

What's Hiding in Hybrid Work?

The Rewards and Risks for Women in Hybrid Work



Table of Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	6
Research aims and methodology	7
What is hybrid working?	9
The rewards of hybrid working	10
The risks of hybrid working	15
Risk 1: Invisible workers	16
Risk 2: Sheilded from office politics	20
Risk 3: Missing meaningfulness	25
Risk 4: The hybrid career ceiling	29
Notes	32
Acknowledgements	33
The research team	34

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the widespread adoption of hybrid working for office-based workers, transforming the availability of flexible working and changing the nature of day-to-day work for many people. Hybrid working is considered a gamechanger for underrepresented groups in the workforce, especially women.

But hybrid working at scale is still a relatively new concept for most organisations, and we have not yet reached a point of best practice. Business leaders and researchers have already sounded the alarm about some of the potential challenges that hybrid working might surface for women.

In 2022, educational charity The Female Lead and Dr Madeleine Wyatt, Reader in Diversity Inclusion and Leverhulme Research Fellow at King's Business School collaborated on a multi-sector research study to dig deeper into the lived experience of hybrid work. We wanted to achieve the following aims:



Learn more about how men and women experience hybrid work



Identify best practice to design a toolkit to assist organisations in developing inclusive hybrid working practices



Share knowledge on what men and women might need to consider when managing their careers in a hybrid workplace

What we did

We interviewed 80 hybrid workers (40 men and 40 women) across seven organisations. Our participants came from public, private and voluntary sectors, and held varying levels of seniority and experience.

We examined all 80 interviews for underlying themes and gender differences to identify key rewards and risks of hybrid working for women. We also looked for examples of best practice from organisations and individuals in the ways they managed their hybrid careers (see our toolkit for best practice cases and recommendations).

What we found: rewards and risks

We found many ways that hybrid working benefits both men and women, and their organisations:



Hybrid workers feel trusted and respected as they have greater control over their schedules and work arrangements



Hybrid workers are able to adjust their working style and environment to improve personal productivity



Enhanced flexibility allows hybrid workers to focus on their health and wellbeing



Hybrid workers report reduced costs for travel and childcare and less time spent on their commute



The flexibility of hybrid working is a gamechanger for those with caring responsibilities

We also found four key risks that are likely to negatively impact the workplace and career experiences of women in the world of hybrid work.



Risk 1: Invisible Workers

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



Risk 2: Shielded from office politics

Women are shielded from political interactions. This risks women feeling left out of the loop and lacking the networks they need to leverage for career support.



Risk 3: Missing meaningfulness

Women miss camaraderie with colleagues. Combined with increased isolation and video fatigue many found their roles joyless and struggled to find meaning from their work.



Risk 4: The hybrid career ceiling

The risks of hybrid working combined with a lack of learning opportunities and less flexibility in senior roles place women in danger of slower career progression.

Remedying the Risks

Our findings make it clear that while hybrid working has many benefits, organisations need to consider how to make it more inclusive. We do not find that returning to the office full time is a good or practical solution. Instead we drew from our interviews and our own wider work on gender inclusivity to create a toolkit for organisations to enhance inclusivity in hybrid work. Here are a summary of our recommendations, full details of the best practices we saw and our recommendations can be found in our accompanying toolkit.

Risk 1: Invisible workers

- Reframe and communicate what 'productivity' is
- Managers to champion employees upwards and sideways
- Showcase employees without relying on managers
- Support employees to separate work from home

Risk 2: Shielded from office politics

- Reframe 'politics' to encourage inclusive interaction
- Create transparent communities
- Incentivise (not mandate) the office

Risk 3: Missing meaningfulness

- Invest in purposeful team bonding
- Encourage camaraderie via transparent online social groups
- Create a vibrant office environment

Risk 4: The hybrid career ceiling

- Onboard employees in-person
- Provide regular shadowing opportunities
- Design flexibility into all roles
- Provide sponsorship



Introduction

Hybrid working has revolutionised the workplace. We wanted to find out how women and men experience this new form of working and how organisations can ensure inclusivity in a hybrid workplace.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to work from home almost a quarter of employees now work remotely[1]. Three-quarters of Londoners say they work from home at least once a week and most think that work will never be the same again[2].

The Office for National Statistics reports that just 8% of hybrid workers want to return to their place of work and that 23% of businesses plan to use hybrid working permanently. This evidence suggests that hybrid working is here to stay.

