Hybrid Work, Visibility and Proximity

Bayu Nuswantoro, Victoria University of Wellington, bayu.nuswantoro@vuw.ac.nz
Alexander Richter, Victoria University of Wellington, alex.richter@vuw.ac.nz

Background of the Study

In the context of hybrid work, workplace proximity means that being in an office space brings employees together, facilitates chance encounters and increases communication (Kraut et al., 2002). However, the rapid ascent of hybrid work has added nuanced layers to this concept, which is no longer just about physical distance, but also about how employees perceive and interpret these distances. For instance, ‘perceived proximity’ describes the emotional and relational closeness employees feel towards their colleagues, regardless of their physical location (Wilson et al., 2008) and ‘proximity bias’ encapsulates the tendency to show favoritism towards those in closer physical proximity (Hirsch, 2022). Past research on proximity predominantly focuses on spatial dynamics, often overlooking the temporal aspects. The allocation of time between office-based and remote work, as well as the issue of visibility, remains largely unexplored.

In the era of hybrid work, while organizations offer flexibility for hybrid work due to various reasons, it inadvertently casts remote workers into the shadows, making them less visible to their peers and superiors (Ajzen, 2021; Koehne et al., 2012). Although digital platforms aid in re-establishing this visibility, the traditional workplace often amplifies the presence of those physically present, lending them an inherent advantage simply by being seen, as highlighted by concepts like 'facetime' and its offshoot, 'passive facetime' (Elsbach et al., 2010). To bridge this gap, remote workers tend to engage in ‘voluntary-visibilizing’, or proactive communication methods, to remain relevant and perceptible (Hafermalz, 2021). Nevertheless, the challenge remains – understanding visibility in a hybrid workspace, spanning both physical and virtual settings, is complex. While recent conceptualizations acknowledged the duality of visibility (Nuswantoro et al., 2023), we still grapple with discerning the fine lines and overlaps between them, especially when trying to transpose the tangible benefits of physical visibility to a virtual milieu.

In this research, we aim to unravel the intricacies of visibility and proximity in hybrid work environments. Insights from 14 interviews, carried out during a Covid-lockdown, with remote services professionals, highlight the challenges faced by managers overseeing remote teams and their relationship with proximity, as they used to work closely together. In the following we will briefly summarize our methods, findings, discussions, implications, and study conclusions.

Methods

We implemented a two-phase study approach. The initial phase, elaborated here, is a pilot study examining visibility during a Covid-lockdown. We interviewed 14 auditors from a large Indonesian professional services firm. The first data collection was conducted between 16 May 2021 and 3 June 2021, with the second phase of it has very recently been
completed (23 September to 9 November 2023) exploring a more targeted in-depth study of the topic. Our participant demographics, spanned a balanced gender distribution, ages between 23 and 32, and included positions from associates (As), senior associates (SA) to managers (M). Three associates, having joined during the pandemic, lacked prior in-office experience. Tenures varied, with associates having as little as 7 months of experience to managers boasting up to 10 years. We utilized Google Meet, an already familiar platform for participants. Given prevailing lockdowns, virtual interviews were a necessity. The interviews averaged 75 minutes. All sessions were conducted in Indonesian, later transcribed and translated into English by the first author. The interviews, semi-structured in nature, began with general questions and progressed to specific inquiries about remote work dynamics. Questions probed aspects of supervision, mentoring, monitoring, and support solicitation. Data collection concluded upon reaching saturation, which was evident when the last few interviews offered repetitive insights.

Data Analysis

After transcription and translation, we imported the data into NVivo for comprehensive analysis. Using a grounded theory building approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we scrutinized the transcripts iteratively to pinpoint patterns, particularly focused on remote work's monitoring practices amidst decreased visibility. Our analysis journey, although underpinned by this focus, remained flexible to emerging themes. Mentoring and monitoring arose as key themes during this analytical phase. Our further analysis revealed multiple themes detailing the shift in work methods.

