



Hybrid Work, Social Relationships, and Employee Well-Being: Understanding Engagement and Collaboration in Contemporary Workplaces

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Abstract

Hybrid work is a key characteristic of the modern working world, and it has changed the way people communicate, collaborate, socially connect and engage in the work environment in terms of well-being. This review synthesizes current scholarship on the relational and organizational dynamics of hybrid work, with particular attention to employee engagement, collaboration, belonging, social connectedness, and well-being. The evidence suggests that there are significant benefits to hybrid working that include flexibility, autonomy, better work–life balance and greater control over working arrangements. Alongside these benefits, however, are risks such as decreased informal interaction, loneliness, proximity bias, digital fatigue, technostress, and the blurring of work–life separation, as well as burnout. Social relationships become a key connector between hybrid working conditions and employee experiences and organizational outcomes, and communication quality, knowledge sharing, inclusive participation and managerial support influence distributed working. The review further highlights the role of organizational readiness, inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and equitable work practices in sustaining engagement and collaboration across locations. Hybrid work therefore needs to be considered as a system of socio-technical and relational arrangements, not just a spatial arrangement. It is a combination of flexibility and robust social infrastructure, controlled digital needs, good leadership and employee-focused organizational support that will make it sustainable over the long term. Longitudinal, multilevel and cross-cultural studies are suggested as areas of future research that need to be explored more so as to gain deeper insights into hybrid work arrangements and their impact on individuals, teams and organisations.

Keywords: hybrid work, employee well-being, social relationships, employee engagement, workplace collaboration

1. Introduction

There has been significant change in the structural and social organization of work, following changes in technology, the expectations of workers and a greater demand for flexibility. Work is more than just a task and an exchange of money; employees interpret work within the context of work organisations, their relationships with others, their professional identities and the social nature of working (Noon & Morrell, 2017). Concurrently, employment practices have shifted, changing the nature of work and the demands imposed on workers, which has led to more flexible workplaces along with changing expectations around performance, autonomy and participation within the organization (Findlay & Thompson, 2017). Both of these developments are important to consider in the context of the speed of the increase in remote and hybrid work models.

Participation in an organization has been increasingly detached from the need to be present in a common workspace through digital technologies. The rise of remote work has disrupted traditional modes of communication, coordination, knowledge sharing, and social interaction among colleagues, involving them in managing relationships both in the physical and virtual world (Leonardi et al., 2024). Hybrid work appears to be a continuation of this transformation, as jobs can be performed at home or in the workplace, but the manner and the spatial flexibility of hybrid arrangements demand a shift in thinking about managerial and organizational routines (Sokolic, 2022). Hybrid working needs to be seen as more than just where people work, but rather as a fundamental review of how people work, collaborate and engage in the life of the organisation. These relational consequences are becoming more important to consider for the understanding of employee experiences in a changing work context (Findlay & Thompson, 2017).

Social relationships are a central part of this evolving work environment. Reduced face-to-face interaction may affect communication opportunities, employees' concerns about relationship loss, and their sense of belonging within the workplace, which may transform the nature of communication relationships (Tröster & Brosi, 2026). The nature of workplace relationships determines and influences the quality of an organization's experience because employee interactions with colleagues and supervisors are crucial to information sharing, social support, employee identity development, and employee interpretations of organizational life (Sias & Shin, 2019). Communication in the workplace is the daily interaction process by which these relationships are established and maintained and is especially significant when communication takes place in blended modalities (digital and face-to-face) (Mikkola & Nykänen, 2019). The hybrid way of working can therefore provide opportunities for autonomy and flexibility, while at the same time altering the social infrastructure which connects employees.

The relational shifts have significant impacts on engagement, collaboration and wellbeing. While productivity is a crucial factor in effective hybrid work, others are essential, such as psychological involvement, social connection, and coordination across places. Relational and communication processes are key to the success of distributed work, as they can affect how employees reach out to colleagues and organizational knowledge, in ways that can change with remote working lifestyles (Leonardi et al., 2024). Employee mental health and well-being are also affected by workplace culture; that is, the conditions and experiences of the workplace can impact more than job performance (Monteiro & Joseph, 2023). Social relationships can consequently be a key linking process in the relationship between hybrid working and engagement, cooperation, and employee health.

While there is increasing research into remote and hybrid work, the results are studied individually. While flexibility, technology, productivity, communication and individual well-being have been well researched, there has been less research that examines how social relationships are changing and how that can impact the relationship between hybrid work, engagement, collaboration, and well-being at the same time. This division narrows the lens of understanding about the possible relational mechanisms that could help to make hybrid arrangements work socially.

