

# What's Hiding in Hybrid Work?

## A Guide to Navigating the Risks



# Introduction

Since the catalyst of the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations and employees have embraced the opportunity of hybrid working. In research with The Female Lead we interviewed 80 women and men from public, private and voluntary sector organisations to explore how they experienced working in hybrid roles.

In our report, we identified that overall, both women and men are happy with hybrid working and experience many rewards including enhanced productivity, better health and wellbeing, reduced costs and commute time, more time with family and support with caring responsibilities. But we also identified four key risks for women in hybrid roles:

1. Invisible Workers
2. Shielded from Office Politics
3. Missing Meaningfulness
4. The Hybrid Career Ceiling

This guide has been designed to share the ways in which our participants navigated hybrid work and their innovative strategies for overcoming some of these risks.

## How to use this guide

We caution that the experience of hybrid workers will vary greatly across and within organisations. There is no advice that will suit *all* hybrid workers but we hope our guide will help to equip employees with a choice of strategies to enhance their hybrid working experiences.

Importantly, although this guide focuses on strategies for individuals, we do not think 'fixing' women or hybrid workers more broadly is the right approach for inclusivity. Instead, emphasis should be on organisations to improve the systems and processes in place to support inclusion in hybrid work (see our toolkit for organisations).

Although our report focused on the ramifications of hybrid work for women, the tactics, strategies, and advice we share in this guide are relevant for all hybrid workers. As such, we refer to employees and hybrid workers, not just women in our recommendations below.

We thank the participating organisations and individuals who took the time to share their experiences with us and enabled us to develop this guide. We would also like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for funding this project.

# Summary of Strategies

## Risk 1: Invisible workers

Women double down on tasks and engage in (virtual) presenteeism to counter stereotypes of hybrid workers. Working behind a digital wall risks women's work going unnoticed and unrecognised.

- Don't rely on getting noticed
- Use social media to raise your profile
- Ringfence your home life

## Risk 2: Shielded from office politics

Women are unaware and/or left out of political interactions between peers and managers. Being shielded from politics risks women feeling left out of the loop and lacking the networks they need to leverage for career support.

- Understand the political landscape
- Create your own communities
- Strategically plan in-office time

## Risk 3: Missing meaningfulness

Women felt hybrid work is less joyful and miss the camaraderie they had with colleagues. Along with increased isolation and video fatigue many struggled to find meaning and purpose from their work.

- Reconsider 'professionalism'
- Make time for casual conversations
- Block out time
- Manage miscommunications

## Risk 4: The hybrid career ceiling

A combination of a lack of visibility, less access to office politics, finding less meaning from work, fewer opportunities to learn vicariously in the office and the structure of senior roles means women are at risk of experiencing slower career progression.

- Step out and ask for development opportunities
- Normalise flexibility
- Identify sponsors

# Risk 1: Invisible Workers

## The risk

Women double down on tasks and engage in (virtual) presenteeism to counter stereotypes of hybrid workers. Working behind a digital wall risks women's work going unnoticed and unrecognised.

## Strategies for hybrid workers

### Don't rely on getting noticed

Women in our sample often relied on online productivity trackers or hours logged to convey their work efforts. But these methods can go unnoticed so it's important to find ways to stand out from the crowd:

- It's important to cultivate sponsorship from leaders so they champion your work. Ask senior leaders for (in-person or virtual) coffees so they get to know what you do and where you want to be.
- Self-promotion can feel awkward, but we found participants' attempts were better received when they promoted their own achievements within wider team success:

"The people that get on very well and are recognised as true leaders within the business are able to vocalise themselves in a positive way, champion what they're doing and champion what their team are doing" (F)



### Use social media to raise your profile

We found social media was an important tool that women can leverage to gain visibility in hybrid work.

