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What is healthy hybrid work? Exploring employee perceptions on wellbeing and hybrid work arrangements.

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Abstract

Purpose: This research investigates the personal experiences of hybrid workers, exploring their perspectives on their health and wellbeing when undertaking hybrid working arrangements. The research further explores how organisations can proactively support the health and wellbeing of hybrid workers, mitigating any potential risks to health.

Design/methodology/approach: A cross-sectional, qualitative online survey was used to collect data from 412 hybrid workers. Data was analysed thematically. This approach allows for nuanced insights into the personal experiences of hybrid workers to be understood.

Originality/value: Although empirical research has previously examined the relationship between remote work and employee wellbeing, there is a lack of in depth understanding about employees' experiences of wellbeing whilst undertaking hybrid work - an emerging and relatively unexplored working arrangement. This research therefore addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing a deep understanding of how hybrid work influences employee wellbeing. Furthermore, previous research has not yet explored how hybrid worker health can be enabled and supported by organisations and individuals themselves.

Findings: Findings indicate that employees who undertake hybrid work experience both positive and negative effects on their subjective wellbeing; hybrid work arrangement have the potential to act as a job resource or job demand. The study further identifies actions that can support healthy hybrid work that will be of value to organisations offering these working arrangements.

Article classification: Research paper.

Keywords: Hybrid work, employee wellbeing, remote work, working from home.

Introduction

The global pandemic led to a rapid expansion of remote work, initially on an involuntary basis due to government mandates to work from home. Following what became known as the 'great working from home experiment' (Banjo *et al*., 2020) it was evident that there was a significant demand for the continuation of remote work (McKinsey, 2021; ONS, 2021 (a); Taneja *et al.*, 2021; Chung *et al.*, 2020; ILO 2022). Central to this preference is a desire to improve work-life balance (Vargas Llave *et al.,* 2022), spend more time with family and reduce commuting (Chung *et al.,* 2020). The majority of employees indicated a preference for a hybrid work arrangement – a combination of office and

remote working (Barrerro *et al.*, 2021). Many organisations responded to this demand; by early 2023, 28% of UK employees were undertaking some form of hybrid work (ONS, 2023); a CIPD (2023) report found 83% of organisations were offering hybrid work arrangement to their employees. For many organisations, however, this represents a very different way of working from that employed before the pandemic.

Predictions suggest that in the future, globally 1 in 6 jobs could be undertaken from home, rising to 1 in 4 for more advanced countries (ILO, 2020). In the UK, up to 50% of jobs are capable of being undertaken remotely in the near future (Felstead, 2022). Consequently, understanding the challenges and benefits for employees is important to avoid negative outcomes for wellbeing.

The outcomes of hybrid work at scale, on both organisations and employees, are largely unknown. The extant literature on remote work draws predominantly from a time when remote work was undertaken less frequently, was limited to specific job roles or industries, or from during the pandemic when homeworking was involuntary. Furthermore, much of the research published more recently, focuses on performance and outcomes, rather than employee related benefits.

Previous research into remote work and wellbeing has highlighted its complex nature and has not resulted in a conclusion as to whether it is good for employee wellbeing (Charalampous *et al.*, 2019). It has been found to have both positive and negative effects at the same time (Wohrman and Ebner, 2021). It is argued that overall, remote work does appear to have a net benefit, improving employee health more than damaging it (Crawford, 2022), and is likely to be 'more good than bad for individuals' (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). However, these findings are tentative and there appear to be intricacies around the employees' experiences of working in a hybrid manner.

Many organisations are currently choosing return-to-office mandates over flexible approaches (Knight, 2024) due to a variety of reasons such as, lack of collaboration (Tsipursky, 2023) or reduced innovation (Tilo, 2024). This is apparent even in the face of many employees deciding to leave the organisation due to these decisions (Elliot, 2024). Therefore, organisations do not appear to consider employees aspirations for hybrid work, rather focus on performance metrics. Therefore, it is important to understand the complexity of the rationales for hybrid work from an employee's perspective to enable organisation to understand why hybrid working may be an important approach.

This research study aims to understand, from the perspectives of hybrid workers, the wellbeing challenges and benefits that arise from undertaking hybrid work, and actions or initiatives that might support healthy hybrid work. The study therefore poses the following research questions:

1. What are the wellbeing challenges and benefits of undertaking hybrid work, from the perspectives of those that undertake it?
2. How can we use this knowledge to help organisations support the wellbeing of employees undertaking hybrid work?

Undertaking the first research objective, thereby developing a detailed understanding of employees' perspectives will enable research objective two. Existing literature indicates the potential for employees to experience negative impacts on health and wellbeing resulting from remote work; organisations need to avoid these negative impacts in order to minimise risk to employee health and any subsequent negative business impacts as a result.

