emotional bond to the organization, investing in high-performance work systems can increase employees' orientation to learning. Yadav et al. (2024) found that this is even more pronounced in the hybrid workplace than in purely offline work. High-performing work systems include training and development processes that show employees that they are valued and supported in their work, which contributes to their sense of affective commitment to the organization. Such employees are then more likely to engage in further learning and development activities that promote a learning orientation of the organization. For this reason, practitioners need to foster employees' sense of belonging, provide them with support and development opportunities, and show them that their work and efforts are valued. Hybrid work has a positive impact on employee well-being and productivity in many ways, and increased affective commitment through development opportunities seems to be one of them!

Can teamwork thrive in the hybrid workplace?

Virtual and hybrid working is gaining momentum after many companies were forced to quickly switch to this way of working during lockdowns and has become an everyday way of working. The new generations seem to prefer this way of working even more for various reasons. It is to be expected that virtual and hybrid forms of work will continue to gain ground due to their numerous benefits for both employees and companies. Oppong Peprah (2024) decided to investigate the prevalence of this form of work and employees' attitudes toward it in the Greater Accra region of Ghana. The study revealed several positive aspects of virtual/hybrid working for employees:

- Workers are more productive, both in terms of their work and their personal affairs. The reasons for this are as follows:
  - They save time on commuting;
  - They save mental and physical energy and have more energy for work;
  - There are fewer interruptions from colleagues;
  - They can think and reflect more intensely, concentrate better and therefore make fewer mistakes;
  - They experience less stress; and
  - They have the ability to complete tasks in their own time and at their own pace.
- Costs can be reduced in the following ways:
  - Saving on fuel costs; and
  - Saving on living costs.

Naqshbandi et al. (2024) studied the effects of teleworking on the work performance of college employees in Nigeria and also found that flexible working arrangements allow for greater time autonomy and promote work performance. Some employees perform better in the morning, while others prefer later working hours. Academic work in teaching and research is very complex and multifaceted, so the best working hours for individuals could

ensure the best quality of output and attention to personal matters due to a better work-life balance. Flexible working hours also increase employees' work engagement, which in turn is related to the fact that working at the college is driven by intrinsic motivation, and greater time autonomy allows them to immerse themselves intensively in their work, which also contributes to greater satisfaction.

The study by Oppong Peprah (2024) also identified several disadvantages of virtual/ hybrid work for employees:

- Decision-making is slower when supported by colleagues or managers;
- Insufficient monitoring and feedback;
- Unreliable internet connection;
- Lack of spatial and ergonomic working conditions;
- Creation of two corporate cultures – one in the office and one among employees working remotely;
- Loss of a sense of shared identity and community;
- Mixing of professional and private life;
- Tasks that are sent at all hours and require attention;
- Lack of social interaction with others;
- Social isolation and loneliness, especially for single people; and
- Distraction from spouse, children and/or pets.

These results can be compared with the findings of Naqshbandi et al. (2024), who investigated the effects of the telework on the work performance of college employees in Nigeria. They found no positive effects of telecommuting on employee productivity. Although distractions from home could be responsible for this, the reasons could rather be due to poor power distribution and network service. For this reason, good infrastructural conditions are one of the most important prerequisites for effective teleworking in terms of employee productivity.

The study by Oppong Peprah (2024) also revealed some challenges for the organization:

- Lack of monitoring capabilities;
- Absence due to virtual presence and logging into the system, but actually spending time doing other activities;
- Unreasonably high internet bills;
- Unreliable internet connection;
- Lack of direct and informal connections between employees; and
- Risk of depression due to isolation, which affects productivity.

Hybrid working conditions are also problematic for teamwork and team learning, as the study found. It was found that:

- Group cohesion is diminished;
- The exchange of knowledge is insufficient;
- There is asynchronous working dynamics among employees; and
- There is lack of knowledge transfer to newly hired employees.

In regions with good internet connectivity and in organizations where employees are experts working largely autonomously, both individuals and organizations can reap great benefits

from remote/hybrid work. Organizations can recruit talent from almost anywhere, and people could find the jobs that suit them best. However, if employees cannot work autonomously and need constant guidance, feedback and supervision and their tasks are interdependent, a predominantly office-based workforce might be the better option. Knowledge sharing and transfer, which leads to greater organizational learning, could also be better supported by such forms of working. However, these employees could also benefit from remote working days, so companies will need to consider how best to encourage such opportunities.

Training and learning in the hybrid workplace and supported by multimedia

In times when we are bombarded with content of all kinds, it is difficult to maintain a wide attention span and learn new things effectively. However, the digital environment can offer some advantages and facilitate the learning and development process. Learning in the digital environment has gained popularity not only because of its numerous possibilities but also because of the transition of work to the digital environment and the need to ensure greater flexibility in both working and learning.

In this issue, Suravi (2024) explored the possibilities for training and development in the hybrid workplace. As companies increasingly adopt new ways of working, such as remote and hybrid workplaces, many HR practices will need to change, including training and development. When employees work remotely, training and development programs should also be offered virtually. With greater flexibility, employees can complete such programs at their own pace and in their own time, repeating some aspects as needed. Such programs, such as simulation-based training, can also achieve better results compared to traditional training programs (Kulkarni, Appasaba, Gokhale, & Tigadi, 2022). If employees are to acquire general knowledge of organizational procedures required for some routine tasks, online training programs can lead to excellent results. Such programs, such as simulation-based training, can also achieve better results compared to traditional training programs (Kulkarni et al., 2022). They can incorporate gamification, virtual reality and artificial intelligence to achieve better results and more engagement.

In a hybrid workplace and in digital training programs, trainees may feel disengaged due to a lack of active interaction. This is why Saini & Baba (2024) analyzed blended learning as technology-mediated teaching that combines face-to-face teaching and digital learning opportunities. Digital learning environments enable multimedia learning by combining audio, video, animations, simulations, graphics and interactive features to provide a rich learning experience. Diverse content can increase learner engagement and convey information through different perceptual pathways, improving comprehension and memory. Such content can also be tailored to specific needs, allowing for a personalized learning experience. In this way, the learning process could take less time while its impact lasts longer.

However, practitioners should bear in mind that excessive use of multimedia could overstrain the sensory apparatus. In this way, the learning process could be less effective or completely ineffective due to frustration and rejection of the learning material. It is therefore a great challenge to create a digital learning experience that uses multimedia in a balanced way so that it is stimulating but not overwhelming, engaging but not frustrating and challenging but not overly complex. The right choice of multimedia has a positive effect on learners' attitudes toward learning and the material presented, but it can also stimulate their reasoning, critical thinking and memory. It is important to arouse learners' curiosity for new content but also to emphasize the most important learning points. A positive learning experience convinces learners of the positive effects of digital learning so that they want to

have further similar learning experiences. For this reason, it is important that practitioners first learn about the target audience and then customize the learning experience accordingly using various digital and multimedia tools.

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