Many assume that hybrid working has solved the challenges that women and those who shoulder caring responsibilities face in the workplace because it can provide more flexibility than office-based work.

Women do report that they have experienced a better quality of life as a result of hybrid working[2]. Yet there is a danger of reducing the equality of hybrid working to issues of flexibility.

We believe it is important to look beyond working patterns to examine what the risks and rewards of hybrid working might be for gender equality, diversity, and inclusion.

With this project, we shift the focus from flexibility to understand how people really experience their day-to-day hybrid work, and to learn from these lived experiences about what might contribute towards gender differences in the hybrid workplace.

Research Aims and Methodology

This research aimed to provide an in-depth exploration into peoples' experiences of hybrid work.

We wanted to find out:

- How women and men experience hybrid work
- What organisations and managers can do to ensure hybrid work is inclusive
- What might men and women need to consider when managing their careers in a hybrid workplace

This report presents the evidence from in-depth interviews with 40 women and 40 men that we conducted in 2022.

Participants all worked in hybrid roles and were from a range of private, public, and voluntary sector organisations across different regions of the UK and some with international offices (see Table 1). All participants were volunteers, and the study followed ethical standards outlined by King's College London.

Organisations supported us to promote the study to employees across a wide range of regions, to ensure we provided a good overview of the variations of hybrid work in different environments.

We asked participants about:

- How they structured their working week
- The types of software or virtual communication platforms they used and how they used them
- How they achieved their day-to-day work tasks at home and in the office
- The ways in which they networked and interacted with colleagues
- The extent to which they felt they achieved voice in their organisations
- How they adapted their style and presentation in different work environments.
- What their organisations did well or less well regarding hybrid working
- What they would like to change about hybrid working



Table 1. Participating Organisations

Organisation	Description
Centre for Process Innovation (CPI)	A large independent technology innovation centre based primarily in the Northeast of England
Ecus	A medium-sized environmental consultancy operating across the UK
Equation	A domestic abuse charity based in Nottinghamshire, UK
The LEGO Group	A Danish toy production company
OVO Energy	A large independent UK gas and electricity energy supplier with hubs in London, Bristol and Glasgow
Patrizia SE	Global investment and asset management company in the real estate sector
Civil Service	UK public sector employees from several governmental departments

We thank our participants for their willingness to discuss their work (and home life) so openly and honestly. Many of our participants reported finding the interview itself a useful reflective exercise to take stock of the changes that had happened in their working styles in recent years.

We therefore encourage organisations to empower their employees by spending the time to listen to their voices to understand how they experience hybrid work in context.

Across all 80 interviews we were able to identify clear themes about the rewards of hybrid work, the gendered risks, and their potential remedies, which are discussed throughout this report and the accompanying toolkit.



What is Hybrid Working?

Hybrid working is a term typically used to describe roles where employees work for some of the week at home. While this broad definition encompassed all our participants' experiences, there were variations in how hybrid working operated in practice.



Location

Most participants were encouraged to be in the office at least 2-3 days per week. Some organisations had closed smaller offices and moved to larger hubs. This could mean some employees rarely attended the office or worked across a range of offices.

Schedule

All participants had broad flexibility over their working hours including start and finish times, lunch breaks, and were able to go out for personal appointments when it suited them.



Formality

Most participants had informal hybrid agreements. Some had hybrid working written into their contracts. This was more prevalent in organisations that needed to differentiate between roles that could or could not be fulfilled at home (e.g., laboratory based).

The Rewards of Hybrid Working

The shift to hybrid working during the COVID-19 pandemic was revolutionary for many aspects of people's lives. As the dust settles in 2022 we found many ways that hybrid working continues to benefit employees and organisations.



Benefits for men and women

Hybrid workers feel trusted and respected, report improved health and wellbeing, and have reduced commute times, costs and a smaller carbon footprint.

Personal productivity

Hybrid workers are able to adjust their working style, schedule and environment to improve personal productivity.

A gamechanger for carers

Fathers spend more time with their families and mothers have more autonomy at work and home.

Happy with hybrid

All 80 participants reported that overall, they were happy with hybrid work.

Trust and respect

Most participants worked in organisations that followed a flexible hybrid model. This meant that in-office days, typically two days per week, were encouraged and sometimes contracted but in practice were not dictated.

This left employees able to control where they worked each day, and how they managed their time, usually around a set of 'core' hours.