Literature Review

Employee wellbeing is often discussed as a benefit of hybrid working; however, it is theoretically underexplored. Four out of five organisations who intend to implement, or have implemented, hybrid work opportunities include the potential to improve employee wellbeing as a reason for doing so (ONS, 2022). The extant literature on the relationship between remote work and wellbeing is, however, contradictory in nature, identifying both positive and negative effects potentially at the same time (Wohrman and Ebner, 2021). For example, remote work has been found to both reduce stress levels (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003) as well as increase them (Arvola and Kristjuhan, 2015). These differences in mental health outcomes may result from differences in the extent of telework, the design of the specific working arrangement, the job resources available (Beckel and Fisher, 2022) or the frequency of remote work (Henket *et al.*, 2016). The relationship between hybrid work and wellbeing, therefore appear to be complex and is typically examined in the confines of quantitative approaches.

Remote and hybrid work has been associated with wellbeing benefits including improved sleep and nutrition (Franklin, 2023), increased leisure time (Gimenez-Nada *et al.,* 2018) and exercise (Barrero e*t al.*, 2023) reduced fatigue (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003) and higher energy levels (Bosua *et al.*, 2012). A common outcome of remote work is increased autonomy. Autonomy is a fundamental requirement for psychological health (Ryan and Deci, 2000); perceived autonomy acts as a job resource (Niebuhr *et al.*, 2022) which can result in positive health outcomes (Li *et al.*, 2023). According to Messenger (2019) when employees have a 'substantial degree' of autonomy over their work (including where they work) they are generally healthier and less stressed when compared to employees with less autonomy. In contrast, a lack of employee autonomy can result in work-related stress (HSE, 2022). Consequently, providing opportunities for a more autonomous approach to work provides opportunity for innovation (Orth & Volmer, 2017). This may not only occur within the work context,

but as hybrid work brings in the opportunities for engagement in home life, it may open up creativity in how people approach supporting their wellbeing more generally. Therefore, this requires a creative approach to understanding the complexity of the relationship between wellbeing and hybrid working.

Conversely, remote work has also been associated with sedentary behaviour (Almarcha *et al.,* 2021), which is in turn also associated with a range of poor health outcomes (Park *et al.*, 2020), increased musculoskeletal problems (Jodi *et al.,* 2022) as well as isolation and loneliness (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Ahrendt, 2020). Remote workers have also reported lower levels of subjective wellbeing overall (Song and Gao, 2019) and experiencing a greater frequency of negative emotions (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). The excessive screen time that can be part of working remotely can result in eyestrain and headaches in remote workers when compared to non-remote workers (Vargas Llave *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, remote workers have been found to engage in presenteeism, working whilst unwell (Steidmuller *et al.,* 2020) and taking fewer breaks during the working day (Chim and Chen, 2023).

Furthermore, working remotely, especially from home, is associated with both work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009) and work extensification (working longer hours), the latter of which was especially prevalent during pandemic-related homeworking (Parry *et al.,* 2021). Work intensity can result in a range of problematic health outcomes including negative impact on both physical health (Michel, 2011) and mental health (Hunt and Pickard, 2022), as well as burnout and exhaustion (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, long working hours is associated with stress and sleeping problems (Messenger, 2017), fatigue and negative mood (Caruso *et al.*, 2006). It has been identified that as work becomes more complex, the more it can influence employee health (Erlandsson & Eklund, 2006). Therefore, with hybrid work increasing, it is important to gain an understanding of the demands and resources that are placed on employees.

The subject of work-life balance, defined as 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict' (Clark (2000), highlights the complex relationship between remote work and wellbeing and the contradictory nature of previous research. Some remote workers report improved work-life balance because of their working arrangements (Grant *et al.*, 2013). However, working from home can also result in encroachment of work into other aspects of life (Chung, 2022) as well as 'blurred boundaries' (Sullivan, 2000). Whether any given employee experience positive or negative effect on work life balance can depend on factors including gender, skill level and space in the home (Crosbie and Moore, 2004), suggesting that work life balance and remote work is subjective and individual. Despite these contradictions, there is a consensus that there are wellbeing benefits to remote work (Charalampos *et al.*, 2019).

Although empirical research has examined the relationship between aspects of remote and hybrid working and specific areas of wellbeing, there is a lack of in depth understanding about employees' experiences of wellbeing whilst undertaking hybrid work. This is particularly the case post-pandemic where rates of hybrid working have drastically increased and is now open to a wider range of employees. In addition, literature has not yet explored support mechanisms that enable hybrid working that focus on supporting employee wellbeing in this new way of working.

Theoretical framework

Job-Demands Resource theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014) posits that all jobs have both inherent demands and resources, some of which might be common to many roles (such as workload stress) and others unique to the specific work or role situation. The theory is founded on the notion that the characteristics of jobs significantly influence employee wellbeing – thus the model can be applied to any job role (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006). The theory also brings together concepts of stress and motivation, arguing that they should be considered together; it is predictive, suggesting that it is possible to make assumptions about employee wellbeing taking into account resources and demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014).

Job demands are those 'physical, psychological, social, or organizational' aspects of a particular role such as those that require physical, cognitive or emotional effort, and which whilst not necessarily always negative have the potential to become work stressors. Examples of job demands include excessive workload, interpersonal conflicts, job insecurity (Scaufeli, 2017), time pressure and role conflicts (Lesener *et al.*, 2018). Excessive job demands can result in exhaustion and burnout (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). The greater the demands of any given job, the greater the risk of negative health impacts (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Employees influence their resources and demands through various processes. 'Job crafting' is a term used to describe the changes that an employee may make in relation to the demands and resources of their job; examples include seeking different tasks, building workplace relationships or mental reframing (Timms *et al.,* 2012).

