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Issue #75: Hybrid work is more than geography – it is an organizational change

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Hybrid work is already integral to working life and is considered the most prominent trend in the labor market (Eurofound, 2021). Studies indicate that an increasing portion of the workforce expects more autonomy, and will continue to work from home (WFH) (Global Workplace Analytics, 2021). Thus, hybrid work and managing across distance will be essential in discussions on "the future of work."

Many people associate hybrid work with flexibility, allowing people to work from anywhere, and/or anytime. And no doubt working from home (also known as telework) comes with certain advantages like less commuter time and a better work-life balance. Whereas pre-pandemic research listed the pros and cons of telework, our international study shows that we can summarize the experienced advantages and disadvantages needed to optimize WFH, and guide workplace decisions. These guides include three dimensions that relate to maximizing the advantages, three others that relate to minimizing the disadvantages of WFH (Ipsen et al., 2021)

But hybrid work is more than maximizing and minimizing the advantages and disadvantages. It is also to understand that hybrid work adds to the complexity of work and management of work. In essence, the trend toward hybrid work is transforming the way people work across the world.

Essentially, we have an implicit understanding of work – that it takes place at the same time (synchronously), place, and within the same work culture (see the center of Figure 1). However, in hybrid work, we work at different sites, so there is a geographical distance. Culture, meaning the "work culture", sets expectations for what time everyone takes a break for lunch or whether emails are expected to be checked only during work hours. A new culture may include work time flexibility. There may also be workers working in different time zones and countries. Consequently, these new ways of working challenge our understanding of work – where, when, and how we work. With hybrid work, these three dimensions must be renegotiated.

Fisher and Fisher (2001) understand distance along three dimensions: Geography, time, and (work) culture (see Figure 1). Applying the three dimensions allows us to understand the complexity of hybrid work and the changes we face in our workplaces.
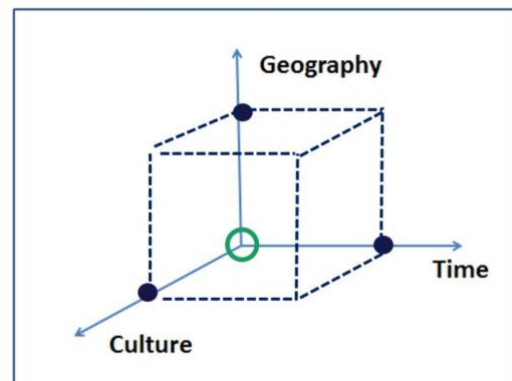

Figure 1. Three dimensions of distance and the span of hybrid work

The transformation of work to hybrid work demands numerous changes, and we see a call for new competencies to work and manage hybrid work, discussions of new forms of collaboration, work processes, rules for when and where to meet (online-onsite), and introduction of new technologies to plan for "who is in the office" and facilitate collaboration.

Hybrid work has turned out to be more than personal preferences and choices. It is about implementing new and alternative processes, systems, and structures and discussing responsibility, trust, and cooperation. Consequently, hybrid-remote work is not just a geographical shift from where or when work is conducted. It is a change in work and how it is organized and managed. In sum, hybrid work is an organizational change that involves new processes, skills, structures, and incentives. And above all, a clear understanding of how it supports the strategy and achievement of goals.

As we advance, key organizational actors like occupational health and safety representatives (OHS), facilities managers, HR managers, and managers, in general, will play a key role in understanding the extent of the organizational change. This includes understanding how to implement the changes to harvest the advantages of hybrid work, i.e., supporting people's well-being and performance (SDG 8).

Building on the consensus that one of the most important ingredients for successful organizational changes is strong leadership, then it is essential to give managers the required support to develop in tandem with the changes, thrive in the process, ensure employee well-being, efficiently manage the task, and achieve the organization's goals (Ipsen et al., 2020).

Globally, numerous training courses and guides on how to lead remotely, practice good workplace management, and daily one-2-one leadership and management are available. However, hybrid management calls for attentive management to ensure a fair and inclusive environment for all and to create the sense of proximity over distance. In this light, the next level in management training will be to understand and implement the organizational change that hybrid work really is.

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