Who should come to the office? – Toward a decision support tool for hybrid work

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Introduction

Across the world, companies and employees collected positive experiences while working from home (WFH) during the national COVID-19 lockdowns (Ipsen et al., 2021; Vargas, 2020) and investigate currently how these experiences can be implemented into WFH or hybrid-work solutions (Singhal, 2021). Individual solutions and ideas exist already. Howevermore general solutionsare missing that face the challenges and possibilities for the development of hybrid work that considers different groups of managers and employees but also the company's interests like optimal use of facilities, knowledge sharing, performance, etc.

In Denmark, workplaces such as Danske Bank took the first steps toward increasing the use of hybrid work (Jørgensen, 2021), and worldwide, companies are also considering this. The expectation is that high productivity can be maintained and well-being supported by potentially reducing the number of office workplaces (Lufkin, 2022). The wish to use hybrid working arrangements, where some work from home and others meet 'at work', is creating new forms of collaboration and work processes combined with distance management. This has led to a discussion about the current legislation on hybrid work and the possible long-term effects (Eurofound, 2022).

The new reality raises questions for companies: How do we ensure collaboration and performance when more people WFH - for those who work at home and those who come to work? How can daily (distance) managers, in cooperation with their employees, organize (co-)working in the future? Answers to these questions are still discussed both in research and in practice. Based on these discussions, our paper aims to find answers to these questions by proposing a decision support tool based on our international results to balance individual, departmental, and company needs for hybrid work.

Background

For decades, digital technologies have helped workplaces use work from home (Fisher & Fisher, 2000) to do work more efficiently. Hybrid working arrangements allow managers and employees to choose when and where they perform their work and tasks and gain more autonomy, mobility, and flexibility (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). In practice, this can include intra-/inter-organizational telework (Verburg et al., 2013) and different types of work from

home (telework): fully remote, hybrid workplaces, and on-site (Boland et al., 2020).

Previous research points to potential disadvantages of working remotely, such as isolation, misunderstandings, reduced personal contact, and role ambiguity (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Hertel et al., 2005). Other studies have found that family-work balance is more challenging to establish, boundaries are unclear, there is a lack of support and visible leadership, and people are more isolated when disconnected from the workplace (Jackson, 2001). As homeworking involves the use of ICT, it also includes the risk of technostress, which addresses the personal challenges of dealing with new digital technologies (Vuori et al., 2019). Conversely, the benefits of working at home include being more productive, less stressed, having a better work-life balance, having less commuting time, and being in control of one's work patterns (Anderson et al., 2015).

An international research project classified the experience of working from home into six specific advantages and disadvantages (Table 1, (Ipsen et al., 2021)). This classification provides concrete benchmarks for workplaces to develop, implement and evaluate new forms of teleworking.

Table 1: Individual perceived advantages and disadvantages of WFH

| POSITIVE EXPERIENCES	NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES
Comfort of being home The comfort of home, atmosphere, routines, more social life, less commuting	**Home-office constraints** Isolation, less contact with people, a lot of time in front of the computer
Work with more efficiency Focus on tasks, fewer interruptions, fewer meetings, less waste of time on meaningless tasks at the workplace	**Unclear work situation** The value of work**:** Work loses its value; what should I work on or focus on, what should I do, tasks are not as interesting
Control over your working day Control over the day, Take a break, and less micro-management	**Loss of important work tools** Limited access to important work tools, data, and documents, makes it hard to do a good job

Furthermore, the interest of the individual employee and the interest of the organization have to be balanced. If employees act in self-oriented autonomy and decide how flexible they want to be, it might end in individualism, egoism, and a withdrawal from the social setting (Fischer & Baskerville, 2022). A simultaneous socialization process is therefore necessary, leading to employees still interacting independently while forming social relations that generate and utilize a common good, the company's organizational knowledge, and goals.

The geographic proximity between co-workers influences the social ties between colleagues, communication, knowledge creation, and innovation (Catalini, 2017). Therefore, hybrid work arrangements affect workplace management to ensure good performance and employee well-being. Can office space be reduced, should there be more

space for meetings? Are individual offices still needed when employees can best concentrate at home? Do we need rules for flexible work, made by politicians or by each company? Data should be collected from office uses (e.g., via surveys or sensors) to have insights into the usage and draw conclusions for workplace management (Jensen, 2022).

Toward a decision support tool for hybrid work

A decision support tool for defining an optimal hybrid work arrangement has to balance the needs of individual employees and departmental and organizational needs – between the individual and the social perspective (Figure 1). The common good in hybrid-remote work is the well-being of the employees by keeping a good performance that benefits the company and its goals.
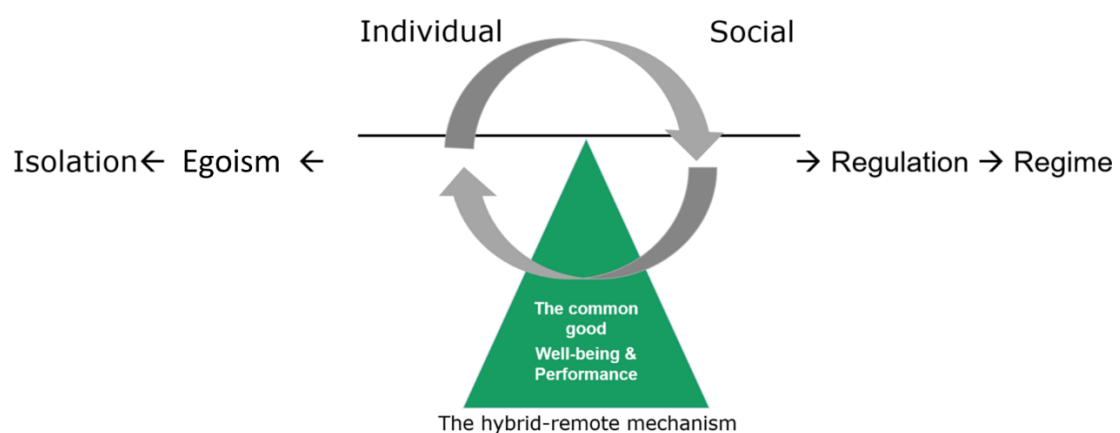
Figure 1: Balancing between individual and social needs, a figure inspired by the paper of (Fischer & Baskerville, 2022) and a discussion with its first author

On the one hand, studies show that WFH is perceived differently by different groups in a company, depending on family status, distance to the workplace, job experience, type of job, etc. To ensure the individual's well-being, a high degree of flexibility could be desirable, where everyone can decide when and how often they work from home. However, a high degree of individualism could lead to egoism, where everyone only thinks about their needs. This could lead to a high degree of isolation where employees lose contact with their colleagues (thus negatively influencing well-being), negatively affecting their performance. A new study shows that even though citizens have high digitization skills and experience working from home, they experience loneliness and isolation to a greater extent than citizens with fewer experiences and skills. This is independent of age and gender (Ipsen et al., 2022). Digitization, therefore, has an inherent risk of isolation in some contexts.

On the other hand, handling only in the organization's interest can lead to a high degree of regulation about who has to be when in the office. Employees might feel mistreated, which negatively influences their well-being.

For a decision support tool, data from both employees and organizational leaders must be collected to balance the different interests of individuals and organizations. A survey for the employees' side already exists (Ipsen et al., 2020) that will be adopted for the planned tool. Data from organizational leaders will be collected in focus group interviews.

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