The Job Demands-Resource theory has been used in remote and flexible work research to understand the nature of the relationship between this form of working arrangement and employee health and wellbeing (Beckel *et al.,* 2022; Yang *et al.,* 2023; Vargas Llave *et al.*, 2020; Wohrmann *et al.*, 2021). Beckel *et al.,* (2022) suggested that telework itself is a resource that can be used by employees to help them meet the demands of their role, with specific aspects of telework such as job autonomy also acting as a resource or a buffer against demands. They further proposed that teleworking changed typical job demands from those experienced in a traditional office environment, such as those presented by virtual work. Therefore, utilising JD-R theory enables the examination of demands and

resources employees experience when hybrid working and therefore, the support organisations can offer moving to this new way of working.

Methodology

Qualitative survey design

A cross-sectional qualitative survey design was utilised to gain a deep insight into the experiences of hybrid workers. This approach of a small number of open-ended questions allowed for a wide exploration of different perspectives and the capture of rich data (Braun *et al.*, 2021). The survey took place between October and November 2023. The research took an interpretivist approach, prioritising employee's rich experiences of hybrid working. Qualitative surveys harness the potential of qualitative research unravelling in-depth, nuanced and often new insights into social science issues (Braun *et al.,* 2021). Qualitative surveys are still relatively novel within social science research; however, this research offered the opportunity of examining the richness and depth of experience of hybrid working, which is still not fully captured, whilst also exploring the wide range of experiences across individuals (Braun *et al.*, 2021). Using this qualitative open-ended approach enables the capturing of employees' own experiences of wellbeing influences and interventions, rather than restricting responses. For example, 'what wellbeing benefits have you personally experienced when working in a hybrid way?' Due to the nature of the open-ended questions, only a small number of questions were asked which enabled the sample size to be maximized to explore the nuanced experiences of employees.

Data collection process

In total 412 hybrid workers participated in the survey, consisting of individuals who undertook some form of hybrid working pattern (working some of their time remotely and some of their time from a physical workplace). The survey was disseminated by social media (primarily LinkedIn and Twitter) and through snowball sampling, requesting participants to share the survey with other hybrid workers or via their social media networks. Full-time remote and office workers were excluded from the criteria. To provide insight into the demographics of respondents, relevant questions were included and analysed. These questions established that 95.1% of respondents were from the UK, with 4.9% responding from outside the UK. 85.3% of respondents worked full-time and 14.7% part-time. The majority of respondents were female (75.7%); the remaining 23.8% described themselves as male, 1% as 'other' and a further 1% who chose not to disclose their gender. Just over half (51.1%) of respondents were parents of school-age children. Just under half (48.4% of respondents) managed other people, while 51.6% did not. Respondents were mainly aged between 25-39 (29.4%) and 40-54 (54.9%) with smaller proportions aged between 16-24 (2.4%) and 55 or over (13.3%).

The majority (45.4%) of survey respondents described their occupational classification as 'professional' (including finance and HR). R Respondents further described their occupational classifications as follows: 20.4% director/senior leader, 22.1% manager, 6.1% secretarial, administrative or clerical, and with the remainder as 'other, IT and sales / customer service.

The following questions were asked of respondents:

- What wellbeing benefits have you personally experienced when working in a hybrid way?
- What wellbeing challenges have you personally experienced when working in a hybrid way?
- What steps do you take, or have taken, to address any wellbeing challenges you have identified when working in a hybrid way?
- What would help you to further improve your wellbeing as a hybrid worker? You may include actions you could personally take, or actions you think your organisation or manager could take.

Data analysis

Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can be utilised to generate themes and 'patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2013) across a data set, using these patterns to interpret the phenomenon being researched (Boyatzis, 1998). This approach is commonly used in the analysis of qualitative surveys (Braun *et al.,* 2021). To enhance the consistency of the interpretation, internal consistency of themes was constantly undertaken through the systematic analysis of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

For the first two questions, a priori expectations, generated by the literature review, were used to generate an initial codebook, forming a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). During the coding process, some codes were amended and removed, and new codes were added. For the second question, the data from the subsequent three qualitative questions were analysed using a different approach; contrary to the initial questions there were no a priori expectations based on the literature review, and accordingly, an inductive approach was undertaken with codes and subsequent themes developed directly from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

A code log was maintained during the entire coding process, as well as with a contemporaneous record of observations and reflections throughout as the process unfolded. For each question, utilising the coded data, key themes were first developed, and then reviewed refined and named.

Findings

The initial analysis of the research identified two higher-order themes: the benefits and challenges of hybrid working: these are summarised in Figure 1, below. Benefits included improved physical health, time for family and home life, improved work-life balance, time for wellbeing activities, improved overall health, and reduced stress and anxiety. These findings are consistent with previous research into remote work and wellbeing.

Many of these themes are around having more time. On the other hand, challenges included impacted physical health, work extensification, switching off and isolation, loneliness and disconnection. These appear to be around work extending into home life and a lack of connections with colleagues.