Men and women were overwhelmingly supportive of this model, feeling trusted and respected to structure their own schedule.

“Being able to have the flexibility and the choice of how and where you work has really boosted people's morale and motivation” (M)

Even individuals who preferred to spend most time at the office enjoyed having choice and flexibility. All participants claimed they would consider hybrid working a requirement in any future roles.



“I think if people are looking to leave or join a different company, I think their first question is ‘Do you have hybrid working?’” (F)

Personal productivity

Countering claims that hybrid work can encourage social loafing and slacking off, we found that organisations are able to reap the benefits of a more focused workforce.

While it is possible that our participants may have wanted to appear socially desirable, we found no examples of employees reporting being less effective in hybrid roles, which should go some way to alleviating organisations' concerns about productivity in hybrid working.

“It needs some self-reflection. In which working environment can I deliver my best output?” (M)

Health and wellbeing

Enhanced flexibility meant participants had adapted their lifestyles to improve their wellbeing. Participants reported doing more exercise and eating healthier meals because they had access to their own cooking facilities.

“Today I'm at home office so let's start my day with a morning run!” (F)

Dog ownership was a very common theme, with several participants having recently welcomed puppies into their family. Many talked about the importance of walking and spending more time with their pets.

“I walk the dog on a lunchtime, which means I can get pretty far in about 45 minutes...it's a nice decompression throughout the middle of the day. You get to shake off your stresses and come back to work with a clear mind, which you can't do in the office” (M)



Costs and carbon footprint

Participants felt that a major reward of hybrid working was the reduction in commuting time and costs. Many participants talked about using their would-be commuting time to either catch up on work or engage in activities to improve their wellbeing.

Some did acknowledge that the cost of living and working from home may be challenging:

“The added cost of working from home on your electricity, your gas can have a big impact on people” (F)

But participants typically saw hybrid working as a way to recoup costs and were also mindful of the environmental impact.

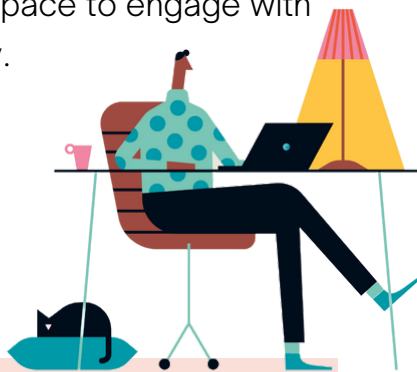
Family and Caring

The flexibility offered to the hybrid workers in our study was particularly useful for parents and those with caring responsibilities.

Men who had previously worked long hours away from the home spoke about the increased time they had to spend with their families. Many felt hybrid working had enabled them to become more involved as fathers.

“It’s helped me to have more quality time when my family’s in” (M)

Women spoke more about their increased autonomy, which helped them to reduce childcare costs, experience less time pressure and more space to engage with both work and family.



“For me [hybrid work] is absolutely fantastic because I take my little boy to nursery at 8 and I’m back at my desk at 8:15” (F)

“It’s the practical aspects. I don’t have to be out the door at a certain time to be at work and I don’t have that commute. I can be logging on and checking emails while I’m still getting the kids sorted for school. Before [hybrid working] I would have had to start work later and then I’d have to make the time up” (F)

Women also spoke about having increased emotional availability for their families.

“I’ve definitely been able to be more on top of what they’re doing and help with homework more and just be emotionally there, when they come home from school and they’re upset about something, they can come and talk to me straight away” (F)

Happy with hybrid

At the end of our interviews, we asked whether participants were happy with hybrid working. While some undoubtedly carried criticisms of how hybrid arrangements were implemented, all the men and women we spoke to reported that they were happy with the ability to opt for hybrid flexibility. These are just some of their comments:

“I'm very happy with it actually” (M)



“Happy, I can highly recommend it. I would never go back to 100% office presence” (F)

“Very happy. It's something that I can highly recommend” (M)



“I'm super happy, it completely suits my life situation as it is” (F)

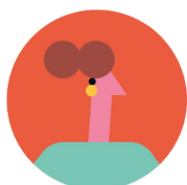


“Personally, I couldn't be happier” (M)

“Having a hybrid model of two or three days in the office and the rest working from home, it's just great!” (M)



“I personally like it. I give my best when I have this flexibility” (M)



“I am very happy. I do feel it works” (F)

“I really enjoy it. I would say I'm really happy with it” (F)

“I only see benefits in hybrid working” (F)



“I love it. I think it's amazing, the flexibility to be at home when you need to and then come in when you want to. It's just really good” (M)

The Risks of Hybrid Working

As well as the benefits of hybrid working for men and women, we found four key risks that are likely to impact the workplace and career experiences of women in the world of hybrid work.