Findings

We found remote work blurs traditional cues, challenging managers and employees. Managers are now more inclined towards direct communication, while employees grapple with expressing emotions and attentiveness in a digital setting. This environment complicates supervisors' assessments.

Virtual leadership challenge 1: Emotional cues in the virtual space

The shift to remote work has obscured numerous facets of workplace interactions previously taken for granted. For instance, light informal conversations, as well as reading facial cues to assess an employee's well-being, have become challenging to maintain. In their pursuit of efficiency, managers have had to adapt, focusing more on direct communication rather than understanding an employee's emotional state. M-2 emphasized this transformation: “In remote settings, discerning a team's motivation is challenging. I prioritize understanding both work results and the team's emotional state. In the absence of face-to-face interactions, I now opt for straightforward queries such as, “What's the issue? What is their proposed solution?” Managers expect remote employees to be transparent about challenges. M-3 recounted an instance where an employee broke down due to stress, saying, “I once had an associate who was suddenly crying [having a break down] during a meeting due to stress and work pressure. Had I been aware, I would've
reduced their workload. Such incidents occurred twice.”

Remote workers themselves grapple with striking a balance between succinctness and detailed communication. M-3 highlighted the loss of emotional and visual cues, noting, “At the office, we'd gauge our superior's mood and adjust our updates accordingly. Remote work hinders this intuition, leaving us reliant on limited cues like tone.” In-person interactions offer insight into an individual's mood and facilitate an understanding of one's overall persona and the tasks they are engaged in. As senior-in-charge (SIC) SA-4 stated, “Face-to-face interactions, especially for junior employees, are pivotal. It's how they discern my disposition—whether I'm in good spirits or irritable.” M-3 further elucidated the challenges of remote communication: “In virtual meetings, attendees might multitask, missing out on discussions. Physically present, one can spot if a colleague is distracted, say, responding to a WhatsApp chat [instant messaging].”

Virtual leadership challenge 2: Maintaining Trust and Support Provision

The constraints of remote work often leave superiors pondering the productivity of their teams. M-1 articulated this sentiment by noting, “An employee's delayed response led me to question their dedication. When they attributed the delay to 'focusing on work,' I wondered why the progress showed otherwise.” On a similar note, senior associate SA-5 expressed concerns about mentoring her junior colleagues in a virtual setting, indicating, “Physically present, I can gauge an associate's progress. Remotely, it's hard to tell if they're on track or require guidance.”

In the remote work setting, SA-5, an SIC, reflected on the challenge of discerning when team members need support without the benefit of direct visual cues, a sentiment shared by another SIC, SA-3. “Before, I could manage my team, discuss with clients, and oversee my associate simultaneously. Now, with remote work, if an associate gets sidetracked, I'm often in another meeting and unable to multitask.” SA-5 lamented, highlighting the distinct challenges that arise in a virtual space. SA-3 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the change in team dynamics, “Normally, they'd speak directly; now, silence can lead to team-wide issues, a time bomb for everyone.” In virtual space, not all team members are comfortable asking questions. This shift in communication is further exemplified by SA-2, who adopts a more collective approach to problem resolution, “I consolidate issues before bringing them up as one item; this avoids constant back-and-forth.” As-2's strategy supports this collective approach, “After I collect all the issues or questions... I will contact my SIC via WhatsApp and ask if he has time to do Google Meet.” Understanding the need for close monitoring and clear communication, it's apparent why team leaders, such as SA-5 and SA-3, favor in-person interactions for effectively gauging team needs and quickly resolving issues.

Discussion

Understanding Proximity in Remote Work Settings

Visibility is an element in shaping relationships among peers and between employees
and their superiors. The diminished visibility in remote work settings is identified as a constraint, impeding remote workers from career progression due to a weakened bond with their in-office superiors (Richardson & Kelliher, 2015). We dove deeper into this issue, revealing that the crux of the strained relationship between remote workers and supervisors lies in this diminished visibility. This change in dynamics can impact observer awareness when the observer holds a managerial role. Our research resonates with this concern, showing that managers struggle to gauge the responsibilities and potential of remote employees, thereby setting the stage for proximity preferences.