Figure 1: Benefits and Challenges for Hybrid Work Wellbeing (author's own creation)
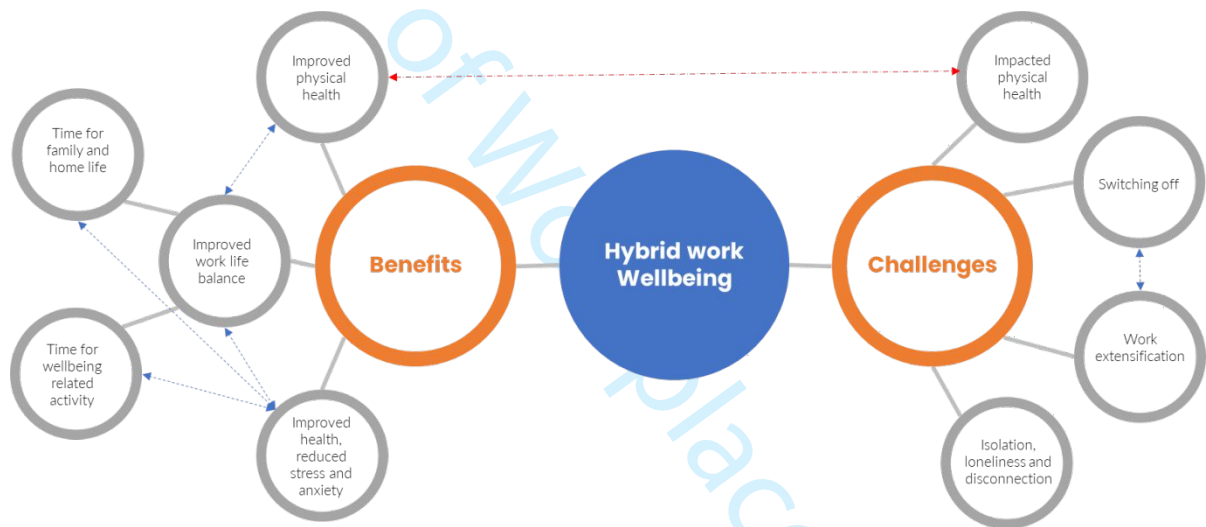
Wellbeing benefits

The idea of time as a benefit is inherent within several of the 'benefit' themes; employees appreciate the additional time that working from home (or not commuting) provides which they utilise in a variety of ways. Respondents value the benefits that have been afforded to them through hybrid working arrangements. An overlap of themes can be observed within the responses. Several benefits were frequently discussed together in a single response, with respondents experiencing them simultaneously. Three primary wellbeing benefit themes, with two additional sub-themes were identified from the data.

Theme 1: Improved work-life balance

Many participants felt that their hybrid working arrangements resulted in improved work-life balance:

'*Working in a hybrid way provides me with a huge amount of flexibility to balance work with my home*

life.' Employees can benefit from the opportunity to better balance work with other responsibilities such as caring obligations: '*I feel more in control and on top of home life and caring responsibilities.* This is also related to the ability to spend more time with family and '*fit domestic activities fitted around work'*. The benefits of having more time and feeling there was a better balance between home and work were identified as a profound benefit of hybrid working.

Theme 1a: Time for family and home life

As a sub-theme from having more balance between work and life, participants identified more time for family and home life as wellbeing benefits. Incorporated within this theme, are two aspects: more time for practical home matters such as life administration and domestic chores, and more time for friends and family, including children. A participant noted that '*reduced travel time means more time and energy to spend on my family and young children'.* This 'more time' theme appears to be interlinked with the subsequent theme 'improved work-life balance': '*More time in the morning to complete household chores gives me more time in the evening and weekends to relax.'* Respondents talked extensively about the benefit of more time for family and home, expanding on how it improves their day-to-day lives '*I see my children for breakfast and tea and feel like I am with them and not missing them growing up. I can be at sports days etc. and it's not difficult or stressful to arrange.'* This theme was most discussed for hybrid workers; therefore having more time appears to be one of the largest benefits.

Theme 1b: Time for wellbeing related activity

Another sub-theme of work-life balance, and also relating to this idea of 'more time', participants indicate that they have more time for activities that support their general wellbeing. Hybrid workers use time saved from commuting to undertake a variety of wellbeing-related activities including walking, being outside, utilising green space and undertaking many different forms of exercise, '*I can exercise regularly during what would have been my commute time.'* They can prioritise these activities and fit them in around their working lives in a way that they cannot when working full time in a physical workspace, '*I am able to exercise before work or during my lunch hour which helps my mental health.'*

Theme 2: Improved mental health, reduced stress and anxiety

Respondents state that the ability to work in a hybrid way results in reduced stress levels and improved mental health. This includes the opportunity to manage work stressors differently: '*Walking my dog at lunch increases my mental health by being outdoors and breaking up a stressful workday'* and having fewer stressors relating to the commute to work '*the reduction in stress of busy mornings means I start my day in a better place.'* Workers also benefit from reduced stress that arises from a physical

workspace '*Removal of stress to leave on time to be at childcare'*. Again, much of this is around the concept of having 'more time', therefore providing the opportunities to take advantage of opportunities to support mental health.

