

Managing Digital Workplace in the Era of Hybrid Working Environment With Reference To Service Sector

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Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to change in so many unprecedented ways which has pushed organizations and managers to chalk out a way to manage their employees, get work done and maintain the productivity and profitability of the organization. This directed the organizations in exploring and implementing employee friendly flexible work plans that helps meet the rapidly changing environment. After a lot of analysis, organizations have realized that the hybrid model is here to stay which means organizations will have to reimagine their success strategies and will also have to change their entire structure of working starting from cultural aspects to leadership styles, workplace management, communication etc.

This research is an attempt to find how hybrid work has impacted aspects of workplace management and how digital workplace can be made as efficient as possible. Few factors that have been studied under workplace management are Infrastructure; where Organizations should ensure that employees working from home have the same or all the necessary infrastructure that an in-office employee is provided with, Communication and collaboration; where all employees should be brought to a common platform for communication ensuring that no matter where the employee works out of, everyone receives firsthand update information from the organization/ manager and also invest in collaboration tools that allows employees to work together in teams, giving opportunity for all employees to be heard in case of any ideas, suggestions or grievances, to receive all necessary communication on time and to combat proximity bias.

Keywords: Hybrid working environment, digital workplace management

1.Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to change in so many unprecedented ways which has pushed organizations and managers to chalk out a way to manage their employees, get work done and also maintain the productivity and profitability of the organization. This directed the organizations in exploring and implementing employee friendly flexible work plans that helps meet the rapidly changing environment. After a year of remote work, the organizations are bracing themselves for a new major style of working, the hybrid model. After a lot of analysis, organizations have realized that the hybrid model is here to stay which means organizations will have to reimagine their success strategies and will also have to change their entire structure of working starting from cultural aspects to leadership styles, workplace management, communication etc.

A hybrid workplace or a hybrid working environment is a course of action where employees go to the workplace incidentally and complete the remainder of the errand by telecommuting relying upon their comfort. It is nearly another idea that the associations embrace to execute a smoother work process while managing the pandemic. It is the future of work giving employees the flexibility of location allowing companies to tap on a larger talent pool, giving everybody equal opportunities and encouraging communication.

The hybrid work environment for the most part permits representatives the chance to fit work around their lives, instead of organizing work around fixed hours signed into an office. For some representatives (and managers) it's an ideal offset of useful work with diminished pressure and less driving.

Understanding the hybrid workplace is the need now than ever because organizations are just starting to transition to the hybrid working model and are trying to understand and sketch out a way to make the fullest use of this new model of working while ensuring the productivity stays intact and that employees are able to transition smoothly into this new model.

The scope of this study is extended to discovering where every employee works to her best using competency management program. It helps organizations to track and manage the skills, knowledge and expertise of employees, understand their

working styles eventually leading to capturing the best practice. The scope also extends to benchmarking the necessary infrastructure, skills and tools that is needed for employees to function smoothly in a collaborative manner in a hybrid working environment. It also enables the human resource department to come up with learning and development initiatives for a hybrid workplace and how to provide them to all employees irrespective of where they work from. It also brings light to managers on how to manage their subordinates, combat proximity bias and make sure all employees are given equal visibility and opportunities.

It also helps managers and organizations to devise a strategy to take advantage of the different places and times in which employees work by increasing energy for people working remotely, promoting coordination towards synchronous work and as well making sure employees stay focused during asynchronous work and also encourage unity for employees in-office. Understanding hybrid working environment also throws light to managers that mechanism of measuring productivity has changed to focusing on outcomes than by measuring the number of hours an employee has worked or tasks completed. This means that this study also paves way towards increasing the sense of accountability and responsibility among employees.

A greater sense of understanding of the hybrid workplace helps recruiters of the human resource department to refresh job descriptions making a larger pool of talent fit to their criteria. The scope of this study is also extended to organizations realizing the dynamic nature of a hybrid workplace and will enable them to keep their operations and aspects of workplace management more fluid and easier to changes.