This review is designed to bring together existing knowledge regarding hybrid working and workplace social relationships, analyse the impacts of relational changes on employee engagement, teamwork and well-being, as well as understand which organizational mechanisms enhance or detract from these results, and provide clear guidelines on how to design socially connected and sustainable hybrid workplaces.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Hybrid Work

Hybrid working is more than just about distributing employees between home and organizational workspace. It is a multidimensional, non-categorical work model, defined by the variability in the nature of the work itself, the timing of it, the technology involved, the autonomy and the nature of the interaction. To comprehend the impact of spatial and temporal flexibilities in practice, it is important to consider the interplay between the flexibilities and the organizational structure and employee experiences (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). Another important consideration that goes into designing a hybrid environment is intentional choices about place and time; instead of a rigid "on" or "off" schedule, purposeful decisions are made about what time of day, or day of the week, an employee will be in the office, and what tasks will require them to be there. (Gratton, 2021).

Employees' experiences are key to assessing the effectiveness of hybrid arrangements. When working

conditions, autonomy, working relationships and opportunities for meaningful interaction are suitable, flexibility can help to promote work engagement, work–life balance, perceived effectiveness, and health. The benefits of being hybrid are not guaranteed but are dependent on how staff perceive and engage with hybrid working in practice (Eng et al., 2024). The possibilities of reorganizing work have also grown with the aid of digitalization, as traditional office structures are no longer crucial and employees can conduct interrelated work in a distributed environment. Digitalization therefore requires workspace configuration, communication technologies, and management practices to operate as interconnected components of hybrid work (Epizitone & Moyane, 2026).

Hybrid working is also part of the wider transformation to new ways of working, where digital connectivity and flexibility, mobility, and the changing nature of organisational boundaries are challenging assumptions about where and how work takes place. These changes influence working practices as well as social interaction, employee identities, and experiences of control over work (Aroles et al., 2021). The Job Demands–Resources (JDR) model offers a helpful framework for the mixed consequences. Hybrid options create a mix of resources that include autonomy, flexibility, fewer commutes, increased control, and demands for digital intensity, coordination challenges, lack of boundaries, and decreased interaction with others. How these demands match up with resources can influence engagement, strain and overall employee outcomes (Doargajudhur et al., 2026).

In Social Exchange Theory, employment relationships are seen as systems of reciprocal exchange, bringing a relational explanation. Organizational support, flexibility, fairness, trust, and recognition are signals that impact organizational members' readiness to reciprocate by aligning their actions with the organization by committing to it, cooperating with it, or engaging in positive behaviors in the workplace. For this reason, although hybrid arrangements can enhance the relationship between employee and organization at the same time, when they are not properly managed, they can also erode the reciprocity and trust between employee and organization (Ahmad et al., 2023). Social Capital Theory is an extension of this concept from personal exchanges to the resources that are stored in workplace networks. Social capital is most important when employees are not working together in the same physical location and is communicated through relationships, enabling access to information, trust, shared meaning, support and informal knowledge. It is therefore essential to preserve these relational resources in order to ensure collaboration and the effectiveness of the organization when operating in hybrid working environments (Deal & Levenson, 2021).

Combined, they cast a more socio-technical and relational lens on hybrid work, rather than just a location policy. Its results are contingent on factors such as the design of the work, the digital infrastructure, the demands and resources of the jobs, interdependent organizational relations, and social capital between workers both physically and virtually. Table 1 provides an amalgamation of the main conceptual and theoretical ideas that explain the interaction between work design, resources, reciprocity and relational capital and their influence on hybrid-work experiences.

Table 1. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of Hybrid Work

Perspective	Central Construct	Explanatory Mechanism	Organizational Implication	References
Hybrid work design	Spatial-temporal flexibility	Aligns place and time with work requirements	Design work around tasks and employee needs	Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024; Gratton, 2021
Employee experience	Engagement and work–life balance	Working conditions shape hybrid-work outcomes	Provide autonomy and supportive conditions	Eng et al., 2024
New ways of working	Digitalized work transformation	Technology reshapes workspaces and boundaries	Integrate technology, workspace, and management	Epizitone & Moyane, 2026; Aroles et al., 2021
Job Demands–Resources	Demands–resource balance	Resources stimulate engagement; demands generate strain	Balance flexibility with workload	Doargajudhur et al., 2026
Social Exchange Theory	Reciprocity	Support and fairness encourage reciprocal commitment	Strengthen trust and organizational support	Ahmad et al., 2023
Social Capital Theory	Relational resources	Networks enable trust and knowledge exchange	Preserve social ties across locations	Deal & Levenson, 2021