Women who promoted their own and others' work on internal (e.g., Yammer) or external (e.g. LinkedIn) social media developed positive reputations across their organisations

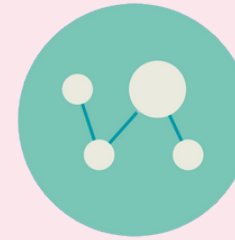
## 'Profile: Sammi Jeffries



We interviewed Sammi when she was working at the Centre for Process Innovation (CPI). She was keenly aware of the need to gain visibility in hybrid work.

Sammi spoke about using LinkedIn as a “professional tool” to showcase her own and others’ work:

*“I’m quite into my social media. I’m into LinkedIn, I’ll get updates from colleagues, or they’ll see updates from me, if I have attended a really useful webinar, or done some training, or I’ve made connections and networked with new people, I’d post about it”*



Her profile-building on social media has developed her career and since interviewing her, Sammi has moved to Beckman Coulter (London) who are supporting her in working remotely in the Northeast of England.

*“I think a lot of my exposure to the senior leadership team has been through delivering projects and shouting about it”*

*“I’ve had nothing but support from my new employer on my LinkedIn presence so far... it’s even given me an extra boost in making my mark, as many of my new colleagues have introduced themselves to me and noted my LinkedIn posts!”*

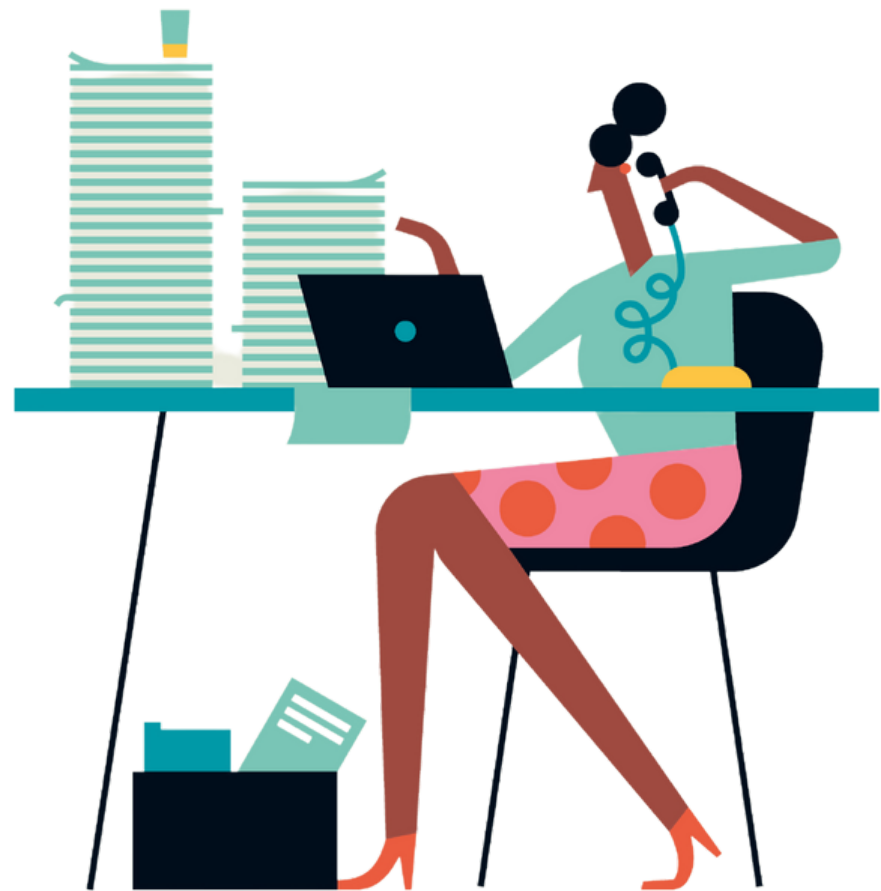
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## Ringfence your home life

We found many women were pressured to demonstrate diligence through availability and found difficulty ‘switching off’.

