



# THE QUEST FOR A PERFECT HYBRID WORKING: A CASE STUDY OF SYSTECH SOLUTIONS, CHENNAI.

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## Abstract.

**BACKGROUND:** Although hybrid work has been a topic of research for many years, the pandemic has introduced a new context that remains relatively unexplored.

**OBJECTIVE:** This paper aims to define hybrid working as a novel flexible working arrangement and investigate the factors that influence its effective implementation within organisations.

**METHODS:** To achieve this research objective, we conducted a single case study focusing on Systech Solutions, Chennai. The study involved interviews with the Director of the company and an analysis of internal documents developed during the implementation of hybrid working.

**RESULTS:** Our findings show that hybrid working is a team-managed flexible working arrangement, and it is within the teams that the specifics of the hybrid work should be determined and defined. Additionally, the findings reveal that hybrid working is not a one-size-fits-all model. It requires a holistic approach to establish a clear strategy that encompasses various factors such as culture, technology, and employee experience. Of particular importance is the need to ensure connection in the broader sense and ongoing support to employees.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Managers can significantly improve the success rate of hybrid working by gaining insight into the key factors that facilitate the implementation of the hybrid model.

Keywords: Hybrid working, hybrid team, flexible working arrangements, case study

## 1.Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought flexible working, particularly remote work, into the spotlight. With governments worldwide announcing comprehensive lockdowns and many states issuing stay-at-home orders, employers were forced to implement flexible working arrangements on the fly. Then, as businesses reopened, requests for flexible working from employees became commonplace. One significant development is the rise of hybrid work, which allows employees to blend remote and office-based work according to their preferences and needs [2]. This shift underscores a newfound emphasis on employee autonomy and the importance of fostering a healthy work-life balance, reshaping not only how individuals approach their jobs but also how organizations structure their workplaces. Employers who presumed that everyone would return to their offices as before have no choice but to adjust to employees' expectations or to accept that their recruitment and retention rates will be at risk [3–5].

Interest in flexible working practices began long before the pandemic, resulting in numerous studies analysing various forms of flexible working practices and gaining a better understanding of their impact on both individuals and organizations [6–11].

Workplace flexibility was defined as “the ability of employees to make changes on where, when and the total time they would spend or engage in work-related tasks” [12, p. 152]. Therefore, flexible working arrangements are arrangements that provide employees with a degree of choice regarding when, where and how much they work [13–17]. The term flexible working has been used in a broad sense to encompass various working patterns that diverge from the standard working pattern (be it 9-to-5 hours, shift work or

central workplace). However, there have been several main types of named and recognized flexible working arrangements in use prior to the pandemic: part-time work, term-time work, flexitime, working from home, mobile working, annual hours, job sharing and a compressed work week [18]. These practices offer different levels of flexibility both to the employers – to align the supply and demand for labour more effectively – and to the employees – to accommodate their needs and preferences. While it is recognized that not all flexible working is voluntary [19], the assortment of practices that offer so-called flexibility for employees and flexibility of employees [20] can be somewhat confusing. The voluntary nature of these practices can influence whether employees truly benefit from them [21–23].

Traditionally, flexibility has been seen as a feature of low-quality jobs [24, 25], where employers impose non-standard working practices such as temporary or part-time employment to achieve organizational flexibility. At the centre of this view is the assumption that given the choice, employees would prefer permanent and/or full-time jobs. However, much of this evidence relates to flexibility of employees rather than flexibility for employees. This contradicts the definition of flexible working arrangement, where the key principle is to provide employees with the choice over how, when and where they perform their jobs. “The central feature of these [flexible] work arrangements is that it is the employee, not the employer, who chooses the working arrangement, so-called flexibility for employees” [26, p. 84]. Flexibility for employees gives them the freedom to choose how they do their work and it is this element of choice that has a positive impact on employees’ perceptions of their work [27]. A lack of understanding of what lies at the heart of flexible working practices can be the reason for their ineffective implementation, leading to employee dissatisfaction which can ultimately impact their engagement [13]. And yet, giving employees the freedom to choose does not mean that they are the only beneficiaries of flexible working practices. On the contrary, several studies have confirmed the benefits of implementing flexible working practices for employers as well, such as growth of employee commitment, higher retention rates or improved productivity levels [9–10] demonstrating that providing flexibility for employees can benefit both employees and organizations.

In this article, we will focus on hybrid working as a flexible working practice that only earned its place on the list of such practices after the pandemic [32] and, as such, lacks in-depth exploration. While studies acknowledge the rising demand for hybrid working among employees [30], the concept itself remains underexplored within the realm of flexible work practices. Recognizing this research gap and the apparent interest in this evolving practice, our study seeks to precisely define hybrid working and delineate its core characteristics as a flexible working arrangement. Furthermore, we endeavour to identify the essential factors crucial for the successful implementation of hybrid working. The key questions this study sought answers to were therefore what defines hybrid working as a novel flexible work arrangement and what factors play a key role in its effective implementation. To bridge this research gap, we have chosen a single-case study methodology, as such studies are conducive to inductive theory-building, especially in the nascent stages of research [37]. Our approach involved in-depth interviews, featuring open-ended questions that encourage thorough exploration of experiences, perspectives, and situational nuances, coupled with a comprehensive analysis of secondary data sources.