3. Social Relationships, Connectedness, and Belonging in Hybrid Workplaces

Hybrid work changes the social context in which employees become members of an organization. In hybrid settings, belonging cannot depend primarily on continuous in-person interaction when employees are working in both remote and shared settings. The sense of membership and connection to the work and the sense of

perceived inclusion become important factors in maintaining a sense of membership across geographic locations (Urrila et al., 2025). Social connections are a key part of the employee experience, as workplaces are not only places of task performance. Social support and interpersonal connections can be related to the quality of relationships with peers, which in turn can be associated with the overall health and well-being of workers (Birmingham et al., 2024). Belonging is a universal desire to be accepted, valued and connected in a social setting, and, thus, having relational experiences is a practical reason that should be part of the consideration of organizations alongside productivity and performance outcomes (Imboden, 2024).

The manager–employee relationship also shifts when there is less regular “in-person” contact. Managing relationships and/or the development of relational responsibilities will be a new challenge for managers, and they must be prepared to assist employees whose working habits or location may be shifting. In distributed working arrangements, the management of relationships is thus a more conscious responsibility of the manager (Hasle, 2025). Another mechanism of relations is informal communication. In non-formal settings, away from the heavily formalized meetings, exchanges can foster knowledge sharing and organizational commitment in hybrid teams. Organizations might need to take steps to ensure informal interaction continues where opportunities do not necessarily exist, rather than relying on other digital means of communication for these interactions (Lütjens & Felfe, 2026).

Relational benefits of flexibility can also exist alongside social risks. While an increase in freedom over the location of work can improve the social dimensions of working, it does not automatically do so; hybrid workers can be lonely because having fewer face-to-face interactions with others in the workplace reduces their opportunities for an enriching social life. Workplace relationships have not been forgotten when evaluating workplace hybrid arrangements, and the quality and availability of these relationships are important factors in how employees experience hybrid work (Knight et al., 2022). Social connectedness also relates to diversity, equity and inclusion. The design of the hybrid working environment should also take into account variations in workplaces, as this can shape organizational participation experiences of workers, which can be relevant for other inclusion measures. Supporting hybrid practices with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can help organizations ask themselves if there is a fair opportunity for staff members working from multiple locations to access and be included in organizational life (Dowling et al., 2022).

The literature indicates that hybrid work influences not only how employees perform their work but also how they experience workplace relationships. Belonging, social connection, managerial relationships, informal communication, loneliness, and inclusion collectively shape the social sustainability of hybrid work. Figure 1 illustrates how relational mechanisms in hybrid work can generate both positive outcomes and social risks, highlighting the importance of meaningful, equitable, and inclusive workplace connections.