As organizations move into the hybrid working environment, employees will be working out of different locations i.e., from office and at home. This poses quite some challenges to the organization in aspects of workplace management:

- **Infrastructure:** Organizations should ensure that employees working from home have the same or all the necessary infrastructure that an in-office employee is provided with. This includes a proper office desk setup at home along with needed electronic gadgets like laptop, tablet, mobile phone etc., and as well a perfectly working internet connection to make the working atmosphere as comfortable and easy as possible.
- **Communication and collaboration:** As half the employees are working out of office and half the employees are working from home, they should all be brought to a common platform for communication. This ensures that no matter where the employee works out of, everyone receives first hand update information from the organization/ manager. Also, as most of the employees are part of teams, proper communication and collaboration is required so that employees are able to coordinate with each other well and that the work is carried out seamlessly. Organizations must ensure to invest in appropriate communication and collaboration tools to allow employees to work together in teams, to give opportunity for the employee to be heard in case of any ideas, suggestions or grievances, to receive all necessary communication on time and to combat proximity bias i.e., making sure every employee is equally considered for new opportunities and employees are equally recognized for the work they do.

Hence, this study is conducted to know how hybrid working environment affecting these variables of workplace management and what are the steps taken by the organization to reduce these challenges.

2.Literature Review

Corrin Jones (2021), in his article on how to effectively manage a hybrid workplace model enunciates the challenges in a hybrid work environment which includes difficulty in communication, more time to touch base on aspects of collaboration and employees tending to feel alienated and apart. However, he also provides certain tips on how to manage the hybrid workplace like:

- Shifting focus from the number of hours worked to milestones and deadlines achieved and measuring productivity and achievements than raw time as the human brain can only do focused work for a certain number of hours no matter where the employee works from.
- Utilizing communication and collaboration software like office 365 and MS teams that acts as a consistent method of communication which provides an integrated platform for employees regardless of whether they are remote or in office.
- Encouraging team engagement and team building activities, exercises and shared goals so that employees don't feel left out.
- Building trust between employers and employees and not micro-managing employees as it simply doesn't work in a hybrid environment. Managers would rather have to play a role of a facilitator by ensuring their employees have what it needs to succeed rather than questioning the employees' ability to self-govern.

- Having frequent check in with employees to ensure that are getting what they need in terms of resources, infrastructure etc.
- Having processes in place to monitor and manage communication by making clear channels of communication, whom they should contact in case they need guidance, raise a complaint or seek approval etc.

Mark Mortensen and Martine Haas (2021), in their article have given their viewpoints and ideas on how to make the hybrid workplace fair. They talk about how hybrid provides organizations with benefits like labor-cost optimization, increased flexibility, increased employee satisfaction and reduced carbon footprint while also challenges in maintaining critical strengths of smoother coordination, stronger cultural socialization, greater creativity, informal networking and face-to-face collaboration. In order to lead the hybrid environment, they say that managers should know how to manage 2 distinct sources of power: hybridity positioning and hybrid competence.

Hybrid positioning is basically the visibility and resource accessibility level of the employee that gives employees chances in a new project, update information, recognition for good work and credits. This visibility tends to be more if the employee is working out of office or is in the same location as the manager while managers have very little visibility over employees working remote where no matter how hard or how many late nights and early mornings the employee has worked, their efforts remain unseen. Hence, it is important that managers understand the concept of hybrid positioning to ensure equal recognition and opportunity for all.

Hybrid competence is the employees' ability to be adaptive and flexible to changing environments, to be good at communication, relationship building, establish and provide evidence that build trustworthiness even in a context of low visibility etc. While employees who naturally possess these skills tend to collaborate and transcend the gap, not all employees are strong in these skills which puts them in a place where they feel constantly out of sync. Hence, it is the responsibility of the managers and the organization to bridge this workplace gap to ensure everybody is moving along the same line.

Vikas Kalwani (2021), in his article talks about how communication should be a hybrid workplace and discusses in the key aspects of setting up communication in a hybrid workplace.

Keeping a hybrid ready tech stack is very important as it will be the platform on which we will be bringing both remote and if-office workers together. Thus, it is essential to invest on some team chat tool or software. There should be a clear communication process set up with easy access to resources and information so that employees can work asynchronously, reduce communication gaps and misunderstandings and as well be clear of the goals expected to achieve. Face to face communication is extremely important when the situation calls for it as it will be beneficial for both the company as well as the employees. Certain employee benefits such as contribution towards home office set up or travel expense allowances must be provided to remote and hybrid workforce by the company to ensure seamless workflow and as well helps to boost the productivity and engagement of the employees. It is highly essential for the organizations to become feedback driven to make sure all employees are in line and mistakes if any can be immediately rectified. It also helps the employees to improve and embrace this new way of working. Finally, leaders must treat all employees the same way and ensure that employees are kept on loop with communication no matter where they work from.

