Exploring employees’ experiences of autonomy in hybrid work

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Introduction

While hybrid work is not a novel phenomenon, the masses of people and organizations experiencing hybrid work has reached unprecedented levels since the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial “Work from Home” (predominantly virtual work) was the shared experience of previously office-based workforce globally, forcing organizations and individuals to rapidly adapt to remote working environments. The prolonged period of disruption has made fundamental and irreversible changes to organizations and ways of working, potentially leaving hybrid work a permanent component for future ways of work (Richter, 2020).

Digital technologies were key for enacting new virtual work practices during the pandemic. Individuals were said to be provided with greater autonomy as they harnessed these tools to work remotely, breaking free from the fixed space and time in traditional office settings. IS scholars such as Wang et al. (2020) have gone so far as to propose “worker autonomy” as a new paradigm of the future of work and one which characterises virtual work. However, as we move into post-pandemic hybrid working (both virtual and in person work), workers are urged to return to collocated office work while remaining flexible in virtual work. This dynamic often leads to individuals exhibiting reluctance to return to office-based work, for fear of losing the flexibility and autonomy they perceive when working virtually. This shift necessitates a deeper examination of the complex interplay between digital technology and physical spaces, as well as their combined influence on individual autonomy and work.

Drawing upon existing literature on virtual work, we explore the notion of autonomy and its implications in the current hybrid working environment. Our initial findings centre on the paradoxical nature of autonomy and its intricate relationship with the material agency offered by different technology-infused work environments. This interplay between material and social aspects has significant implications for both employees and organizations as they navigate the hybrid working landscape.

Autonomy

Previous research on autonomy has revealed complex dynamics. At the individual level,
self-managing teams with high collective autonomy often incorporate mechanisms that restrict members' individual autonomy, leading to a paradoxical relationship (Sewell, 1998). Similarly, at the organizational level, the presence of a strong culture and the expectation of commitment can limit individual autonomy, creating a contrast between autonomy and implicative expectations (Willmott, 1993). This conflict is particularly evident in high-status occupations where professional norms prioritize individual responsibilities, reputations, and work relationships (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The use of digital technology in virtual work further contributes to the paradoxical nature of autonomy, as individuals experience both liberation and constraint simultaneously (Leonardi et al., 2010; Mazmanian et al., 2013).

**Temporality**

The temporal dimension adds another layer of complexity to the adoption of technology-dependent virtual work. Over time, individual-level changes can trigger collective-level responses, influencing individuals' behaviour. For instance, the initial expectation of constant availability through digital technology may eventually stabilise as reconfigured professional norms and collective perceptions evolve (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Technology enabled connectivity can also become institutionalized through the establishment of recurrent behavioural patterns, leading to organizational change (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). However, research indicates that voluntary virtual workers may deliberately adjust their engagement with digital technology to reduce connectivity when they feel overwhelmed by constant connectivity, resulting in a decrease in autonomy (Leonardi et al., 2010).

While existing studies on autonomy shed light on its importance in virtual work settings, they assume that workers have a choice in how they work e.g., virtual work is part of their everyday work practices. The pandemic, for many, provided new work settings at different time points. For example, enforced working from home was common in the early stages of the pandemic which brought new challenges (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020), then came the return to the office, where collocated space was redesigned to incorporate new technologies and new ways of working (i.e., hybrid work). In this context of hybrid work, we seek to understand: *How is autonomy experienced across temporal and spatial settings as workers transition between virtual and collocated workspaces?*

**Methods**

We apply a longitudinal case study approach – to gain in-depth insight into how experiences of hybrid work changed over time. In line with Klein & Myers (1999) and Walsham (1995, 2006) we follow the principles of an interpretive case study to understand real-world phenomena embedded within organization contexts (Eienhardt & Graebner, 2007).

We selected two UK based public sector health research organizations to study for the following reasons. First, the organizations provide a good example of typical knowledge
work, combining a mix of individual and team-based work that is independent and heavily reliant on IT to perform. Second, each organization decided to undertake an office refurbishment during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide more flexible workspace and technologies to support hybrid working and neither organization had worked fully remotely prior to the pandemic. The organizations followed the same UK government guidance regarding COVID-19 and began to encourage a return to office working at the same time.

We conducted in-depth online semi-structured interviews at two time points, nine to 11 months apart, with employees belonging to the two organizations. The first round of interviews (T1=22) was conducted between September to December 2021. During this time, there had been a general relaxing of COVID-19 rules and guidance over the summer period following the drop in case numbers and rise in vaccinations. The second round of interviews (T2=28) were conducted in August 2022. At this time, all COVID-19 guidance had been reduced, allowing business to re-open offices fully.

All interviews were conducted online using video-call software. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. These interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide which allowed participants to expand on specific experiences related to hybrid working. Data analysis is ongoing. Below we present some of the initial findings and potential for contribution.

Preliminary Findings and Next Steps

Illusions of Autonomy

Digital technology was found to both enable new virtual ways of working and provide more flexible work arrangements where workers developed autonomy in terms of when they worked (flexible hours) leading to new work routines to emerge. For example, one interviewee explained how they started work earlier as they no longer had a commute and was able to manage their time to take lunchtime walks and collect the children. However, this also facilitated longer working hours and increased expectation to be digitally available. Which lead to interviewees having to negotiate new work boundaries to manage these expectations.

It was also found that workers autonomy to choose where to work, how and when to communicate with others, and what technology to use was significantly restricted. This was due to factors beyond the individual’s control, as working from home was enforced, communication was solely digital mediated, there were less opportunities to socialise with work colleagues, and technology use was company mandated. This suggest that while virtual work provided increased flexibility, it only provided the illusion of autonomy.

These illusions of autonomy were also prevalent in T2 when workers were returning to the office and transitioning from virtual work to hybrid work. At this timepoint workers were required to return to the office for at least two days a week but had autonomy to choose the
days they preferred and through the use of a new digital booking system, could choose where and who they would like to sit with in the office. While the notion of autonomy existed and was perceived to exist, decisions over when to come in and where to sit became bounded by social ties. For example, many of the interviewees expressed that their decision to come into the office was dependent on when colleagues or managers were in the office, and spatial arrangements that were available which enabled collocation.

These preliminary findings suggest that autonomy is paradoxical in nature. Although workers experience a greater perception of autonomy, this autonomy is an illusion due to the interrelated nature of the temporal aspects of work, the social ties that exist within the organization and the spatial arrangements that facilitate it.

The next steps in this research are to further unpack the nuances and complexities of hybrid working, and the role of autonomy as workers experience new temporal and spatial arrangements. Such insights can also inform organizations in effectively managing and optimising their hybrid work arrangements, ensuring successful integration of both physical and digital work environments while supporting employee autonomy and productivity.

References


