

Leadership for fostering employee engagement in Hybrid work

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Introduction

Hybrid work is a form of workplace transformation that requires employees to combine both remote and in-person work. While some employees return to the in-person work environment following the Covid-19 pandemic, others continue to work remotely with an increasing preference for a combined in-person and remote work model. Such hybrid workplace model has created new opportunities such as flexibility and autonomy, but also new challenges such as siloed teams and digital exhaustion. Within this context, there have been calls for leadership skills to be adapted (Hooijberg & Watkins, 2021; Gratton, 2021). We extend research in this area, by arguing that there is a need to understand the emerging and successful workplace leadership practices to strengthen employee engagement as we move towards the new hybrid work environment. Hence, the aim of this, *work in progress*, study is to explore how leaders in knowledge-based organisations can develop engagement with employees when a hybrid workplace model is in operation. The research question that drives the study is “*How organisational leaders develop employee engagement in hybrid workspaces?*”.

Employee Engagement

Employees' engagement in the workplace, sometimes known as work engagement, has been defined as “the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles” by Kahn (1990, p.694). Employees who are energetic, enthusiastic, and absorbed in their work are called engaged employees contributing to increased productivity and performance (Christian *et al.*, 2011). Research on employee engagement has pre-dominantly focused on traditional and permanent work arrangements in collocated organisations with Auer *et al.* (2014) arguing that there was a need to understand engagement in non-traditional organisational settings.

New forms of work, such as virtual teams, remote and hybrid work, are challenging conventional understanding of employee engagement (Auer *et al.*, 2014). In such alternative form of work arrangement, job resources and demands are expected to be different due to the nature of such work (Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, as with any project, collocated, virtual, remote or hybrid, team members need to be ‘on the same boat’ to identify with the project effectively (Webster & Wong 2008, p. 58). In their study of employee engagement within virtual project teams, Panteli *et al.* (2019) argued that engagement is not a one-off practice. Instead, notwithstanding the increased dependence on information and communication technologies, it requires ongoing effort that should be evident and supported across the different phases of a virtual project. Appropriate information and financial provision as well as leadership support, encouragement and feedback are resources which are deemed important to the development of employee engagement in the context of virtual projects. Like virtual work, hybrid work implies that employees work remotely for some of their work time, therefore increasing reliance on the use of technology for their communication and interactions.

In what follows, we present the characteristics of hybrid work and argue that leadership has a key role to play in developing employee engagement in this context.

Hybrid Work and Leadership

Hybrid work has been conceptualised along two dimensions, time and place, and the flexibility embedded within these (Gratton, 2021). This is reflected in the shift for employees to working from the office or being ‘place-constrained’, to being able to work anywhere or being ‘place-unconstrained’. Similarly, there is a shift from having employees work synchronously with others or being ‘time-constrained’ to a model where there is flexibility to being able to work asynchronously or being ‘time-unconstrained’ (Gratton 2021). This heightened flexibility in place and time of work (including number of hours as well as time of work) presents multiple sources for diversity which needs to be accommodated for. This includes remote vs in-person context and synchronous vs asynchronous work.

Due to these work changes, there is a need to revisit the role of leadership in the new context of work to ensure employee engagement despite employees’ increased autonomy and flexibility due to being place- and time- unconstrained. Leadership in particular has been identified as critical in the success of the workplace transformation in the post covid context (Chamakiotis et al., 2021) and digital workplace in general (Schneider & Kokshagina 2020). Chamakiotis et al., (2021) identified engagement, trust and relationships along with digital wellbeing and work-life boundaries as added responsibilities of new e-leaders. Though employee engagement is already recognised as an important condition for successful work performance, in the context of hybrid work it is the relationship aspect that matters, which ultimately has a bidirectional relationship with engagement (Chamakiotis et al, 2021). Therefore, there is a need to understand the emerging and successful workplace leadership practices to strengthen employee engagement and resolve the ‘productivity paranoia’ (Jack, 2022) as organisations move towards the new hybrid work environment.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and is based on a single case study approach. The case of Alpha (pseudonym), a multinational organisation where hybrid work following the pandemic became popular among employees was selected. At the time of the study, Alpha employees could work from home up to 50% of the time as standard; more than that required management approval or a move to part-time working. Our approach to studying this case organisation entailed semi-structured interviews with employees and managers across a range of departments and seniorities within the Australia/New Zealand region of the company. A total number of 26 participants (18 employees and 8 managers) with varying organisational roles have so far taken place in the study including solution architects, engineers, networking specialists, experience product manager and technology strategist. Interviews averaged an hour in duration and each interview was transcribed and coded using NVIVO software. Data analysis adopted a ‘Thematic Analysis’ approach with specific emphasis on leadership behaviour and practices, whilst also allowing for other factors to be considered, that could foster employee engagement within the idiosyncrasies of the hybrid work setting.

Findings

Our study pointed to several challenges that employees with hybrid work arrangements face. First, there was evidence of digital fatigue which resulted from the prolonged use of technological tools supporting communication and collaboration in hybrid work. This has been

aggravated by several factors including employees working across different time zones and locations and the requirement to initiate calls at all hours of the day, increase in the amount of back-to-back meetings, and increase in the number of daily peak times - the 'triple peak' effect where there is a *"peak time in the morning, you have a peak time in the afternoon and then you have a peak time at night time"* – P2.