Kristina Martic (2021), in her blog suggests ways to ensure smooth transition into the hybrid working model so that employees can quickly adapt to this new form of workplace. To tap into some of the benefits of hybrid working environment like better employee experience and wellbeing, increased employee engagement and productivity, easier talent attraction and better retention etc., organizations must meet certain basic requirements to get this new form of working up and running. In this blog, 8 such ways are mentioned for the smooth transition:

- Understanding employees' needs and preferences with respect to their engagement and productivity level, nature of work etc.
- Setting and communicating clear goals and expectations, mission, vision etc. to make sure all employees are aligned and objectives are achieved no matter where they work from.
- Establishing proper employee communication channels and treating it as a top priority. Investing on proper communication technology.
- Getting frequent feedbacks from employees on employee wellbeing, motivation, engagement, collaboration and productivity through surveys/ 1-1 calls etc.
- Constantly giving employees guidance through new rules, policies, procedures etc., to make sure employees have clarity at all times.
- Reducing biases and discrimination in terms of opportunities and productivity based on the place they work from.

- Introducing and providing new benefits and perks for employees like home office supplies, mental health services etc.
- Constantly updating organization's tech stack to make sure all employees have equal access to update information.

Martha Maznevski and Katherine Chudoba (2000), in their research study about bridging the space over time among global virtual teams to increase their effectiveness. During the research period, organizations were just starting to go global and thus it became a mandate for organizations to implement decisions regarding international components and policies. The research was based on adaptive structuration theory that involved investing in communication tools and changing the structure of organizations according to the changes of globalization. Today, this is the essential need of organizations and is applicable even with employees belonging to the same geographical zone. The research primarily focuses on effective interaction through virtual communication mediums as well as its sync with regular face-to-face communication to see aspects like how fast the communication happens, how much the members are in the loop with follow up conversations etc., to see the gap if any and come up with effective solutions to bridge the gap to ensure both virtual and face-to-face communication are as equally effective as possible.

Gernot Grabher and Oliver Ibert (2014), in their study talk about how knowledge and resources can be shared through collaboration in hybrid virtual communities. This article disagrees with the reification of closeness in the current discussions about the geographies of information creation. It targets fostering a more separated view on the spatialities of learning by zeroing in on information rehearses in which neither physical nor social closeness are accessible. All the more explicitly, the article investigates based on a 'netnographic approach' intelligent information coordinated effort in nine 'mixture virtual networks' that mirror an expansive range of hierarchical set-ups from firm facilitated over firm identified with free networks. The exact examination uncovers that mixture virtual networks even without physical or social vicinity can deliver monetarily helpful information; that regardless of the low significance of closeness the physical and material conditions assume an essential part for information joint effort in hybrid virtual networks; and that half breed virtual networks manage the cost of special specialized freedoms and social elements that encourage learning measures unreachable in vis-à-vis settings.

Hybrid virtual networks can be partitioned into three particular sorts, every one of which is characterized by the sort of connection between business makers from one viewpoint, and clients and excited laypersons on the other. Firm-facilitated networks are started and kept up with by expert and business makers. These organizations set up the online gathering of trade, utilize the local area's mediators, characterize and police the standards of connection and can, whenever considered significant, set the plan by unequivocally requesting input on explicit points. Firm-related networks are dispatched by local area individuals who make and implement the principles of cooperation in a self-coordinated measure. Notwithstanding, these networks are not autonomous from proficient makers. Maybe, the object of normal interest is related with an unmistakable brand or even an explicit item. Rather than the to some extent requested exhortation in firm-facilitated networks, information cooperation regularly unfurls around questions and practices that rise up out of every day usage. At long last, autonomous networks arise and develop without the motivation or help of expert or business associations. Association elements are driven by the inspirations and desires of local area individuals alone. Comparative with the two different kinds of networks, information coordinated effort in free settings is most thoroughly centered around the 'epistemic article' while firm-related networks specifically unfurl solid sidelong elements around off-theme strings or essentially 'commotion'.