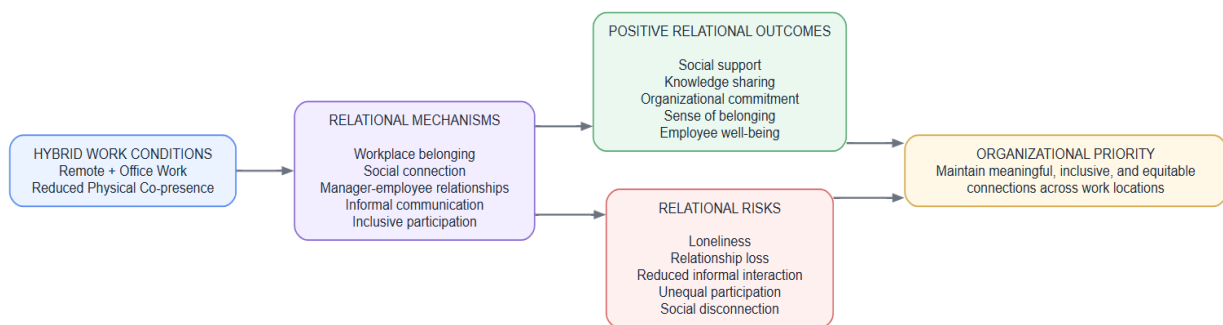


Figure 1. Relational Mechanisms, Outcomes, and Social Risks in Hybrid Workplaces

4. Employee Engagement, Communication, and Collaboration

Organizational support, employee participation, and social connectedness are fundamental to employee engagement in hybrid environments, alongside the effective integration of flexibility. Hybrid work culture thus demands the adoption of new practices of engagement that align with the new employee expectations and ways of communication, not just replicating the typical engagement experiences in the workplace context to the remote one (Kumari & Yelkar, 2022). Engagement is now recognised as a social, cultural and contextual construct in which individual engagement (performance and well-being) is shaped by the overall context of the organisation (Boccoli et al., 2023). Organizations, then, have to rethink the way they measure and maintain engagement when they work remotely or with hybrid teams. When staff members work across sites, the physical presence of workers is less useful as a proxy for contribution, and performance systems should recognise outcomes, participation and evolving patterns of engagement. Hybrid working can therefore change the nature of engagement as well as some expectations associated with performance management (Tawalbeh, 2025).

Communication plays a crucial role in this transition, as hybrid work arrangements involve an allocation of interactions between face-to-face and digitally-mediated ways of communicating. Business communication has to be able to reach employees in varying locations and with limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction,

so the quality and availability of communication are becoming more crucial to the functioning of the organisation (Brkljača & Šajn, 2025). However, 'distributed work' experiences also differ by employees' work-specific contexts and other contextual conditions, indicating that there are no one-size-fits-all equivalents between hybrid work practices (Gauger et al., 2022). Access to communication technology is not the only ingredient of collaboration. Since there is less co-location, distributed teams need to coordinate activities, responsibilities, information, and interdependent activities. Research with remote-first and hybrid software teams highlights the need for coordination to be an iterative process in which the diverse members of a team coordinate collective activities (de Souza Santos & Ralph, 2022). Collaboration-aware methods also emphasize the importance of considering collaborative information in the study of knowledge development, further underscoring the relationship between interaction and collective learning processes (Chen et al., 2024).

Asymmetries between co-located and remote participants can also result from hybrid interaction. Synchronous meetings do not necessarily generate the same interactional conditions, as different communicative, technological and spatial conditions are experienced by the participants. This asymmetry questions the notion that everyone should join the same meeting to ensure equal participation (Bjørn et al., 2024). This issue also has an organizational component, since those who are working from home might be subject to different treatment compared to those who are more physically present. Return-to-office policies are not enough to address the issues of visibility, access, and equal treatment (Williamson et al., 2024).

Flexibility can increase autonomy over how and where employees work, but access to such autonomy may be uneven. These inequalities are therefore important when assessing the well-being effects of hybrid arrangements (Doms et al., 2026). To make sustainable hybrid work happen, employers need to take employee wellbeing into account, as well as performance and flexibility. There is evidence that whilst hybrid working may be suitable in the short to medium-term, work practices which can support employees in the context of remote working conditions are required to meet the different demands of distributed working (Telu & Kumar, 2025). Therefore, engagement and collaboration must be understood in the context of a larger system of sustainable work, and not as standalone metrics.

Communication and collaboration are interlinked with employee engagement in hybrid working environments. To achieve sustainable arrangements, there needs to be more meaningful engagement, effective coordination, accessible communication, equitable participation and autonomy, but at the same time, working in a hybrid workplace is not the same for everyone. Table 2 captures the mechanisms by which engagement, communication, coordination and participation impact collaborative functioning in hybrid working.

Table 2. Core Processes Shaping Engagement and Collaboration in Hybrid Work

Organizational Process	Employee-Level Mechanism	Hybrid-Work Constraint	Strategic Response	References
Engagement	Involvement and commitment	Reduced visibility	Emphasize meaningful participation	Kumari & Yelkar, 2022; Tawalbeh, 2025
Contextual engagement	Performance–well-being balance	Variable work experiences	Align performance with well-being	Boccoli et al., 2023
Communication	Information exchange	Spatially fragmented interaction	Maintain accessible communication	Brkljača & Šajn, 2025; Gauger et al., 2022
Coordination	Task interdependence	Distributed responsibilities	Establish clear coordination routines	de Souza Santos & Ralph, 2022
Knowledge collaboration	Collective learning	Fragmented knowledge exchange	Enable collaborative knowledge development	Chen et al., 2024
Interaction equity	Equal participation	Hybrid meeting asymmetry	Ensure comparable participation opportunities	Bjørn et al., 2024
Proximity equity	Organizational visibility	Proximity bias	Reduce location-based disadvantage	Williamson et al., 2024
Sustainable flexibility	Autonomy and well-being	Unequal access to benefits	Design equitable work arrangements	Doms et al., 2026; Telu & Kumar, 2025