Second, with the shift to the enforced pandemic-related remote, and then hybrid work, most employees had to re-purpose their living space to accommodate a working or office space, deepening as a result the blurring between work and home boundaries. For some, this has shifted the pattern of a conventional work day; a delayed start and delayed end to the workday or an earlier than usual start, prolonged breaks during the day due to family and caring responsibilities, and delayed finish are amongst the observed patterns of shifts. The inability to separate these two spaces and balance work and personal life demands have been reported to negatively impact employees – *"I felt like it was really affecting my health overall, like mental health, being at home all the time"* – P8.

Third, the sense of connectedness, employee relationships and engagement emerged as a third challenge in hybrid work. Our study revealed that the impact of hybrid work on the frequency and forms of social interactions was linked to employees feeling a sense disconnect, isolation and loneliness – *"that definitely felt, uh yeah, quiet, I guess lonely at times because you are really lacking that kind of human interaction"* – P24. Another participant noted: *"You arrange coffee catchup just to kind of, you know, pick their brains about something or whatever it may be. I missed those incidental connections"* – P5. This was particularly an issue for the new Alpha employees who joined the organisation during and post pandemic and had less opportunities to interact with existing team members.

Employee Experience Analytics in fostering Employee engagement

Strategies that demonstrate a leadership sentiment of care for employees' wellbeing were evident in the study. One of the commonly appreciated practices was the increased and consistent check-ins by managers. These check-ins varied from pulse checks, aimed at checking how employees were doing, to frequent 1-1 in person meetings. Some of the strategies were data-driven and coincided with the introduction of an employee experience platform (Microsoft Viva) during the study. Viva, is an algorithmic management tool, based on AI and work analytics that generates information which can be used for managing productivity, developing engagement and collaboration while also improving employee wellbeing. Several initiatives were reported by participants about how work analytics influenced leadership practices that pay attention to employee engagement and wellbeing. For example, *"I do get a report regularly around how much time am I spending outside working hours online. What is the percentage of email I do during nine to five versus outside of that window ... It's not something that I had paid attention to before ..."*–P12.

Another participant noted the use of Viva insights to help managers listen to employees and act towards improving their well-being: *"There are manager insights and it [Viva] can tell early indications that your team might be burning out by working late. So, if people are logging on and sending emails at midnight or sort of outside their typical working hours, that insight would be surfaced to your manager"* – P6.

Study participants with management roles, found Viva very useful in helping them managing their teams' work habits: *"the Manager Insights is very powerful. It's not personal like, ...but you know there are ways we can see the trends ... if people are disengaging, not individual ... but teams. It'll say to me' you haven't had a one-on-one with this direct report"*

for two weeks” – P15. Viva Manager Insights give increased visibility into teams whose work patterns may lead to burnout and stress (Figure 1). Insights may highlight after-hours work, meeting overload, or too little focus time that help managers take necessary steps to help the teams to replan their work habits and improve members’ wellbeing.

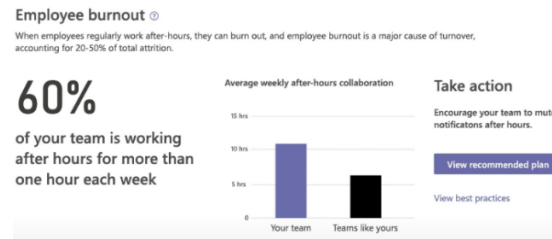


Figure 1: Manager Insights about Employee Burnout (extract from data collected)

Discussion and Implications

Empirical findings indicate that organisational leaders can develop employee engagement and help to overcome the challenges of hybrid work by adopting response and adaptive leadership practices. In our specific case of a multinational organisation, the use of analytics platforms was found to enable such leadership styles. Work analytics platforms like Viva have been found in our case study to support human-centric leadership practices, ones where caring, provision of individualised support and consideration in response to insights revealed by the tool become key drivers for employee engagement in a hybrid workplace. Such data-driven leadership provides opportunities to leaders to adapt their skills and behaviour as a way for responding to the challenges and idiosyncrasies of the hybrid work context. Leaders need to pay close attention to the data generated by work analytics tools to derive the design and implementation of initiatives that demonstrate consideration of the changing nature of the workplace and the requirement for individualised resources and support as required in the hybrid workplace.

The study contributes to developing an understanding of the role of employee experience platforms like Viva in supporting leaders and enabling them to foster employee engagement in the hybrid work context. Actively listening to team members voice is clearly facilitated by algorithmic nudging by work analytics tools. Ultimately, employee experience platforms can act as the means through which leaders gain renewed knowledge about their employees and insights about their work patterns. Leaders can therefore use these platforms to take actions centred around supporting their employees and enabling them to develop a stronger identification with each other and the organization.

Finally, our study shows that a hybrid workplace requires an inclusive leadership (Roberson & Perry, 2021), one that recognises diversity, responds to individual needs and work styles, and actively listens to team members voice. As work teams become more diverse, multicultural, multigenerational, and global in a hybrid work model, inclusive leadership needs to take extra step towards facilitating a work model that fits everyone with the help of work analytics as well as inclusive leadership skills. Empowering employees based on their diverse needs is an essential leadership practice to accommodate employees work preference and where they feel they belong.

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