3. Research Methodology

After extensive literature review, the objectives of the research were framed. They are:

- To identify the variables of digital workplace management.
- To examine the infrastructure variable in hybrid working environment.
- To analyze the aspects of communication, data management and team management of digital workplace management.
- To analyze the effect of infrastructure variable on communication, data management and team management.
- To find out the relationship of age and work experience and communication, data management and team management.

The research design of the present study is analytical in nature. The study is based on Non – Probability Convenience Sampling. The researcher used 'Questionnaire' as an instrument for collecting primary data, which proves to be less expensive and yet elaborative, when compared to other methods. The questionnaire in this study contained a total of 30 questions of which the first 2 questions were demographic questions. For the remaining 28 questions, the researcher has used standardized 'Digital trust in Workplace' questionnaire by Dave E. Marcial and Markus A. Launer which are based on a five-point Likert-scale by using "Strongly Agree" =5, "Agree" =4, "Neutral" =3, "Disagree" =2 and "Strongly Disagree" =1. The sample size of the study is 100 respondents.

4. Empirical result and Discussion

Percentage Analysis

Distribution of respondents based on Age

Age	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
20 – 25	13	13
26 – 30	9	9
31 – 35	14	14
36 and above	64	64
Total	100	100

Distribution of respondents based on Work Experience

Work Experience	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
0 – 3 years	15	15
4 – 7 years	5	5
8 – 10 years	5	5
Above 10 years	75	75
Total	100	100

LINEAR REGRESSION

Hypothesis 1:

H₀: There is no effect of infrastructure on communication, data management and team management.

H₁: There is effect of infrastructure on communication, data management and team management.

Relationship between infrastructure variable on communication

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	17.109	2.417		7.079	< .001
Infrastructure	.540	.111	.440	4.848	< .001

Dependent Variable: Communication **Level of Significance:** 0.05

Note: R= .440, R²= .193 and Adjusted R²= .185

Inference

From the above table it can be inferred that the t statistics probability value for Infrastructure is < .001 which is less than 0.05 level of significance, hence we reject the null hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that the infrastructure provided in a hybrid working environment influences the communication in the digital workplace. The regression equation can be written as:

$Y = 17.109 + 0.540 X$, where X is the infrastructure and Y is the communication. The value of correlation coefficient (r) is 0.440, coefficient of determination (r²) is 0.193 and adjusted R² is 0.185.

Relationship between infrastructure variable data management

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	22.450	1.932		11.623	< .001
Infrastructure	.665	.089	.596	7.354	< .001

Dependent Variable: Data Management **Level of Significance:** 0.05

Note: R= .596, R²= .356 and Adjusted R²= .349

Inference

From the above table it can be inferred that the t statistics probability value for Infrastructure is $< .001$ which is less than 0.05 level of significance, hence we reject the null hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that the infrastructure provided in a hybrid working environment influences the data management in the digital workplace. The regression equation can be written as:

$Y = 22.450 + 0.665 X$, where X is the infrastructure and Y is the communication. The value of correlation coefficient (r) is 0.596, coefficient of determination (r^2) is 0.356 and adjusted R^2 is 0.349.

Relationship between infrastructure variable team management

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	14.198	1.705		8.328	$< .001$
Infrastructure	.515	.079	.552	6.557	$< .001$

Dependent Variable: Team Management **Level of Significance:** 0.05

Note: $R = .552$, $R^2 = .305$ and Adjusted $R^2 = .298$

Inference

From the above table it can be inferred that the t statistics probability value for Infrastructure is $< .001$ which is less than 0.05 level of significance, hence we reject the null hypothesis. Thus, it can be concluded that the infrastructure provided in a hybrid working environment influences the team management in the digital workplace. The regression equation can be written as:

$Y = 22.450 + 0.665 X$, where X is the infrastructure and Y is the communication. The value of correlation coefficient (r) is 0.552, coefficient of determination (r^2) is 0.305 and adjusted R^2 is 0.298.

ONE WAY ANOVA

Hypothesis 2:

H₀: There is no significant difference between the age group with regard to communication, data management and team management.

