

# Leadership and Cultural Evolution in Hybrid Workplaces

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## Introduction

Workplaces and work practices have been profoundly transformed by digital technologies, altering where and how work is conducted and resulting in new ways of working (Aroles et al., 2021; Alfes et al., 2022). Many of these new ways of working are broadly grouped under the term, flexible work arrangements, and changes where work is done, for example, telework, described by Boell et al. (2016) as participation in work activities away from an office using digital tools. There are several forms of flexible work arrangements, including virtual work, remote work, distance work, and, more recently, hybrid work (Lamovšek & Černe, 2023; Aroles et al., 2021). Previously, flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting and work-from-home (WFH) were commonly perceived as adjustments or fringe benefits for specific employees (Rodgers, 1992; Torres & Orhan, 2023). Soon, advancements in digital technologies enabled the reorganization of workspaces, creating opportunities to conduct work simultaneously across multiple locations (Halford, 2005). Although recent IS studies perceive these workplace transformations as a reactive process and a second-order effect of digital transformation in organizations (Brünker, 2024), the enforced work-from-home during the COVID-19 pandemic heralded a new era for flexible work arrangements (Waizenegger et al., 2020), such as the widespread adoption of remote work and increased exploration of hybrid workplaces (Teng-Calleja et al., 2023). Hybrid work is understood as a socio-technical work arrangement mediated by digital technology that facilitates collaboration among employees working from various locations and at different times (Griva et al., 2025). While hybrid workplaces are described as integrating multiple spaces to allow for the seamless spatial movement of individuals, activities, and material flows (Zamani et al., 2025)

The prevalence of flexible work arrangements, such as hybrid work, carries several implications for workplaces and organizations. For example, they raise concerns about organizational culture, leadership, learning, innovation, workplace efficiency, and workers' autonomy (Costa, 2025; Gibson et al., 2023; Mikołajczyk, 2021; Nenonen & Sankari, 2022). Specifically, the existing frameworks for traditional workplace culture, which primarily focus on in-office settings, fall short in addressing the compatibility of workplace culture and other complexities in hybrid workplaces (Vij et al., 2022; Sankar & Malhotra, 2023). Additionally, recent studies suggest that hybrid workplaces challenge and redefine leadership, prompting many organizations, particularly those with knowledge workers, to reassess their approaches to flexible work arrangements (Bell et al., 2023; Detjen & Webber, 2023). Hybrid working exists on a continuum between fully in-person and fully remote work, increasing the likelihood of subgroup formation within teams due to temporal dispersion—the degree to which members work at different times at the same location (Handke et al., 2025). Despite this, many workers prefer workplace flexibility, prioritize personal well-being and work-life balance, and are reluctant to unlearn the benefits and expectations of remote work during the pandemic (Eng et

al., 2024; Oquendo & Bell, 2024). These complicate both organizational culture and leadership, as the communication and interaction norms in such digitalized workplaces require further unlearning and relearning (Högberg & Willermarck, 2024). Also, there is a heightened risk of subcultures emerging, commonly known as silos, which may not align with the overarching organizational culture (Schein & Schein, 2017). This is attributed to the increased flexibility of work and poses a potential challenge for leadership. As a result, most organizations are mandating a return to office, citing issues with organizational culture, collaboration, and innovation (Höcker et al., 2024; Gibson et al., 2023).

With increasing digitalization at work, new ways of working and organizing have become a topic of interest in organization studies and IS research (Aroles et al., 2021; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021). Emerging work practices and organizational culture are crucial issues for managers and practitioners, and the recognition that strong organizational cultures inspire effective leadership, which in turn shapes and sustains the desired organizational culture (Adeniyi et al., 2024), is especially salient in hybrid workplaces. In this paper, we view organizational culture as socially constructed in the workplace, and understanding the reciprocal relationship between organizational culture and leadership is important, as culture is no longer limited to physical workspaces but extends beyond their boundaries. This paper follows the recommendation by Schein and Schein (2017) that culture is a shared product of shared learning, and to understand an organizational culture, it is necessary to know what kind of learning has occurred, over what time span, and under what kinds of leadership. Thus, we explore organizational culture in hybrid workplaces from a leadership standpoint. The research question asked is: *How does the hybrid workplace shape organizational culture and leadership over time?*

## Methods

This paper is a work in progress and presents preliminary findings from a research project aimed at advancing knowledge of the transition to hybrid workplaces. This study is qualitative with a multiple case study research design of two large knowledge-intensive organizations in Sweden, providing the empirical data, which is longitudinal and ongoing. Qualitative longitudinal research enhances comprehension of subjective experiences by offering detailed, contextually relevant data that elucidates how study participants perceive the world over time (Henwood & Shirani, 2022), particularly during the transition to the hybrid workplace. Data collection began in September 2023 and is expected to end in September 2026. Case A and Case B lead innovation in the information technology and automation industries, respectively, with a large number of knowledge workers, mostly engineers, providing technological expertise, solutions, and products to customers. They value a culture of learning that fosters the generation and sharing of new ideas to support their innovative work and knowledge-intensive activities. This study adopts an interpretive approach, viewing reality as socially constructed through shared meaning, and the roles of individuals as social actors in a context (Myers, 2025; Klein & Myers, 1999). This approach helps to understand the different experiences of individuals in the construction of the hybrid workplace culture and leadership through the narratives of the research participants. Data have been collected so far through 33 semi-structured interviews, with 24 managers and 9 co-workers (23 men and 10 women), 3

focus group sessions, and 203 hours of non-participant observations, through both physical and digital platforms, including Microsoft Teams, involving leaders and co-workers of the case organizations, and illustrated in Table 1. Data analysis was through a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021), and preliminary findings are presented.