Risk 1: Invisible workers

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

Risk 2: Shielded from office politics

Women are shielded from political interactions. This risks women feeling left out of the loop and lacking the networks they need to leverage for career support.

Risk 3: Missing meaningfulness

Women miss camaraderie with colleagues. Combined with increased isolation and video fatigue many found their roles joyless and struggled to find meaning from their work.

Risk 4: The hybrid career ceiling

The risks of hybrid working combined with a lack of learning opportunities and less flexibility in senior roles place women in danger of slower career progression.

Risk 1: Invisible Workers

Takeaways

- Women felt they needed to challenge the biased assumption that they are distracted by domestic work and childcare
- So women felt more pressure to conceal their home set-ups
- Women also reported ‘doubling down’ on work to prove themselves worthy of hybrid arrangements
- These extra work efforts are not necessarily seen, acknowledged, or championed by managers.
- Women are at risk of their work going unrecognised in hybrid roles

Countering stereotypes

A challenge for hybrid workers is to counter long-held assumptions that people working from home are lazy, frequently slack off and are less productive.

We found no evidence to support these stereotypes from our participants. But we did find that women faced further threat from assumptions that women use hybrid working to avoid childcare.

Again, we found no evidence to support this stereotype. While we found carers often reduced childcare (e.g., no longer needing breakfast or after school clubs to cover commuting time) and could allow more blending of work-life boundaries (e.g., answering emails early morning) no women or men in our research were attempting to care for young children or vulnerable dependents during their working day.

Women were also threatened by stereotypes that framed women as distracted by domestic work, such as washing and cooking.

“It absolutely drives me up the wall that my mother-in-law asks “Did you get the washing done” and I am like “No, I was working...so” and you just have to wonder because when her son works from home, he doesn’t get the same questions!” (F)

These stereotypes perpetuate societal expectations that women should shoulder the burden of domestic work.

We did find women attempted to meet these expectations, often equating enhanced work life balance to achieving domestic tasks whereas men spoke about it meaning more time to engage in hobbies.

“I can put the washing out on my lunch break” (F)

“I might do my gym routine, going for walks in my day-to-day working from home” (M)

We caution that hybrid work can be exploited as a means for women to do more unpaid domestic labour[3].

These stereotypes also devalue women’s involvement and contribution at work. For example, even some of our female participants held stereotypes that tainted their perception of colleagues.

“[Other women] just see that the advantages [of hybrid working] are that they can put the washing on and nip out to Sainsbury's at lunchtime” (F)

These attitudes are likely to impact how women’s performance and motivation are evaluated at work.

Concealing home life

Being careful not to trigger stereotypes and maintain ‘professionalism’, women in our sample were more concerned than men about concealing evidence of their home life.

This was often exacerbated by women’s work arrangements at home. Women were often relegated to stereotypically female spaces in the home, such as the kitchen or children’s bedrooms, whereas the men we spoke to were more likely to have their own dedicated office space.

“I've been working out of my daughter's bedroom since the beginning of COVID. Partly because we only ever thought it was going to be a week or two, right? My husband was also working from home and took himself off to our office, and I got [daughter's] bedroom” (F)

We also found cultural differences in the extent participants felt they needed to mask their home life. Many of the Asian participants we spoke to discussed the lack of recognition of working within multi-generational households.

“[the organisation] probably just needs to be a bit more inclusive of different cultures, different generations living together in a household and be a bit more wary of the things that are said on video calls... it could offend somebody in my household. Not everyone has the luxury of a home office ” (F)

We also found that home set-up impacted the junior staff we spoke to who were more likely to share their living spaces, often working on sofas, dining room tables and beds.

“Whenever [my roommate and I] work from home, one of us takes the sofa and the other one takes the table.” (F)

While their organisations offered occupational health support, this often did not work practically.

“They can order you a desk, and [organisation] would have no worries doing that, but it’s about where I put the table, where can I put the computer screen?” (F)

Our findings reflect the template that many organisations have in mind for the ‘ideal hybrid worker’, as White, male, and having the space and security to work from home.