To prevent work spilling into home life, participants recommended the following:

- Use alternative devices and separate accounts for work and home email and messaging
- Use out of office messages to convey (un)availability
- Turn off ‘read receipt’ notifications on messaging apps so you don’t feel pressured to respond immediately



# Risk 2: Shielded from Office Politics

## The risk

Women are unaware and/or left out of political interactions between peers and managers. Being shielded from politics risks women feeling left out of the loop and lacking the networks they need to leverage for career support.

## Strategies for hybrid workers

### Understand the political landscape

In hybrid work, we found people were often isolated in siloed teams and needed to develop more informal knowledge, including:

- Knowing who holds (formal and informal) power
- Understanding others' agendas
- How processes work 'on the ground'
- Awareness of tensions between colleagues
- Existence of informal groups and coalitions

Networking underpinned the ability to gain such knowledge. Participants highlighted that without chance encounters with colleagues hybrid-networking requires a more strategic approach.



## 'Profile: Josephine Kiernan

Josephine shared advice on how to strategically develop networks in hybrid roles.

*“Digital networking is not completely random, it’s more calculated than bumping into someone at the water cooler”*

She outlined the steps she had taken to develop a network to support her operational delivery and career moves:

- *“You do a bit of a mapping exercise, sit down, look at the organisational chart and who people are”*
- *“You need to be quite pointed about it, who is that person and what are you trying to engender from the relationship? Is it to directly benefit a work project or just because you find their work interesting?”*
- *“Put in one-to-ones with them to introduce yourself”*
- *“Establish a regular rhythm to catch up”*
- *“Invite them to events you are attending”*

- *“Send them information that they would find interesting so you can forge the relationships”*

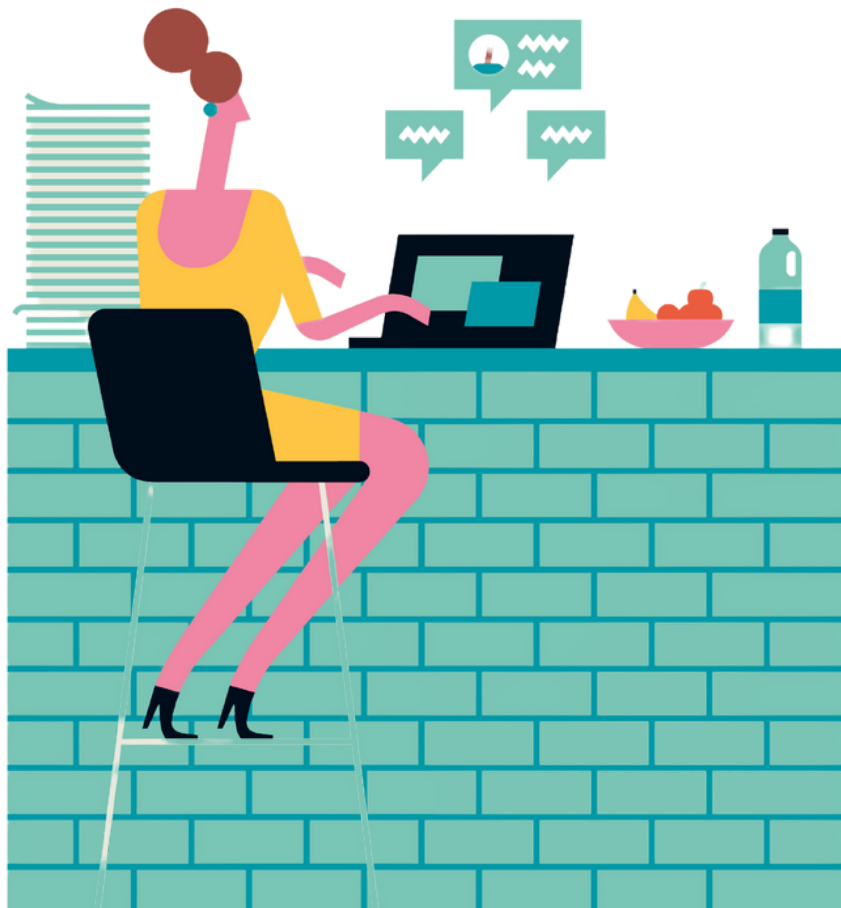
Most importantly, Josephine emphasised the need to be authentic in interactions:

