






Motivation and Managerial Role in the Hybrid Work Environment

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Received: August 30, 2024
Accepted: November 27, 2024
Published: April 5, 2025

Keywords:

Managers;
Motivation;
Hybrid work model;
Pandemic;
COVID-19



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Abstract: Hybrid work environment was discussed even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the arrival of Generation Z en masse, and it was implemented in some areas, but the pandemic period marked a clear disruption event, changing the work environment forever. Instead of teleworking, which was prevalent during the pandemic times, or switching back to full office work, hybrid work environment has become the obvious solution that could preserve “the best of both worlds”: instead of “toleration occasional teleworking” it has become widely seen as an “inseparable part of competitive advantages” for both the organisation and employees. Work/life balance and work/life flexibility are increased in the hybrid model, the autonomy, competence, and connectedness can reach the optimal balance, and the productivity has risen, thus enabling the competitive advantage. A hybrid model seems to be an optimal solution for the future job market, where employees with task-based jobs can feel motivated, especially in so-called creative industries. The managerial role in this future job market is crucial, since it has changed drastically in the last 4 years, and the more flexible managers, who are less control-obsessed and possess tacit knowledge and motivational skills will progress more in the new work environment, which include territorially dispersed workers, like digital nomad, the full-time office workers and the “hybrid workers” all at once. The managers who observe which factors can yield the best results and what model suits which workers may lead their organisations to better results as a consequence of this new flexibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The hybrid work environment has been a hotly debated topic for quite a while – it was discussed even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the arrival of Generation Z en masse, but these two events were decisive in kicking in the teleworking and normalizing it (Ng et al., 2022), although it was already implemented in some areas of business since the prerequisites were already there before the lockdowns (Allen et al., 2015). In the pre-pandemic days, only 35% of companies offered hybrid work or planned on implementing it (Shao et al., 2024), but in 2021 this number was up to 77% (Berger et al., 2021). However, it was not how it continued after the pandemic ended in early 2022. Although the pandemic period marked a clear disruption event, changing the work environment forever, teleworking ceased to be prevalent after the regular working conditions were reinstated (in April 2020, a staggering 81% of the workers were working remotely (ILO, 2020).

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Teleworking is sometimes a preferred working setting for employees, but employers, tending to assert more control over their employees, are willing to impose Return-to-Office (RTO) policies, considering teleworking a temporary setting (Krajčik et al., 2023). This paper argues that *the hybrid work environment could preserve “the best of both worlds” and the managerial role in this historical transformation is crucial.*

The task of HR and project managers has changed rapidly in the teleworking environment, and then again it has changed in the hybrid work environment, and so has the motivation of workers. The managers were afraid that the remote workers worked less than in the office, while it was the other way around – employees tended to work longer hours than in the office which negatively affected their well-being and long-term productivity (Nemțeanu & Dabija, 2023). Also, the working hours frequently intersected with household duties (Xue & McMunn, 2021). Instead of teleworking, which was prevalent during the pandemic times, or switching back to full office work, hybrid work environment has become the obvious solution.

Namely, instead of “tolerating occasional teleworking”, teleworking has become widely seen as an “inseparable part of competitive advantages”. Hybrid work environments offer workers a greater level of control, over where (location) and when (timing) their work tasks are performed (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2022). It was accepted by both the organizations and employees, but the workers are dispersed and managers are sometimes “itchy” about control - they sometimes struggle to motivate them, acting aggressively instead. However, Shao et al. (2024) claim that the hybrid work environment is a new “high-flying” policy. In the meantime, Generation Z appeared as a new workforce with completely different worldviews, thus clashing once again with the stiff managerial policies, further complicating the equation.

The paper also aims to explore the psychological, social, and economic consequences of hybrid work environment with a special emphasis on motivational techniques used by managers i.e. the managerial role in organizing an efficient hybrid work environment, maximizing both profit and the employees’ well-being and their motivation. The paper claims their motivational and organizational roles are crucial for maintaining the balance between the delicate and conflicting desires of different stakeholders. Conversely, they are to blame if the outcomes are proven to be worse than expected.

2. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The hybrid work environment consists of creating a mix of “in-office” work with “out-of-office” work, be it home, cafe, or coworking space (Cook et al., 2020), and aims not to lose any element of “old” productivity, and get new elements, and thus, for the same time spent at the computer, get more output and consequentially, more profit. Hybrid work completely changes and revolutionizes the very nature of work as well as management concepts, and in all possible levels, including the domestic space of the employee, the organizational space of the company, as well as the virtual space, as noticed 19 years ago by Halford (2005) in his research and many managers are not very good at it. As David Bowie described the future of the Internet in 1999, describing the Internet as an “alien life form” – it changed many things in society and finally, surprisingly late, it changed the work environment for good.

Employees with university degrees tend to work in hybrid work environments, since it has become a new standard – in 2023 it is estimated that over 100 million people in Europe and North America only worked permanently in a combination of „company office“ and „home office“ during different

days of the week (Aksoy et al., 2023). It is a radically different work practice from the classical on-spot work for all workers. We can freely say that the pandemic and COVID-19 have cemented three different work environments and practices (Stasiła-Sieradzka et al., 2023), which are both diverging and converging at the same time: office work, remote work and hybrid work environment.

It has certain advantages, among which include the reduction of commuting time needed to travel to work and back (which can be used for free time or vacation) (Eldér, 2020), as well as choosing one's own work environment. The disappearance of distraction from colleagues (no disturbances, no noise (Yang et al., 2021), adjusting physical parameters at will (Milošević, 2023), increasing visual privacy (Gratton, 2011), etc. can be crucial for some employees, especially since they can stop work to rest, lie down, exercise, and they can also prepare their own food and thus eat healthier, achieve greater job satisfaction, as well as a sacrifice at work (Charalampous et al., 2022; Golden & Gajendran, 2019).

Some researchers or managers tend to conclude that the effect is purely negative, diminishing productivity, innovation and career advancements (Goldman Sachs requested RTO policy to be implemented as early as July 2021 (Kelly, 2021), while Elon Musk even claimed that „working from home is morally wrong“ (Goswami, 2023). Other research like those from the architectural companies in Poland (Orzeł & Wolniak, 2022) or IT companies in India (Raj et al., 2023) have shown the improvement in both work-life balance and productivity. It is, however, up to the dispersed hybrid regime workers themselves to find the right balance, so it is more likely for employees to lead themselves to burnout (Vayre, 2019; Smoder, 2021) than to underperform or dodge their tasks when working in hybrid work or telework environments.

Managers see disadvantages in hybrid work, such as less employee flexibility, inability to press the employees when deadlines must be met (Babapour et al., 2022), and the most important thing, which is psychologically disastrous for managers - their uncertainty that they can determine with certainty the effectiveness of each employee, that is, his work contribution. This is precisely where the problem lies, because the role of managers with hybrid work, in their subjective opinion, is called into question, although this is not the case.

They feel “superfluous” if the employees can organize themselves, but this is a question that psychologists need to deal with - the bottom line is that the managerial role has now only changed, and has gained importance, because now it is necessary to coordinate all the employees who they are also in the office, in digital nomads, and those who work from home, and those who work hybridly, and who sometimes appear in offices, and this is a crucial change that many managers find difficult to adapt. Research in Denmark, for example, showed that working from home and hybrid work for managers was extremely stressful, much higher than for employees (Ipsen et al., 2021). They face the challenge of becoming “distance managers” and getting used to it (Ipsen et al., 2022).

There is another factor that appears here, changing the equation, and that is that between the onset of the pandemic and the present moment, almost 5 years have passed, that is, 5 new generations have entered the labor market, and they all belong to the generational cohort known as Generation Z. Generation Z is known as a generation that has a low tolerance for pressure in the workplace, at least in the sense that they imagine it - they insist on being motivated for work (Gandhi, 2018). They tend to leave their jobs faster than any other generation (Csiszárík-Kocsír & Garia-Fodor, 2018) and are very financially aware (Sladek & Grabinger, 2014). In case they don't like the management practices in the company they work for, they tend to indulge in what is called “consciously underperforming” or “quiet quitting” while looking for another job. They are known for constantly learning, they don't

consider a career to be ever over or to have ever reached its zenith, they apply a “no nonsense” policy towards CEOs and middle managers, and they highly value work-life balance (Chillakuri, 2020), and are very autonomous in their work (Sharma & Pandit, 2020). They are increasingly the “weakest link” in managerial efforts to introduce control and “order” and tend to leave the company without remorse. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for managers to deal with more votes “against” their control practices and RTO-orders every year.