Doubling down on work

To counter stereotypes of women in hybrid roles, women felt the pressure to demonstrate their diligence at work. Many spoke about showing efficiency, focusing on task completion and reducing ‘idle chit chat’ with colleagues.

“With hybrid working, I’m just head down and getting on with it more. You have less time for catch ups and chat, it’s purely just about work” (F)

Both men and women spoke about working extended hours. But women reported feeling more obliged to do so, attempting to demonstrate commitment and productivity at work.

“[my manager] calls me at ridiculous times, like bath time or when I’m putting the kids to bed, if [my manager] calls me, then you pick up” (F)

“I think the best way that I get my name out there is if I worked on a project, a piece of work that my manager has raised and said, “this is what [Rachel] has done”, but I think that’s probably the only way I get my name out there and it is harder when you’re remote” (F)

Invisibility

Achieving visibility behind the digital wall in hybrid work was challenging for women. We found women often relied on virtual signs of availability (e.g., the ‘is online’ notification) or productivity reporting to achieve recognition.

But while work trackers demonstrate time at work and task completion, they do little to showcase women’s work. This leaves women’s recognition in the hands of their managers.



We found informal interaction and social bonds were typically stronger between men and their managers than for the women in our sample.

Lacking other routes to recognition in hybrid work, women are therefore vulnerable if managers fail to spot and champion their work.

“I have no idea if [my senior manager] knows about any of our work, [the manager and senior manager] must have conversations, but we don’t get that visibility, or roll down of information from him or in the opposite direction” (F)

Risk 2: Shielded from Office Politics

Takeaways

- Hybrid work can appear democratic and give the illusion that office politics has disappeared.
- Siloed team interaction has reduced office gossip but leaves people feeling out of the loop
- We found men typically engage in more political tactics than women, giving them better access to informal knowledge and career support.
- Women are more likely to be shielded from politics and ‘play it by the rules’.
- Lacking access to political knowledge and networks leaves women susceptible to being left out of the loop and lacking career support.

Hybrid work has been hailed as a ‘great leveller’ and an opportunity to ‘reset’ workplace politics[4]. With less interaction in the office, it is often assumed that hybrid working allows what-you-do rather than who-you-know to decide who succeeds and that office gossip has been extinguished. But our data shows that politics persists in a hybrid world and is perhaps more exclusive than ever.

Democratic conduct

Hybrid working has introduced more democracy into employees’ day to day work. Virtual meetings, for example, require more structure, and inclusive meeting etiquette. Women particularly valued the ‘hand up’ function of virtual platforms, allowing them better opportunity to express their views.



“the ‘golden hand’ is very respected, and that whole thing that people complain about with in-person meetings where women might get talked over or interrupted, or their ideas can be stolen. I don't see that in in Teams meetings” (F)

Many men also found these functions useful but some reported feeling constrained and wanting to sidestep them.

“I feel muzzled by [the hands up function], so I just talk, I just take myself off mute and I talk” (M)

Methods of effective and inclusive communication were high on senior managers' agendas.

“We've just introduced a Communications Charter, which I was keen to do to as it lets our staff know how we intend to communicate with them, and we sought feedback on it. We wanted to know if that is what people want, and how they want to be communicated with. We're a slightly different type of business because it's not like we can all sit down on Monday morning and have a team meeting because people are, you know, everywhere. So, it is really about tailoring that communication to different teams and different people”

Kit Hawkins, Managing Director, Ecus

Participants generally felt that their organisations had gone to significant lengths to ensure they were informed about what was happening via a number of channels (see Table 2). Yet, participants were often overwhelmed by the various forms of communication.

“I would say the downside is that having too many communication channels sometimes, you know, not everybody knows how to use it or the purpose behind each one” (F)

Importantly, these communication channels are typically top-down, with their content controlled, filtered, and moderated by the organisation. This leaves little room for informal knowledge sharing between employees which particularly impacted the women we spoke to.

Left out of the loop

Despite the value of organisation-led communication, siloed team interaction meant informal knowledge sharing was scarce.