Many higher-ups believe that in-office interactions provide invaluable visual cues, such as indications of an employee's workload or their multitasking abilities. These cues, while present virtually, are often more pronounced and discernible in person. When supervisors feel more connected and confident about the capabilities of in-office employees, they naturally assign them more critical projects (Hirsch, 2022). However, this view, formed from limited visual cues, may unintentionally misread remote workers by missing their actual challenges and efforts, like their aim for effective communication by considering the significance and urgency of issues, which remain unseen unless articulated. We advocate that this proximity bias is not an irrational prejudice but a logical outcome of reduced visibility in remote settings. Achieving visibility in a virtual space, while feasible, lacks the authenticity and depth that face-to-face interactions offer. In addressing the potential of proximity bias in hybrid work, we have identified areas where visibility is lacking in the remote aspect of this work mode. We offer ways to address the issues, summarized in Table 1, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Challenges from the Lack of Visibility</th>
<th>Relationship to Proximity (Extended Challenges)</th>
<th>Potential Approaches to Mitigate Challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of emotional cues</td>
<td>Supervisor difficulty in capacity assessment</td>
<td>Regular check ins; Encourage openness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellbeing (workload and capacity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity (persona and emotion)</td>
<td>Reduced communicative symbols; Distance communication issues</td>
<td>Video feature optimization; Schedule in-person meetings</td>
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<td>Trust and support provision</td>
<td>Supervisor difficulty in monitoring</td>
<td>Employee check-ins; Promote bidirectional communication</td>
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<td>Remote work dynamics (focus or multitask)</td>
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<td>Support provision (seeking and giving)</td>
<td>Preference for face-to-face due to differences in synchronicity</td>
<td>Assess online/offline communication needs; Recognize medium challenges</td>
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Table 1. Remote Work Challenges, Their Connection to Proximity, and Strategies for Mitigation

Implications, Recommendations, and Avenues for Future Research

The essence of hybrid work models lies in their flexibility, balancing in-office and remote operations. Online platforms might offer a semblance of visibility, but nothing compares to the richness of in-person interactions. For organizations pivoting to these models, it is imperative to address proximity challenges in relation to the lack of visibility. Encouraging transparency, especially among remote workers, can bridge the visibility gap. Regular
leadership plays a role of Far. Organizations need to deliberate on whether to equate proximity to relational. This could happen when challenges related to the lack of visibility and proximity were not observed and mitigated. To address this, we advocate for enhanced openness and transparency within organizations, especially among those who predominantly work remotely. This approach aims to foster a more inclusive environment, mitigating the potential for bias. Furthermore, we encourage a collaborative effort between researchers and industry leaders to rethink and strategize balanced work arrangements, ensuring equitable treatment for all employees.

However, our research has illuminated an unexplored facet: the variance in remote work levels and its implications on visibility and proximity. With our study rooted in the pandemic era, it predominantly focuses on full-time remote scenarios. As work environments evolve, it becomes essential to probe how diverse remote work schedules and the intensity of onsite work can steer proximity bias. Organizations need to deliberate on optimizing their hybrid models: Should there be caps on remote work days? Would it be beneficial for teams to synchronize their remote days or adopt a staggered approach? These are questions that future research must address to sculpt a balanced and unbiased workplace.

Conclusion

Our research highlights the interrelation of lack of visibility and challenges of proximity in hybrid work settings. It is evident that diminished visibility, especially in remote work contexts, can inadvertently magnify proximity bias. This could happen when challenges related to the lack of visibility and proximity were not observed and mitigated. To address this, we advocate for enhanced openness and transparency within organizations, especially among those who predominantly work remotely. This approach aims to foster a more inclusive environment, mitigating the potential for bias. Furthermore, we encourage a collaborative effort between researchers and industry leaders to rethink and strategize balanced work arrangements, ensuring equitable treatment for all employees.

References