Theme 3: Improved physical health, including sleep and diet.

Partly enabled through time saved by not commuting, employees report improved physical health resulting from the opportunity to undertake more exercise, get extra sleep, and improve diet (through the opportunity to prepare better food): *'I am healthier and more active. More sleep. Better diet.'* Employees report having more energy and rest, contributing to the sense of better *'I feel less tired due to no commute.'* Interestingly with this theme, the opposite appears to be true for many participants as well.

Challenges

In contrast to multiple and detailed benefits described for question one, where challenges were identified it was common for them to be a single, briefly described issue. Five primary themes were identified from the data.

Theme 1: Isolation, loneliness, disconnection from others

Some hybrid workers identified that working partly remotely results in reduced contact with colleagues, making them feel lonely, isolated and disconnected: *'Isolation...disconnection from human interaction.'* This does not however, appear to be a permanent state, but something that arises from time to time and may relate to personal living circumstances*: 'I don't see people as often so it gets a bit lonely sometimes.'* with some respondents noting that they live alone, compounding the issue.

Theme 2: Physical health, including sedentary behaviour

Although respondents reported physical health benefits from hybrid work, for other respondents it has resulted in physical health challenges: *'Sometimes I can feel like I am sat down a lot, stuck in one room or stuck indoors in the same house repeatedly.'* These issues predominantly relate to the sedentary and online nature of working from home: *'More intense long periods of uninterrupted work at the computer which is very productive but very sedentary.'* Ergonomics and musculoskeletal issues were also noted, resulting from extensive sitting and poor home workstation design: *'neck pain due to prolonged sitting periods.*

Theme 3: Work extensification

Employees undertaking hybrid work reported working long hours: *'I work significantly longer hours working hybrid than I did when I was office based.'* Often, this was accompanied by comments about 'switching off', a subsequent theme, discussed below. Typically, respondents frame this as an

outcome of their own working practices rather than a cultural or organisation obligation: '*my time "on" at work is longer and the work/life balance is blurred. But this is from my own practices.*' Contrary to previous research, and often linked to work extensification, there was no evidence of work intensification present in the research data.

Theme 4: Switching off

This theme is linked to and sometimes discussed simultaneously with, theme four: work extensification. A common difficulty is stopping working or stepping away from work tasks or equipment: '*not switching off entirely at the end of a day (moving from desk to mobile email).*' Contributing factors to difficulties with switching off seem to include the ease of engaging with work-related technologies and the prominence of work equipment in the home, both of which can result in blurred boundaries between work and home spheres: 'Home *working can sometimes be difficult to switch off. It sometimes overtakes when you are in your own personal space and unable to get away from work.*'

Theme 5: No challenges experienced

Over a quarter of all respondents indicated that they did not experience any wellbeing challenges at all whilst undertaking hybrid working arrangements, replying simply '*none*' or '*not applicable*'.

Support and interventions for hybrid working

Following the analysis of the interventions that are utilised to support hybrid working two elements were identified: personal interventions and organisational interventions. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, these were split into two elements, things that were already being done and things that need to be developed further.

Figure 2: Support and Interventions for Hybrid Work Wellbeing (author's own creation)
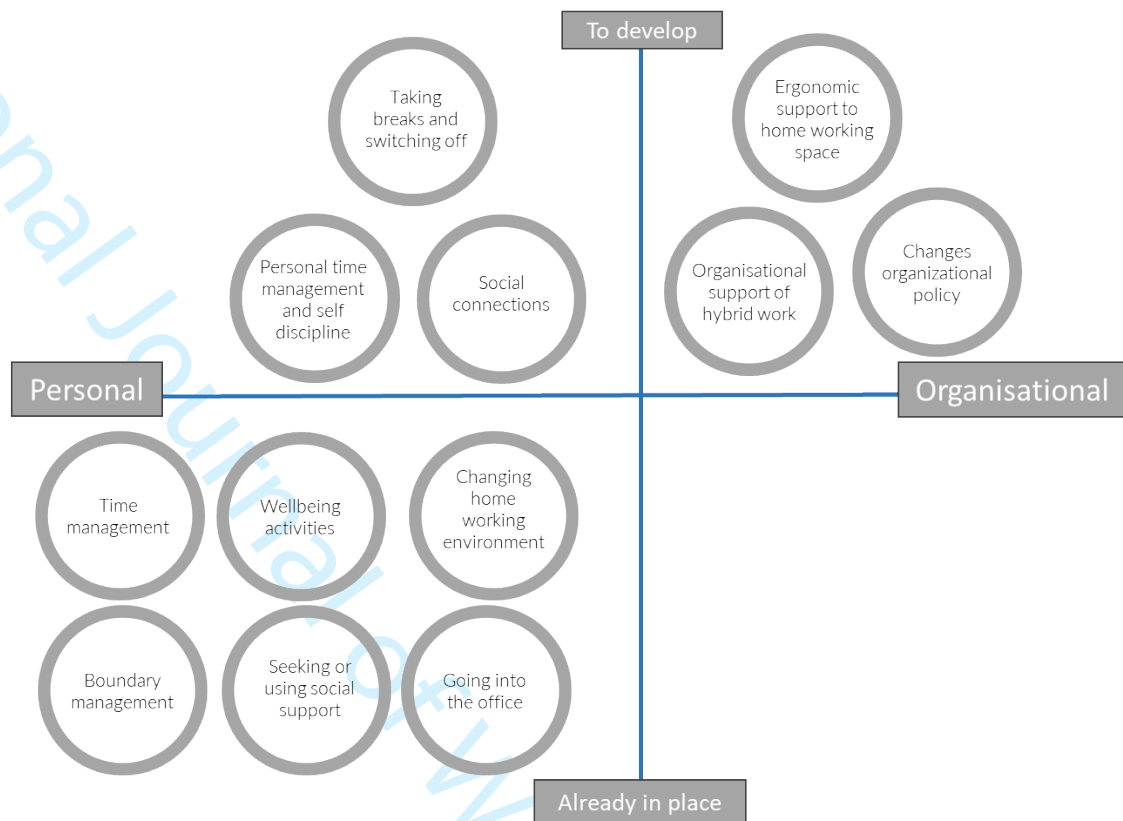
Hybrid working support already in place