*“I think you have to work a bit harder when it’s a digital relationship because you have to make people feel like you’ve got true intentions, or it can come across quite cold”*

*“I really try not to go straight into a conversation and ask for something. Instead, I’ll say “hey, I’ve heard something was going on in your area at the moment. Must be really stressful. Hope that everything’s OK. By the way, I’ve got this thing I was hoping you could support me on. Here’s what I need. I’m going to put a call in about it. Hope that works””*

Josephine found networking had helped her deliver projects successfully, find her career path and identify who could help her facilitate important career moves.





## Create your own communities

We interviewed several women who had proactively developed their own networks to avoid feeling left out of the loop at work.

These women designed the communities to share work based knowledge, develop peoples' profiles and work connections across teams, sites and regions.

### Profile: Mercedes Scaife

Mercedes, a business analyst working in OVO Energy developed a community of practice to connect with analysts across the business:



*“I felt I was siloed in my department; you don’t get to interact or share knowledge to see how other teams and other parts of the business work. I thought “Do we have a community?” but there was no community of practice for business analysts, no forum for people to get together. I thought it would be nice to know the other business analysts and for my own development so I created a space where we could come together”*

## Profile: Faye Durkin and Felicity Husband

Faye Durkin, Head of Ecology and member of the leadership team at environmental consultancy, Ecus has been instrumental in developing technical working groups that provide cross-regional specialist networks.

*“I’ve set up technical working groups, they weren’t ‘a thing’ pre-COVID, it would have been very regionalised. Whereas now it’s national, people get together once a month and report back to me once a quarter and it works really well”*

Faye not only set up the concept of technical working groups, but also embeds their use across the organisation with bi-annual meetings of the various groups:

*“I do a start- and end-of season summit, which has all the ecologists dialling in. We get internal and external speakers It’s a good chance for people from all different grades and regions to get to see each other and get to know each other”.*

Principal Ecologist, Felicity Husband, also talked about the proactive role she took in technical working groups at Ecus:

*“I lead on the biodiversity net gain specialism group, I put my hand up and said “yes, I’ll lead the group”, it’s a networking opportunity to get to know people across the country”*

The technical working groups therefore provide Faye and Felicity with visibility, knowledge of the organisation and their work specialisms, and career enhancing networks.



## Strategically plan in-office time

Travelling to work only to sit on your own or on online calls is not the best use of your time in hybrid work. We found participants who liaised with their team members, and who strategically chose days to coincide with senior managers made the best of their office time.

“When I started, I tried to meet the senior leadership team all face to face, some of them all in one day, for example, when I went to [headquarters], I'd get tipped off. There was a gathering for a board meeting or something. So I'd go and tick off 5 or 6 all in one go” (M)

It is also important to think about where you go once in the office. Sitting near stakeholders or senior managers can mean you pick up on important information that can help work projects and develop the visibility required to receive career support.

## Profile: Sheena Taylor

Sheena, a Procurement Manager, chooses to sit with the stakeholders for her project area.

*“When I go in I sit with the whole operational team, rather than my other procurement colleagues”*

Sheena's role involves sourcing and purchasing goods for her organisation. Being near the operational team means she can pick up important information about their priorities without needing to schedule in specific calls.

*“I've got a better handle on what they need, I'm up to date with what they're working on so I know how to work it into ordering priorities”*



# Risk 3: Missing Meaningfulness

## The risk

Women felt hybrid work is less joyful and they miss the camaraderie they had with colleagues when working in-person. Along with increased isolation and video fatigue many struggled to find meaning and purpose from their work.

## Strategies for hybrid workers

### Reconsider 'professionalism'

We found women felt bound by having to demonstrate 'professionalism' which comprised reducing chit chat, getting straight to work related content and keeping conversations neutral and business like.