When talking about another phenomenon that seriously disrupts managerial practices, it is “quiet quitting”, i.e. a deliberate reduction of performance at work, often to the very minimum (Scheyett, 2022), before finally giving up (Galanis et al., 2023). That something is wrong with managerial practices is also said by the Wall Street Journal article, which claims that 50% of today’s workforce in the USA is in the “quiet quitting” stage (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023; Smith, 2022) - and it is quite clear how much financial the repercussions of this behavior. This is not a phenomenon that originated only with Generation Z – on the contrary, it is very old and present (Formica & Sfodera, 2022), but only recently came under the spotlight, mainly due to the viral TikTok video from 2022 (Scheyett, 2022), when academic interest also skyrocketed. Managers do not do their job properly and directly reduce the company’s profit by actively forcing employees to quietly quit, and this can also be largely solved by a hybrid work environment (Wooll et al., 2023; Cooper, 2020; Mahand & Caldwell, 2023).

Because of all this, managers have found themselves in the position of becoming “distance managers”, that is, they have to perform their roles of work organization and motivation remotely, without the possibility of prior strict control (Ipsen et al., 2022). Interestingly, this caused many of them serious psychological problems - they failed, regardless of their age and knowledge, to adapt. They mostly wanted to go back to the old ways, which is impossible.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the aviation industry, Lufthansa Systems FlightNav AG in Zurich (LSY ZRH) introduced a hybrid work policy starting in May 2022, ordering a 50-50% hybrid work environment. The results have shown that the employees are not fully satisfied either with full office work or with full remote work and that the hybrid work environment fulfills the need of a heterogenous and dislocated workforce most (Shao et al., 2024). The managers have recognized the new times and new managerial practices, thus enhancing profits.

Bloom et al. (2024) performed a six-month randomized control trial investigating the effects of hybrid working from home on 1,612 employees in a Chinese technology company in 2021–2022. The results show that the hybrid work environment reduced quit rates by 33% and improved job satisfaction – it was especially interesting to see that the quit rates fell significantly among non-managers, female employees and those with long commutes. It goes to show that the average managers do not really feel the grieves of a common employee and that they do not possess enough empathy. However, the general managerial practice seems to be good, since the results were positive. The Chinese managers used their expertise to adapt to the new working environment and yield more profit.

Krajčik et al. (2024) tried their luck researching employees in vastly different parts of the world and diametrically opposite cultures, like as Slovakia and Kuwait. They surveyed 354 employees, 71% from Slovakia (mostly female) and 29% from Kuwait (mostly male). The results have proven that the employees emphasized time flexibility most, while the growing factor of appreciation is locational flexibility, which comes second, and that they preferred hybrid model to any other. It is important

that the conclusion was that the work environment preferences were almost universal – meaning that almost identical results were obtained from drastically different work cultures, climates, etc. Both the work/life balance and work/life flexibility were increased in the hybrid model and Krajčik et al. (2024) suggested managers accept the hybrid work environment as the most suitable and profitable solution for the companies, as voted by employees.

At the same time, the analysis in Fortune magazine has shown that despite the fuss and noise made by managers and their RTO orders, and dismissal of hybrid and remote work practices, the hybrid work environment brought the most revenue (Royle, 2024). Also, the number of companies recognizing it and switching to hybrid work has risen by 19% in the first half of 2024. The CEOs are recognizing the trends faster than middle management, since 50% of the CEOs in 2024 believe in the hybrid work environment as their companies' future, up from 34% in 2023 (Royle, 2024). A staggering 99% of the companies ordering RTO have experienced a drop in engagement (Confino, 2024). The problems were experienced by Deutsche Bahn (90,000 disgruntled employees posted protest content online), Grindr (the dating app lost the majority of the engineers and 50% of the workforce in the first week of RTO only), and Amazon received a threatening petition that 1,800 workers will quit immediately if the RTO is implemented, while their managers complain that even the 3-days' office work is dodged by majority of employees, not to mention the 5-days' office work order. 29% of the companies enforcing RTO have severe difficulties in recruiting a workforce to replace lost employees (Royle, 2024).