Hybrid workers report taking a variety of steps to support wellbeing and address identified challenges. Some respondents did not answer this question; it cannot be established from the data whether this is because they felt that they did not need to take steps, did not know which steps to take or were not motivated to take steps. Responses suggest that taking steps can require effort or motivation on the part of the worker; for example '*push myself to get outside*' and '*making a conscious effort to into the office*' and '*trying to go for walks*'. Overall, six themes were identified related to specific mechanisms employees put in place for themselves.

Personal support already in place

Theme 1: Going into the office

Hybrid workers consider attending the office and spending time with colleagues a vital part of their wellbeing, reducing the potential for feelings of loneliness and isolation. When hybrid workers go into the office, they are maximising this time for social connection and are actively seeking out this in-person engagement: '*When I am in the office I arrange lunch catch ups etc to ensure I still personally contact will colleagues in a non-work way.*' Some respondents reported attending their workplace in person, more than their hybrid policy requires.

Theme 2: Boundary management

Responses highlight the importance for employees of creating boundaries between work and home to support wellbeing. Respondents discussed creating physical boundaries (such as separate workspaces in the home or putting work equipment out of sight): *'moved my workspace to a different area of the house so I don't "see" my desk at evenings and weekends.'* Respondents have established a range of approaches and techniques to manage boundaries between work and home: *'set timer for end of working day and log off at a specific time'* and '*I diarise my lunch now so it's an event in my diary and respect that time in the same way I do a meeting.'* Some respondents re-create a transition between work and home to allow for decompression and segmentation from the work environment such as changing clothes or going for a walk before or after work: *'I have a ritual to slowly log off while meditating at the end of the day to really mark the completion of the workday'*.

Theme 3: Time management

To ensure that they effectively 'switch off', hybrid workers employ a range of personal techniques and 'rules' including taking breaks and setting themselves times (including the use of reminders) that they will stop working. Some of these actions are also boundary management techniques: *Lock my laptop away once I finish so I'm not always 'on'.* Generally, these actions are framed by respondents as their personal responsibility, rather than an organisational one: '*Being disciplined about getting out at lunchtime or breaks.'*

Theme 4: Wellbeing activities

Hybrid workers undertake wellbeing activities as a technique for offsetting some of the challenges of hybrid work, partly to counterbalance the sedentary nature of working from home and to support the mental transition from working to home. This theme is connected to the themes of 'taking breaks' and 'boundary management' and is enabled by the time saved from not commuting. Examples provided include both individual activities but also those arranged by teams / colleagues. Respondents gave examples of both individual activities and (fewer) ones undertaken with colleagues, including a range of exercise, mindfulness, meditation and getting outside: '*Take breaks/ yoga/ go for a walk or run.'*

Theme 5: Changes to the home working environment

Respondents have made a variety of practical changes to their home working environment including improving the aesthetics of the home working environment, creating separate work and living spaces and purchasing furniture that supports health and wellbeing: '*I've also invested in a stand-up desk at*

home so I'm not sitting down all day.' Some of the changes are also a boundary management technique: 'm*ade a dedicated office so I can 'shut the door' on work'.*

Theme 6: Seeking or using social support

Workers seek out social support and connections to offset the isolation and loneliness that can result from hybrid work. For some respondents, this social connection is with colleagues or their manager: *'being mindful to make the most of catching up face to face when in the office.'* For others, it means spending more time with friends and family. Social connection is also acknowledged as being possible online, as well as in-person: '*I try to talk to colleagues as much as I can, rather than send emails.'* Whilst some comments indicate that managers and organisations could support the facilitation of social interaction between colleagues, more generally this is framed by respondents as a personal responsibility: '*I make sure when I go to the office it is when the rest of the team are in and I accept that I am less productive in the office but I am having more useful conversations with the team or others/ building relationships / etc.'*

Hybrid working support to develop

When considering things to do more around supporting hybrid working, participants largely focus on themselves and the steps that they could personally undertake, or broader organisational issues that influence individual wellbeing such as culture or ways of working. Three themes were identified around personal aspects of self, hybrid workers want to develop. There were limited suggestions from hybrid workers for specific interventions for organisational support mechanisms beyond support for establishing a comfortable and ergonomic working environment.