"Some people have a friendly instant message relationship. Some people like to **remain professional** and would rather send emails" (F)

But we found men took more time out for social phone calls with colleagues, catch ups and chats, and saw that as an equally important element of the job.

Reframing 'professionalism' to include developing support networks, social connections and relationships can go some way to make the hybrid workplace less transactional.

### Make time for casual conversations

In hybrid working you might not see colleagues in-person for long periods of time even if you go to the office regularly. You may also miss them online if your work assignments are not aligned.

Reaching out to others without needing a business reason is key to maintaining networks and nurturing social connections at work.

"I've started to keep up with the person I met when I first started, I just drop him a message if something annoying or funny happened or anything like that" (M)

## Block out time

To avoid video fatigue, it's important to break up the day. Our participants suggested the following tips:

- Avoid booking hour long meetings, 30 or 45 minutes are usually sufficient
- Leave gaps between meetings, have a buffer zone to refresh that mug of tea
- Block out lunch or break times during the day in your calendar

### Profile: Grace Smith

Grace, a Children and Young People Coordinator at domestic abuse charity, Equation, summarised her tips for maintaining joy in hybrid work:

- *“Drop people a message to check in”*
- *“Be willing to be available, to have 5 minute calls with people”*
- *“Leave gaps in your diary to avoid video fatigue”*
- *“Have those like casual conversations, even if you are just working from home”*
- *“Take breaks, don't be sat staring at your laptop all day!”*

## Manage miscommunications

We found hybrid work often brings miscommunications, confusion and tensions between colleagues because it is difficult to convey tone as facial expressions and body language cues from colleagues are harder to read. To create more camaraderie with colleagues our participants suggested:

- Choose your medium carefully
- Use chat functions rather than emails for short requests and check-ins
- Use emails for longer requests or to contact people you have infrequent contact with
- Use phone calls to personalise requests and maintain connections
- Use emojis to convey tone in written messages
- Keep your camera turned on to enhance non-verbal communication



# Risk 4: The Hybrid Career Ceiling

## The risk

A combination of a lack of visibility, less access to office politics, finding less meaning from work, fewer opportunities to learn vicariously in the office and the structure of senior roles means women are at risk of experiencing slower career progression.

## Strategies for hybrid workers

### Step out and ask for development opportunities

To accelerate learning in a hybrid environment it is important to ask for opportunities such as

- Shadowing colleagues
- Attend more senior meetings
- Secondments to other areas of the organisation

### Normalise flexibility

To develop a culture that is supportive of flexibility in senior roles it is important that employees, and especially senior leaders role model flexibility. Leaders can:

- Talk openly about how they structure their day

- Make it clear that they log off for the night
- Be open about their preferred work week schedule
- Make flexibility part of developmental discussions

### Profile: Kit Hawkins

Kit Hawkins, Managing Director at environmental consultancy, Ecus told us how he works flexibly:

*“Since my youngest was born I've worked compressed hours, working five in four, so that I can look after the kids on Fridays”*

*“We work flexibly around core hours, so when I need to look after the kids in the afternoon, I set up my laptop at 8 so that I can finish at 4”*

Crucially, Kit role models his flexibility by talking about it with employees, adding it to his email signature and out of office messaging.

## Profile: Pauline Jones

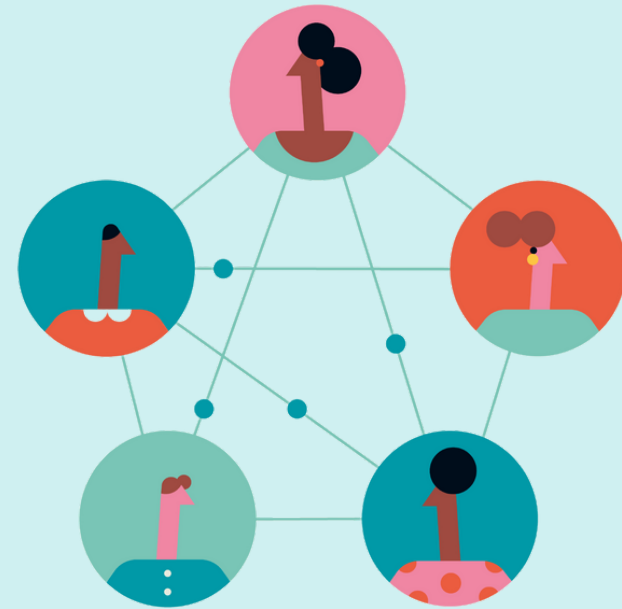
Pauline is a solicitor at the Centre for Process Innovation and had only been working at the organisation for three months when we interviewed her.