“I don't talk to just anyone on Teams, only my boss and my three other colleagues” (M)

Table 2. Methods of Inclusive Formal Communication

Method	Examples
All-organisation forums	<p>“They have installed Patrizia Talk the Pat Talk it's called, where the board gives an update regularly, it's really good because as an employee you really have the feeling that you're on top of things and you're getting all the news” (Patrizia SE)</p> <p>“If there's a town hall or a village hall, we use Slido, which is an opportunity for people to ask questions either anonymously or reveal their name. And that's an opportunity for us to sort of share our thoughts as well”. (OVO Energy)</p>
All-organisation emails or newsletters	<p>“Our CEO makes a point of trying to e-mail us when really important information happens and she sends weekly emails about new projects that we're starting, new partnerships, new people joining” (Equation)</p>
All-organisation social media groups	<p>“We have the Yammer platform, which is a more community based social interaction, sharing ideas and new concepts... we try to make use of connecting with each other through that platform” (Patrizia SE)</p> <p>“We've got multiple [Whatsapp] groups, so we've got one that's for everybody in the region. Its intention is to sort of very quickly share with people regional updates or information” (Ecus)</p>
Intranet pages	<p>“We have an intranet page which is like a newsfeed. That's where the cross-CPI news is shared and although it's quite formal, there's some nice informal things about like babies being born or people going off on maternity leave, new starters, so it's a way of checking in on what's going on across CPI” (CPI)</p>
Team-catch ups	<p>“As a team, we have a weekly catch up. We also have a biweekly people huddle. Our [head of department] leads that call, and she'll have an update with ‘movers and shakers’ (people who are moving or leaving) and then she will go around and do a round robin of each leader to give us an update on the business side of things. So, business wise, I think we're quite good at being updated with things” (OVO Energy)</p>

Both men and women acknowledged that hybrid work meant they had less access to the ‘organisational grapevine’.

“The one that's missing, when you're remote is the one in the kitchen, which is the one that was not planned, the one where you tend to learn something about your organisation based on what your colleagues are doing at the moment, even if it's not completely related to what you do. That one doesn't exist. When I call someone, it's with a clear intention to first chat about a business issue or topic”. (M)

With hybrid workers typically working 60-80% of their working week at home, and often faced with empty offices, there were few opportunities for such encounters. This meant participants often felt ‘out of the loop’ when it came to operational and personal information.

“I had no idea there was a big business review going on. In the office I'm sure I would have heard *somebody* talking about the [review]” (F)

Politics at play

Feeling out of the loop was linked to the extent participants engaged in organisational politics.

Politics remained prominent in office environments. Participants spoke about timing in-office visits to network with senior leaders. Participants also preferred in-person meetings to ‘read’ body language, facial expressions and emotions to influence others and clarify tensions between colleagues that were difficult to discern on online calls.

But we also found evidence of a wide range of political tactics used online and remotely, including:

- exclusive chat groups to network
- covert side-bar chats to strategise with a select group of colleagues
- lurking on others’ work channels to pick up information
- spying on calendar invites
- taking conversations ‘offline’ onto personal devices to avoid surveillance

The majority of political tactics[5] we heard about were not necessarily negative or underhand but were often attempts to gain knowledge, build trust with colleagues, and understand power relations.

Crucially, it was men who most reported using political tactics. Women and ethnic minorities described more instances of being excluded or the target of political behaviours, such as being left out or taken off meeting invites. Many women were unaware that politics persisted in hybrid work.

“I don't think office politics exists as much, because it can't” (F)

“I don't tend to network with people remotely just to say “hi”. I don't think that's common” (F)

Feeling pressure to keep their heads down and focus on tasks, women were also more likely to ‘play it by the rules’, and find politics a distraction.

When women were aware of political behaviours, such as covert side-bar chats during video calls, many considered them “unnecessary”, “disrespectful” and “rude”.

“We're talking face to face so any other distractions probably shouldn't come in” (F)

However, being shielded from office politics means women find it more difficult to navigate their working environment, risk being left out of the loop when it comes to organisational 'intel' and have less access to the relationships necessary for career progression.



Risk 3: Missing Meaningfulness

Takeaways

- Hybrid work can be isolating especially for new starters
- The intensity of back-to-back online meetings leaves employees with video fatigue and experiencing less joy from work
- With less social interaction and doubling down on work many women treat hybrid work as transactional and find it less meaningful
- Organisations may struggle to retain employees unless they foster camaraderie and a culture of belonging amongst hybrid workers

Despite feeling happy overall with hybrid work, participants did discuss the drawbacks of being distant from colleagues.

Isolation and fatigue

Men and women, particularly those who were younger and/or lived alone reported finding home-working isolating and lonely at times.