Data Type	Case A	Case B	Timeframe
Physical observations	180hours	9 hours	Sep-Dec 2023, May 2024, June 2025, and March 2026
Digital observations	1 hour	13 hours	Sep-Dec 2023, March 2024, and Sep-Oct 2024
First round of interviews	7	7	Feb-May 2024
Second round of interviews	5	5	Oct-Dec 2024
Third round of interviews	7	2	Aug-Nov 2025
Focus group sessions	2	1	May 2024, Sep 2025 and Nov 2025
Total data collected	33 interviews, 3 focus group sessions and 203 hours of observation		

**Table 1. Overview of data collected**

## Preliminary Findings

The findings indicate a reconstruction of organizational culture and leadership due to the shift to hybrid workplaces. Major changes include greater reliance and integration of digital tools and technology, such as digital whiteboards, Microsoft Teams, and, more recently, artificial intelligence (AI). The initial shift to pandemic-induced remote work has had enduring effects on both leadership and organizational culture of the studied firms. Both organizations have globally distributed work teams in their operating locations, but they occasionally convene for in-person discussions and meetings. Nonetheless, the local offices maintained a deep-rooted practice of operating from a physical location, a norm disrupted by the pandemic. A consequence is that employees have become accustomed to remote work. Relationships and interactions were also limited to small teams that frequently connect through Microsoft Teams. This led to the formation of new silos that deviated from the overall organizational culture, affecting the social fabric and knowledge-sharing practices of both firms. A participant from Case A expressed, *“I need to network and to know what else is happening in the company. I need inspiration and other viewpoints from the office space... but lots of people are working from home, so when I travel there, they might not be in the office.”* The data indicate that employees have varying preferences shaped by their experience with remote work; some have a changed mindset, prioritizing well-being and work-life balance, and feel more productive with little or no distractions and interruptions when working from home. Others are more regimented, want more structure, and miss previous routines. And some want a mix of both. The leadership of the case organizations has taken into account these demands and made several changes, including office redesigns, new work policies, and rules. In 2024, company A introduced a hybrid work policy in response to the post-pandemic landscape, permitting 50% remote work while mandating 50% in-office work. A manager explained, *“We now try to come back to what is a healthy balance between working from home and working in the office. This is still difficult,... we will refine it. We’ll find a good balance. I’m pretty optimistic.”* While the participants acknowledged the importance of human connections at work, they expressed that managers could improve their efforts in persuading employees to work from the office. The initial hybrid work policy was revised in 2025/2026 to require 60% in-office work and allow 40% remote work, as the previous policy did not yield the expected results. The reverse is the

case at company B, where colleagues have mostly operated remotely and virtually. However, in 2025, their new hybrid policy mandates that managers and their teams determine their in-person and remote workdays and coordinate with adjacent teams to facilitate cross-team interactions that enhance social relations and knowledge-sharing. Ultimately, both companies are providing flexibility in the workplace while learning, adjusting their leadership, and renegotiating their organizational culture to embrace these changes, all without compromising their core identities.

## Conclusion

This paper examines how the hybrid workplace shapes organizational culture and learning among co-workers and leaders over time. It reveals how the new ways of working have affected organizations, including changes in structures, processes, norms, routines, behaviors, practices, and guiding policies. These are important characteristics of organizational culture and are not static; rather, they affect leadership and are adjusted to manage the changes associated with new work methods, particularly in addressing tensions between remote work and return-to-office mandates. The findings also add to the discourse on paradoxical effects of digital technologies, highlighting conflicting pathways of action: they provide efficient digital tools to support remote and hybrid work, yet simultaneously render work and tacit practices such as learning, less visible (Wang et al., 2026; Benabid & Mikhaeil, 2025). Further revealed are issues with collaboration in hybrid workplaces, where interactions and relationships essential to supporting innovative work, such as knowledge sharing and joint ideation, are confined to smaller groups, fostering silo cultures while reducing spontaneity and collaborative learning. The findings also illustrate how individuals perceive and experience the hybrid workplace in different ways, creating nuances that demand a renegotiation of organizational culture and a recalibration of leadership that accounts for individual needs without undermining shared organizational values. Practical implications for leaders and organizations include prioritizing flexibility and empathy when contemplating and enacting changes. This study is currently in progress, and we look forward to discussing its further development.

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