Pauline spoke about the challenges of starting in an organisation that operates a hybrid work model:

*“The big issue for me is trying to build a network with people who don't know me from Adam because they've never seen me before”*

A key strategy Pauline used to learn more about the organisation was to proactively invite herself to meetings and events:

*“I invited myself to their team event, so I spent the whole day with them so they were able to see who I was”*



*“You don't get the chatter and the random catch ups next to the coffee machine, or the drive by's at the desk, it's more formal. You have to get access to the strategy meetings and make sure you invite yourself along to other key meetings”.*

Using these tactics Pauline has been able to develop her networks and learn more about the organisation's culture and strategic priorities.

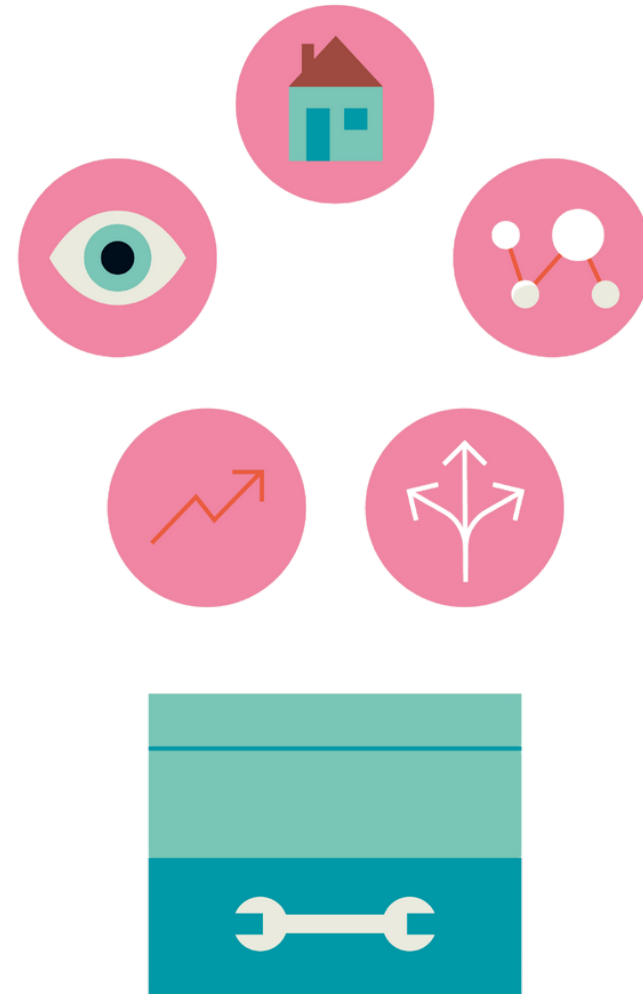
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## Identify sponsors

To gain visibility and develop your organisational knowledge it is important to find a sponsor or sponsors. Beyond mentoring, sponsors can

- Provide advice on career moves and personal style
- Share political knowledge about the organisation
- Connect you to powerful people
- Provide you with 'stretch assignments' and opportunities to develop
- Promote your successes and advocate for you across the organisation

This might not be just one person, it is important to develop a network of sponsors who can support and champion your career in these various ways.





# Acknowledgements

## Our participants

We would like to thank the 80 participants who took the time to share their experiences with us. Their insights were invaluable.

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We are keen to hear from organisations who implement our recommendations or want to know more about our research.

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