“It can be quite a lonely world, can’t it? Home by yourself” (F)

“You get a bit lonely, so I would rather come in just to see people just to have a bit of normalness” (M)

Although many highlighted working in the office can combat isolation, others were prohibited by commuting time and costs.

“It's hard to kind of justify spending that much money on petrol at the moment so I would say once-a-week maximum really” (F)

Participants also complained about the fatigue caused by spending long hours on (often unnecessary) video calls, which were seen as particularly ‘draining’ due to being acutely observed.

“In the office, your face is visible but not everyone is looking at you in such intensity as a video call” (F)

Time pressure in tightly scheduled calls also meant participants reported fewer opportunities to voice their opinions.

Lack of camaraderie and joy

Feeling the pressure to double down at work and avoid informal social interaction online, many women found the intensity of online working created a rather joyless experience.

An issue raised by many women was that hybrid work afforded little ability to vent frustration or to resolve disagreements, which created tension between colleagues.

“I think you probably can stew over something more, if you're sat in a room by yourself and sometimes actually having to write something down feels a much bigger deal than just, say, having a conversation in the toilet and to let off some steam” (F)

Importantly, we did not hear this message from many men in our sample, perhaps because they were more likely to engage in more informal interaction and networking behaviours online.

Women who had been working in their organisations pre- pandemic also mourned the loss of their team cohesion.

“Our team camaraderie has completely been lost, we were a very close team and close with other teams, I just think we're very siloed now. We have team meetings, but for me, it's not the same because it's on Teams and it's virtual. You log in, you say hi, you're straight into your workload. I don't think work should be strict, sat at your desk, no talking. I think you have to have that kind of conversation, banter, within the office and I don't think that's there” (F)

Spontaneity and creativity

The lack of spontaneity, camaraderie and “spark” on online calls was particularly important for roles that require creativity and innovation.

Jonas Skovkonge, Global Partner at LEGO highlighted the importance of a hybrid model, working both at home and the office for creative work:

“I can do a lot of routine work, presentations and so on from home, but you don't laugh in the same way when you're at the office, you don't hear what people are talking about.

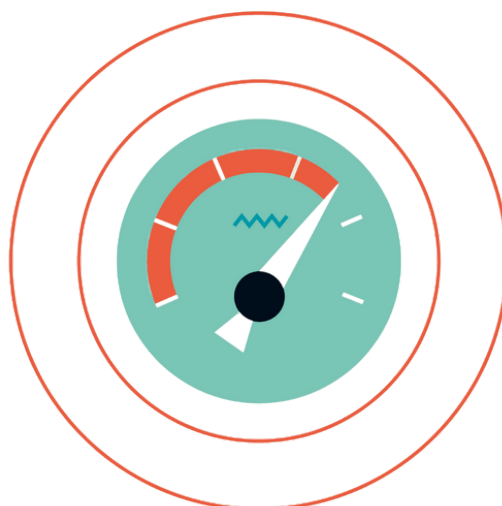
That outside perspective and inspiration, I think is vital for an organisation like ours where you need to be inspired. You need to be creative and that simply can't be done behind the computer even though we can sit watching each other through the screen, it becomes a force field.

So, we are going to a hybrid model and not saying that people should solely work from the office or from home because we need both in order to actually work”

Jonas Skovkonge, Global Partner at LEGO

Yet some participants cautioned that even in the office, the scheduling of online calls for most employees meant that the spontaneity of the office floor has been lost.

“If you have a question, you could just go and ask that person, it might be a 5- or 10-minute conversation and it's done, you've got the answer. Now, you have to find time in someone's diary to put in a meeting and you're squeezing it in amongst other stuff, it just takes so much longer. It's just taken that whole off-the-cuff conversation away" (F)



Transactional work

With less joy and spontaneity, we found many women had grown to treat hybrid work as transactional.

Many focused on getting tasks completed and demonstrating productivity but found it harder to find their work meaningful.

“What we’re missing is that team building...it’s much harder to be connected and that does affect your morale and engagement” (F)

“Don't get me wrong, I'm motivated and I'll do a good job, but in previous jobs we had what was called going the extra mile. And I always tried to go the extra mile as part of my role, whereas in this role I want to do a good job. But I have no career ambition”(F)

Our data suggests that for many women the pressure to double down at work, engaging in back-to-back formal meetings, experiencing less social interaction with colleagues and feeling less joy and meaningfulness from work, means that many women feel that hybrid work has become a transactional experience.