Personal support

Theme 1: Personal time management and self-discipline.

Survey respondents identified the importance of personal time management and self-discipline around working hours and practices in order to maintain wellbeing which work in a hybrid way: '*I am not very good at taking breaks at home or in the office. I need to start listening to my body and mind and understanding how to help myself.'* Cross over between this theme and the subsequent theme of taking breaks and switching off was observed: '*I feel like I could improve my well-being as a hybrid worker by ensuring I switch notifications off on my emails when on my breaks/lunch breaks.'*

Theme 2: Taking breaks and switching off

Respondents recognise the need to be personally proactive and disciplined in relation to breaks and switching off: '*Have more breaks. Tend to not move away from my desk when working from home.*'

Responses do indicate however, that whilst this is recognised as important, hybrid workers do not necessarily take the appropriate steps to do so: *I could start taking regular lunch breaks which I am guilty of not doing* and that they need to therefore do more: *I need to make more effort to switch off and take breaks outside the home.*

Theme 3: Social connections, more time with colleagues.

Hybrid workers value social connections and time with colleagues, seeing this as a way to maintain wellbeing, and would value more opportunities for such connections. Some respondents see this as a matter for them to address and manage, although they also believe that organisations and managers could do more to facilitate and support this. Suggested actions for organisations included support from managers, specific activities such as *'more social activities in the department to benefit more from on-site days'* and changes to the office environment to facilitate employees working closely together during in-person work. '*Facilitate more frequent informal contact between colleagues and teams.*

Organisational support

Theme 1: Organisational support of hybrid work

Some respondents indicated that they would welcome forms of organisational support for their wellbeing. Suggestions ranged from practical issues such as improved systems and technology *'organisationally, more could be done to modify how work is done on more levels. It feels like we've stuck a hybrid model on top of an office-based approach and it is not a good fit'* as well as informal wellbeing actions: *'it would be helpful to have companywide reminders about wellbeing balance, possibly a hybrid pledge too between person & manager.'* Also included in organisation support were broader cultural issues relating to leadership and management, specifically the acceptability of hybrid working and the wellbeing impact of unsupportive managers: '*a manager who is receptive to flexibility. I wish my I wish my manager would trust me more.'* It was notable that some respondents commented on an important cultural matter relating to the 'acceptability' of hybrid work in their organisation and the impact that this can have on wellbeing. Examples include: *I feel it is currently taboo to admit you don't like in-person work'* and *'CEO support. He's very old-fashioned... He'd prefer everyone in the office every day and undermines flexible working at every opportunity'.* Consequently, having the organisation supporting hybrid working is important for employees to enhance their wellbeing.

Theme 2: Changes to the organisation's policy for or approach towards hybrid working.

Hybrid workers indicate that changes to their organisation's approach to and policy on hybrid working arrangements could improve their wellbeing. Respondents expressed a desire for greater autonomy and flexibility within policy application and frustration with rigid approaches: *If a job can*

be done remotely give employees the flexibility to choose where they work and not feel compelled to be in the office if it's not required.' Hybrid workers also indicated a desire for greater time flexibility to be incorporated within location flexibility: *I'm intelligent enough to work out my own pattern of work.* Attending the workplace without perceived need is a source of employee frustration.

Theme 3: Ergonomic support or changes to home work space / station

Hybrid workers value the opportunity to have separate home work spaces, although not everyone can achieve this, '*I would like to have a dedicated space to work, for few years now I have been working in our living room, so the line between work and life are blurred.'* Respondents would also value more support around furniture provision and setting up an ergonomic workspace, '*An allowance for home equipment.'* There is a crossover between these themes and boundary management for effective work-life balance with separation of work and home spaces.

Discussion

This research indicates the complex impact of hybrid work on employee wellbeing with employees sharing experienced wellbeing benefits and outcomes from hybrid working arrangements. Hybrid working, and specific elements of its operation, appears therefore to have the potential to act as both a job resource and job demand for employees depending on the circumstances. Identified wellbeing benefits are potential resources, whereas wellbeing challenges, such as the inability to switch off, may act as job demands. In turn, these will influence individual wellbeing and work engagement. According to (Bakker and Demerouti, 2005) resources can buffer job demands and reducing demands can lead to work engagement. Organisations who are able to support hybrid workers to maximise their resources may therefore be able to buffer the negative health and wellbeing impacts of hybrid job demands.

In accordance with previous research on remote work (Charalampous *et al.*, 2019; Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), hybrid work can result in negative or positive outcomes for employee health. Elements of hybrid work can act as stressors or motivators. This corroborates previous research that remote forms of work can result in improved work-life balance and mental health, reduced stress, increased leisure time and improved physical health. Conversely however, but also in line with the extant literature (for example, Kellier and Anderson, 2013; Michel, 2011; Hunt and Pickard, 2022) on flexible forms of work, hybrid work can result in work extensification, isolation and disconnection, issues with switching off and boundary management, and physical health challenges, the latter of which is often associated with the sedentary and online nature of the work and poor home workstations.