5. Employee Well-Being and the Dual Effects of Hybrid Work

An employee's well-being can be supported with hybrid work through flexibility and increasing the perception of control. Having greater autonomy in how one works can meet vital psychological needs and help with job satisfaction, especially if hybrid working is perceived as a choice, not a mandate (Junça Silva et al., 2026). Flexibility also blurs the lines between work and leisure. Less commuting and more control over work location could help people manage non-work responsibilities, but working in both settings could prove to be a challenge for disengaging from work. Employees' capacity to set and sustain effective boundaries between

work and home, therefore, plays a part in their well-being (Chan & Kinman, 2024).

There is an opposing set of pressures in digital dependency. With the use of virtual communication and technology-mediated coordination being a key part of work, hybrid workers may be exposed to a high amount of digital fatigue. This fatigue can lead to difficulties in maintaining focus and engagement, highlighting that connectivity through technology does not equate to a better employee experience (Jain et al., 2025). Longer-lasting digital requirements can potentiate more comprehensive psychological pressure. It becomes critical in technostress when people have difficulties getting away from work or getting sufficient recovery. Therefore, with hybrid work, burnout needs to be explored in terms of technological demands, psychological detachment and organizational support for employees (Whelan et al., 2026).

These pressures and challenges generate an essential conflict between productivity and mental health. Although hybrid options can help to streamline and enhance flexibility, constant connectivity and high digital demands can also lead to burnout and a decline in mental health. There is a need for organizations to strike a balance between meeting productivity demands and ensuring the mental well-being of their employees for sustainable performance (Mateen et al., 2025).

There is another link between well-being and performance, in the form of occupational stress. Burnout and stress are linked to perceived performance, and work regime has the potential to impact the relationship between these. Therefore, the impact of hybrid work should be assessed in conjunction with other aspects of work organization, and not solely by the work location (Conceição & Palma-Moreira, 2025). The dual nature of hybrid working is due to these benefits and risks. Flexibility can create positive job experiences and, at the same time, add additional demands and challenges. But research into the disadvantages and benefits of hybrid working suggests that outcomes are not necessarily negative or positive, but rather are a function of the combination of advantages and disadvantages in specific work arrangements (Smite et al., 2025).

Hybrid work produces conditional well-being outcomes. While flexibility, autonomy, and effective boundary control can enhance employee experiences, digital fatigue, technostress, inadequate recovery, and burnout can offset these benefits. Organizational design must therefore preserve flexibility while preventing excessive demands from undermining employee health and well-being. Table 3 combines the opposing ways in which hybrid-work characteristics can be beneficial for employee well-being or strain employee mental health and digital well-being.

Table 3. Employee Well-Being Pathways in Hybrid Work

Work Characteristic	Positive Pathway	Adverse Pathway	Organizational Safeguard	References
Work autonomy	Control and job satisfaction	—	Preserve meaningful employee choice.	Junça Silva et al., 2026
Work–life boundaries	Flexible role management	Boundary blurring	Support boundary control	Chan & Kinman, 2024
Digital connectivity	Work accessibility	Digital fatigue	Regulate digital demands	Jain et al., 2025
Digital work intensity	Connectivity and coordination	Technostress and burnout	Enable detachment and recovery	Whelan et al., 2026
Performance demands	Flexible productivity	Mental health strain	Balance productivity and well-being	Mateen et al., 2025
Occupational demands	Adaptability	Stress and burnout	Monitor psychosocial workload	Conceição & Palma-Moreira, 2025
Hybrid work configuration	Flexibility and efficiency	Concurrent work demands	Balance benefits and costs	Smite et al., 2025

6. Organizational Responses, Leadership, and Future Research

Organizational change is needed instead of just a shift of workplaces, in order to transition to hybrid working. Organizations need to match their organizational structures, technologies, communication patterns and human resource systems to these new distributed work patterns. The readiness of employees is also crucial, as it is important to ensure that employees have available resources and capacity to make the necessary changes for work arrangements (Hasyim & Bakri, 2024). Leadership is a critical component when workers work across physical and virtual settings. The challenge for hybrid leaders is to meet performance expectations and keep employees happy while also ensuring coordination and support between the various locations. This entails more than just seeing who is present to supervise; it involves new leadership styles that support flexible and technology-driven work (Sharma et al., 2025).