Many pieces of research have shown a strong correlation between motivation and productivity. But at the same time, when the employees became highly motivated working from home (WFH) or in hybrid work environment, the managers' mental health deteriorated with a high percentage of anxiety and depression (Graf-Vlachy et al., 2020) and the loss of trust (Parker et al., 2020). A Danish study found that managers experienced WFH as more challenging than the employees (Ipsen et al., 2021). The majority of managers (67%) prefer to manage from the office, which may be a consequence of the "work expansion" that managers experience when working hybrid (Ipsen et al., 2022) and appreciate the increased efficiency and control of the workday (Ipsen et al., 2021). Also, they do not feel that they have enough support from the organization in new conditions, which makes them nervous, and they express an increased desire for control (Ipsen et al., 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

Although the last several years have brought disruptions and the pendulum was swinging from full office work to full remote work, the many lockdowns (not only the first one in Spring 2020) have changed the perception of only work-from-home models from very positive to slightly negative. Therefore the hybrid model arose as the best solution since the full RTO was not seen as a proper solution by the majority. However, the least prepared seemed to be the middle managers, since CEOs seem to jump the wagon faster than the middle management, excluding some stubborn bosses like Elon Musk. But the hybrid work environment, according to Fortune, seems to be winning. And it will require a new type of manager.

The new type of manager is not defined by age or education but by tacit knowledge and skills: those who adapt first, will get the head start and the company will turn to a "desirable one". In the social media environment, the good news spreads fast; on the contrary, the bad news spreads even faster - this usually increases the revenue or losses (like in the case of Grindr or Amazon or these 29% of companies struggling to recruit). The managerial role in a hybrid environment becomes a pillar of

business since it is intricately connected with motivational skills, or, better said, „demotivational skills“ in many cases, where managers cannot understand the employees' needs.

The managerial practices in both project management and HR management have to be adjusted in the light of hybrid work, i.e. The managerial role in the hybrid work environment has to pace up with changes to increase productivity. Managerial practices are increasingly more complex in the hybrid work environment, organizing on-spot workers, remote workers, digital nomads and hybrid workers, especially in the increasing presence of Generation Z among the workforce, but the managers are not redundant – they need to adapt and evolve new and less stiff managerial techniques.

Therefore, we can conclude that the work/life balance and work/life flexibility are increased in the hybrid model. The autonomy, competence, and connectedness can reach the optimal balance in this model, while the productivity has risen, thus enabling the competitive advantage for the companies applying the model. The hybrid model seems to be an optimal solution for the future job market, where employees with task-based jobs can feel motivated - this is especially the case in so-called creative industries. On the other hand, the managerial role in this future job market is crucial - it has changed drastically in the last 4 years. The more flexible managers, who are less control-obsessed and possess the tacit knowledge and motivational skills will progress more in the new work environment. It is, however, not an easy task for them.

The managers who observe which factors can yield the best results and what model suits which workers may lead their organizations to better results as a consequence of this new flexibility. It is witnessed all around the globe that these examples are plentiful, as shown in this paper. Empathy is crucial in this case since these new and different classes of workers have different perceptions, as Generation Z enters the work market with their own ethics and business practices it gets more complicated for managers to manage and motivate all these different subsegments (the Generation Z is unwilling to tolerate psychological oppression for “better future”). It is shown by the fact that as much as 50% of the American workers consciously underperform and the managers do not notice or rectify this. Thus, flexibility is the key, and managers with little motivational skills and with little empathy, like those requesting RTO, can underperform. It can result in so-called “quiet quitting” (conscious underperformance of workers), or it can lead to an increased rate of leaving the company. This all creates losses in revenue.

Acknowledgments

This article is supported by the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, as part of the project entitled: “Implementation of research results in the field of Industrial Engineering and Management into the teaching processes of DIIM with the aim of their continuous improvement.” The authors are grateful for the support within the project of the Department for General Disciplines in Technology, Faculty of Technical Sciences entitled “Improving the teaching process in the English language in fundamental disciplines”.

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