Contradictions are evident within the data. For some respondents, hybrid work is good for work life balance, for others it is not and results in blurred boundaries and difficulties switching off. Some find it increases stress and others find it reduces it and improves mental health. Some find that their physical health has improved whereas others note the sedentary nature of remote work and highlight issues musculoskeletal problems. Either hybrid work can lead to work extensification or time (often saved from reduced commuting) channelled into activities that improve health and wellbeing.

These findings indicate that hybrid work and its impact on wellbeing is a very personal matter, necessitating an individual, tailored response. Both organisations and employees have a role to play in ensuring that hybrid work can positively influence rather than detract from employee health. Organisations need to take a multifaceted approach (maximising hybrid worker resources) to supporting employee health providing support mechanisms through policies, training and specifically, provision for ergonomic health. This formalised support can act as hybrid work resources whilst also buffering hybrid work demands. Employees need to take personal responsibility to manage time, boundaries, their home environment (with organisational support) and connecting with colleagues, thereby personally influencing the demands and resources of hybrid work. According to Job-Demands Resource theory, this should result in improved health and work motivation.

Implications for practice

The range of different and sometimes contradictory perspectives of hybrid workers' on the impact of their working arrangements on their wellbeing presents a practical challenge for organisations and people managers. This working arrangement can result in both challenges and benefits and where challenges are experienced; no single or simple solution can fully address those experienced difficulties. Accordingly, there can be no list of actions or universal advice that will lead to healthy hybrid work; and a more nuanced approach is therefore required to optimise hybrid for health.

Whilst employees may welcome some organisational wellbeing initiatives and support to enable their health as a hybrid worker, these are however only part of what makes hybrid healthy for survey respondents. This research indicates that hybrid workers recognise that they have individual responsibility for addressing the wellbeing challenges of hybrid work and that there are steps they can personally take to enable their hybrid health. The organisation can play a role, especially through the creation of a positive climate for hybrid work, facilitation of social connection, effective policy implementation and supporting ergonomic health. Healthy hybrid can therefore be seen as a joint responsibility of the organisation and the hybrid worker.

The findings of this study indicate that organisations who wish to ensure that hybrid work is healthy can consider a range of options. Organisations can set out clear expectations in relation to working

hours and use of communication technologies, encouraging employees to 'switch off' and create healthy digital habits. These may be complemented where appropriate by HR policies and issuing formal guidance. Hybrid workers can also be supported with training and guidance to manage their time and boundaries effectively.

Providing training and development to people managers on wellbeing, the role of the manager in employee wellbeing, and the potential impact of hybrid work on employee health will help to create awareness. Managers should be encouraged to 'check in' regularly with hybrid workers on their health and wellbeing, as well as addressing any observed unhealthy habits. People managers can also act as role models for healthy hybrid work if they are also hybrid workers; the provision of training can support them in taking this role.

Hybrid workers should be supported to establish a homework station that supports ergonomic health. Depending on the availability of organisational resources, this could include issuing guidance, providing furniture or a budget for equipment that supports ergonomic health, and employee training.

In relation to employee social needs, organisations can address employee desire for social connection and reduce the risk of hybrid-related isolation and loneliness by taking action to facilitate colleague relationships, providing resources to teams and managers to enable hybrid workers to build teams, fostering a culture of collaboration virtually and in-person, and creating opportunities for social activity and peer to peer support.

Finally, organisations can consider their broader approach to hybrid work and the extent to which the overall approach and implementation is conducive to hybrid health. Rigid implementation of hybrid work policies, lack of autonomy and unsupportive managers can influence the wellbeing of hybrid workers.

Conclusions

Limitations and opportunities for further research

The utilisation of the qualitative survey, which is a relatively novel approach (Braun *et al.*, 2021), may have impacted the possibility for deep understanding of the role of wellbeing for hybrid worker. However, this research found it an effective tool to explore the diverse and complex experiences of hybrid working. This research opened up the opportunity to explore the varied and nuanced experiences of employee wellbeing when hybrid working, which a small number of interviews, or a large-scale reductionist survey approach would not have enabled. Further research into the

organisational or personal factors that affect whether hybrid work influences wellbeing positively or negatively may be able to further improve suggestions for practitioners implementing hybrid working support mechanisms. Specific areas for future research could include how the experiences of benefits and challenges are influenced by demographic factors or personal circumstances, such as parental status, gender and age. Further studies may also wish to explore factors that influence health and wellbeing including hybrid work intensity, autonomy within hybrid work arrangements and the impact of specific wellbeing interventions to support employee health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

This research highlights the dual nature of hybrid work's impact on employee wellbeing, identifying both benefits and challenges. The thematic analysis of responses from hybrid workers revealed that while hybrid work arrangements can enhance work-life balance, reduce stress and improve physical health by allowing more time for personal and family life, they can also result in health detriments including isolation, difficulty in switching off and physical health issues due to prolonged sedentary behaviour. These findings underscore the importance of both organisations and employees of adopting proactive strategies to avoid or mitigate negative health outcomes of hybrid work.

This research contributes to the understanding of the complex impact of hybrid work on employee health and wellbeing. Furthermore, this research provides insight for organisations and hybrid workers on interventions that enable healthy hybrid work.

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