The other mechanism that can help maintain the performance of hybrid teams is inclusive leadership. Where employees are physically located and the way they are present at the workplace varies, they must be given opportunities to be meaningful participants, contributors and connected people. Distributed teams may be addressed by creating conditions that encourage participation and effective functioning by using inclusive

leadership (Hincapie & Costa, 2024). Psychological safety represents an important social dimension of organizational responses to hybrid work. In the hybrid environment, interpersonal conditions must be conducive to allowing employees to express themselves and to having positive interpersonal interactions without worrying about the interpersonal consequences. Psychological safety and positive experiences can be achieved even if tasks are completed in different settings; opportunities for authenticity and fun at work can be part of this too (Plester & Lloyd, 2023). Organizational support is also essential, as hybrid work is not going to happen as a result of individual adaptation alone. Public sector evidence demonstrates how positive organisational support is crucial to employees' reality and experience of hybrid working. It is therefore necessary to have policies that are formal and accompanied by managerial and organizational practices which will make flexibility workable in the employees' daily lives (Dara et al., 2026).

Future studies should focus on the distinct impacts of types of hybrid arrangements on employee outcomes, rather than comparing hybrid and office-only work, but rather on how these specific aspects of hybrid (including location, frequency, autonomy, leadership, and digital interaction) influence outcomes for employees. Longitudinal and multilevel studies are required to help identify the changes in social relationships, engagement, collaboration and wellbeing over time. In addition, there needs to be more focus on occupational, cultural, socioeconomic and organizational differences, as well as access or lack of access to flexibility and visibility. Future research combining the outcomes of employees, teams, and organizations would give a more solid foundation for the development of a socially sustainable hybrid work environment.

Effective hybrid work requires coordinated organizational and leadership responses rather than isolated flexibility policies. Together, organizational readiness, supportive leadership, inclusion, psychological safety, and institutional support create the conditions for productive, equitable, and socially sustainable hybrid work. Figure 2 presents an integrated pathway linking organizational foundations and leadership support with relational and performance outcomes, sustainable hybrid work, and future research priorities.

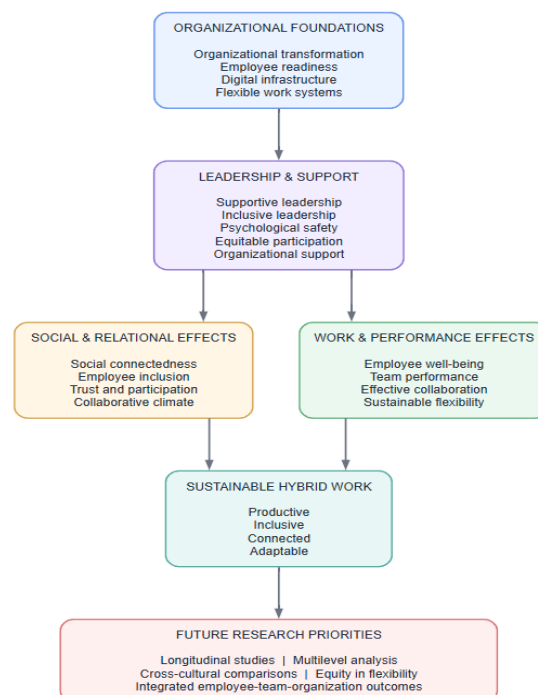


Figure 2. Organizational and Leadership Pathways Toward Sustainable Hybrid Work

7. Conclusion

Hybrid working has become a complex organizational dynamic that is intricately linked with flexibility, digital connectivity, social relationships, and employee well-being. The review demonstrates that its effectiveness can't be determined based on productivity and/or location flexibility. The success of hybrid working, however, hinges on aspects of social connection, belonging, communication quality, collaboration and equitable participation. Another dual effect on well-being is also evidenced. Having autonomy, control and flexibility may enhance satisfaction with work and work-life management, but digital fatigue, technostress, blurred boundaries or burnout may be a threat. The success of sustainable outcomes thus relies on the ability of organizations to find a balance between flexibility and recovery, the demands of digital tools and work design support. Organizational readiness and leadership are vital as well. Social infrastructure to support performance and well-being in dispersed work settings includes inclusive leadership, psychological safety, employee support, and equitable participation. Hybrid work is best understood as a socio-technical and relational system and not as a straightforward scheduling model. It will need to be flexible, with good relationships, inclusive practices and support for employees in the organization if it is to be successful in the long term.

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