Organisations need to foster a collaborative environment for hybrid workers to capitalise on innovation and problem solving and provide support for employees to find meaning in their work.



Risk 4: The Hybrid Career Ceiling

Takeaways

- Although online training is plentiful new starters struggle to learn vicariously. This risks generations entering the workforce missing out on the skills required to progress
- Senior leaders spend more time in the office so in-person availability becomes a requirement for career advancement
- If organisations do not provide hybrid options for senior roles then those who require flexible home working will face restricted career progression
- Women will be disproportionately affected as they reported shouldering caring responsibilities even when partners also worked from home

We identified a number of ways that hybrid roles may risk delayed career progression. Already discussed in this report, women lack visibility and recognition for their work efforts, are shielded from important networks and political knowledge and become increasingly transactional in their work.

We also found that there are fewer opportunities to learn the skills required for career progression in hybrid work, and less flexibility in senior roles. Combined, these features suggest there is a heightened risk for women of hitting a career ceiling in hybrid work.

Career ceiling

Lack of
visibility and
recognition

Reduced
access to
office politics

Less meaning
and joy from
work

Limited
opportunities
for vicarious
learning

(In)flexible
structure of
senior roles



Vicarious learning

Many of our participants were concerned about the learning opportunities for hybrid workers. While online training was plentiful, opportunities to learn vicariously were scant. This means learning the skills to achieve career advancement may be more difficult in hybrid roles.

Participants who were more experienced and senior were particularly anxious about how younger and less experienced members of staff learnt about the norms of office life and organisational culture:

“A real concern, and I think it's been proven a little bit by a couple of people that have joined us during the COVID years is they've not learned as quickly because they're not in the office, just listening in on other people's conversations about how to tackle certain things or listening to me on the phone to a client and just picking up how you speak to clients, new people fresh out of uni might not have got that experience” (F)

Yet when we asked participants who had entered the workforce during the COVID pandemic, they were not aware that they missed out on these type of opportunities.

“I've never felt that I wasn't receiving the right amount of training or learning” (M)

But how staff learn when they are not 'in the room' and unaware that meetings are even taking place is likely to be a problem for the development and progression of new starters.

Access to vicarious learning presents a challenge for organisations that want to develop an inclusive talent pipeline.

Role expectations

Our participants reported that senior leaders were expected to be in the office more frequently, working with clients and colleagues in-person.

“The senior people do move around a bit to try and show their faces in other offices” (M)

“[the CEO] has to be present, wanders around and chats to people” (F)

This means that individuals who have structured their lives around hybrid flexibility but want to progress may be faced with the practical barrier of being available for in-office work more often.

The risk of a career ceiling for hybrid workers is particularly apparent for women because we found that caring responsibilities often default to women even when their male partners are also working in hybrid roles.

Hybrid work certainly enables men and women to spend more time with their families. But we found that while men spoke about being more “present” in the home and available “to really enjoy those lovely moments during the day” with children, the practicalities of childcare were more often spoken about as defaulting to women.

“I definitely feel that the women who have children, they have to leave at a certain time or be working from home when they need to go and pick up the kids or when their kid is not well, whereas I think with the men who have children, they tend to come in [to the office]” (F)

If women need to adapt their work around hybrid flexibility and caring responsibilities in the early and mid-stages of their career, this makes attaining senior roles that require in-person interaction (requiring childcare and commuting costs) more difficult.



Notes

[1] Office for National Statistics (2022). Is hybrid working here to stay. Available from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/ishybridworkingheretostay/2022-05-23>

[2] King's College London (2022). The WFH revolution: How new ways of working are changing London. Available from <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/wfh-revolution-how-new-ways-of-working-are-changing-london.pdf>

[3] This point is explored in greater depth by Professor Heejung Chung in her work on the 'flexibility paradox': Chung, H. (2022) The Flexibility Paradox: Why Flexible Working Leads to (Self-)Exploitation. Policy Press. Available at: <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-flexibility-paradox>.

[4] Chamorro-Premuzic, T and Clark, D (2020). Navigating office politics when there is no office. Harvard Business Review. Available from <https://hbr.org/2020/10/navigating-office-politics-when-there-is-no-office>

[5] We did hear some examples of politics that bordered on cyber-bullying (e.g., private chat groups that aimed to undermine individuals). Organisations therefore need to be mindful of toxic organisational politics.

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Contact

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

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