H₁: There is significant difference between the age group with regard to communication, data management and team management.

Table representing significant difference between the age group with regard to communication, data management and team management

Variable	Mean	F	df	Sig.
Communication	28.640	.420	3	.739
Data Management	36.430	1.302		.278
Team Management	25.200	1.750		.162

Level of Significance: 0.05

Inference:

- **Communication:** From the above table, it can be inferred that the probability value 0.739 is more than the alpha value 0.05, therefore we accept the H_0 . Hence, we conclude that there is no significant difference between the age groups and communication aspect of digital workplace management.
- **Data Management:** From the above table, it can be inferred that the probability value 0.278 is more than the alpha value 0.05, therefore we accept the H_0 . Hence, we conclude that there is no significant difference between the age groups and data management aspect of digital workplace management.

- **Team Management:** From the above table, it can be inferred that the probability value 0.162 is more than the alpha value 0.05, therefore we accept the H_0 . Hence, we conclude that there is no significant difference between the age groups and team management aspect of digital workplace management.

Hypothesis 3:

H_0 : There is no significant difference between the years of experience with regard to communication, data management and team management.

H_1 : There is significant difference between the years of experience with regard to communication, data management and team management.

Table representing significant difference between the years of experience with regard to communication, data management and team management

Variable	Mean	F	df	Sig.
Communication	28.640	1.623	3	.189
Data Management	36.430	1.894		.136
Team Management	25.200	2.696		.050

Level of Significance: 0.05

Inference:

- **Communication:** From the above table, it can be inferred that the probability value 0.189 is more than the alpha value 0.05, therefore we accept the H_0 . Hence, we conclude that there is no significant difference between the years of experience and communication aspect of digital workplace management.
- **Data Management:** From the above table, it can be inferred that the probability value 0.136 is more than the alpha value 0.05, therefore we accept the H_0 . Hence, we conclude that there is no significant difference between the years of experience and data management aspect of digital workplace management.
- **Team Management:** From the above table, it can be inferred that the probability value 0.050 is equal the alpha value 0.05, therefore we accept the H_0 . Hence, we conclude that there is no significant difference between the years of experience and team management aspect of digital workplace management.

5.Research Implication (Reliability and Limitation)

Cronbach's alpha is commonly used measure of reliability for a set of two or more construct indicators. The overall reliability value for this research is 0.930. During the research period, the researcher faced the following challenges:

- Due to the pandemic scenario and lack of physical touch, the researcher couldn't effectively reach out to the target group.
- Information was collected from service sector people on a voluntary basis. Therefore, the responses of service sector employees from all levels could not be covered.
- Due to the strict norms of organizations and closure of organizations due to the pandemic reduced the chances for the researcher to perform data collection physically.
- Data collection through questionnaire was limited only up to 100 respondents.
- Time frame of the study is only one month.

6.Conclusion

Optimizing the digital workplace with integrated technology and fully supported staff is the key to a successful hybrid work culture. Post pandemic, the future of work is hybrid and hence a careful strategy has to be planned to ensure that the hybrid working environment functions smoothly and effectively. This research gives a sneak peek into how the future looks like, how the existing facilities are with respect to hybrid infrastructure, what could be improved and how employees are coping to this new style of working especially with relation to aspects like communication and collaboration factors like data management and team management. This research gives an idea to industries transforming into hybrid working environment as to how they can get started and what are the factors to be considered.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a lasting impact on the way organizations function and operate. Employers are obligated to facilitate WFH Practices, and eventually, nurture hybrid working environments. Employees are expected to maintain efficiency levels while in either of these cases. This is as challenging as it can get, due to the effect of several

parameters as pointed out in the research.

Thus, as Human Resource professionals, our role in facilitating employees towards digital workplace and a hybrid working environment would be on developing strategies to ensure smooth and unanimous onboarding procedure for all employees, facilitating employees in adapting to the digital and hybrid workplace, facilitating learning and development modules that are necessary to unlearn and relearn new skills that are necessary for hybrid model, handling employee grievances and bridging gaps that arise out of hybrid working, building various HR policies for hybrid working and building Human resource strategies that align with the overall organizational strategy to ensure that the productivity and profitability of the company remains intact despite the new shift towards digital workplace and hybrid working environment.

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