## 2. Research methods

### 2.1 Research Design

This study uses a single-case research design. A qualitative approach is adopted as the research method driven by the need to gain a better understanding of the research problem under investigation. Since the primary motivation of our study was to gain a deeper insight into the subject matter, the qualitative method was agreed upon as the most suitable approach. Quantitative methods may prove insufficient when the research objective involves exploring the circumstances and causes and determining the direction of relationships between the phenomena that are unfamiliar to managers and that relate to the social aspects of organization management [66]. The aim of qualitative research is to recognize the unique character of the studied situation, the nature of the phenomenon, its context, and its interaction with other elements. Its major qualities include the researcher’s participation as the main tool in data collection and analysis, as well as the predominance of the extensive verbal description of the phenomenon, its context, and the participants. A case study is a type of qualitative research that focuses on empirical inference and explores a contemporary phenomenon in its natural context [67–69]. Yin [70] suggests that case studies are epistemologically valid when research questions focus on the causes behind observed phenomena, when behavioural events are not under control and when the focus is on contemporary events. Other researchers claim that the case method is “appropriate and essential where either theory does not yet exist or is unlikely to apply, [...] or where theory exists but the environmental context is different” [71]. This study satisfies these criteria. There are convincing arguments suggesting that research on hybrid work, in its current form, is still in the early stages of theoretical development, and the generalizability of previous research on hybrid working is questionable, given its current status.

Our research on the hybrid working model was designed to develop the definition of hybrid work in its new post-pandemic setting, as well as to identify factors that may influence its better implementation. Our research questions were therefore:

1. What defines hybrid working as a new flexible working arrangement?
2. Which factors play a key role in the implementation phase of hybrid working?

### 2.3 Data Collection

We contacted the Systech Solutions, Chennai introduce the research project. Upon garnering her interest, we obtained the formal approval from the company to conduct the study. The data collection phase involved conducting semi structured interviews with the P&OD for primary data, while secondary data was obtained from internal documents developed during the implementation of hybrid working, both

globally and locally, as well as from the company website. The data collection process lasted over three months, starting on 8<sup>th</sup> and ending in mid-November 2024. A total of four online interviews were conducted with the staffs, each lasting between 3 and 4 hours and with each subsequent interview detailing the previous one in order to ensure comprehensive coverage of all aspects related to the implementation of hybrid working. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and synthesized with other data. The key questions we sought answers to were:

- 1) What are the principles of hybrid working? Are they documented, widely known and applied?
- 2) What support does the company provide during the different stages of hybrid working implementation?
- 3) What is the rationale for implementing hybrid working at different levels, i.e., why has the company decided to adopt hybrid working, why is it being implemented for specific functions, teams and employees?
- 4) Was the implementation of the hybrid working model preceded by an identification of needs and opportunities.

### 2.3.1 Data analysis

For the analysis of the data, we employed the general inductive approach (GIA), whose primary goal is to identify common themes, patterns, and categories within the data.

### 2.3.2 Results

Before the pandemic, all Systech employees worked traditional hours, with only a limited level of work flexibility. This involved occasional work from home opportunities, subject to supervisor approval and individual employee request. Out of all systech employees, around 300 have the option to work in the hybrid model. However, certain roles, such as those in sales and manufacturing, are not suitable for flexibility because of the nature of the work they involve.

## 3. Connection

The turning point for the implementation of hybrid working proved to be the pandemic that necessitated the deployment of staff to work from home. The People and Organization department collaborated with IT support to ensure that all the technical infrastructure was established to enable remote working. This involved providing all employees with laptops and any other equipment they needed, as well as offering training in Microsoft Teams. From the very beginning, the company has sought methods to keep a sense.

“It was an emotionally difficult time, so we were also keen for supervisors to continue to be close to the teams and not lose the connection with employees.”

Several initiatives were then introduced that included all employees. One such initiative was the “coffee connection” which coincidentally brought two employees together for a virtual coffee and replaced the usual conversations over coffee in the kitchen or office. This tool, which is still in use today, not only aided communication in difficult pandemic times but also brought benefits, such as the opportunity to meet people in the organization who had not previously known each other. At the same time, the company was in search of a tool that would allow it to see what was happening across the organization. With this objective in mind, they introduced an internal forum called Yammer, allowing employees to share what they were doing, what they were struggling with, and also to share initiatives. In addition, the company used a dedicated forum for managers, that had been created prior to the pandemic with the purpose of developing their competencies and share ideas. All these tools remained in use in the hybrid working model.

## 3.1 Transformational Culture

The starting point for the introduction of the hybrid model was to look at where, how, and when work is done, in order to create the conditions that would uphold maximum productivity while maintaining a company culture that is fundamentally rooted in collaboration and relationships.

“There was the question of how to be productive and at the same time maintain our organizational culture in a situation where work is done remotely rather than in the office, which has hitherto served an integrative and collaborative function.”

Systech Solutions was determined to ensure that the strong relationships ingrained in the company’s culture were not lost during the transition to more flexible working arrangements. Throughout the process, employees were actively engaged and consulted.

## 3.2 Ongoing Support

A number of training programs and workshops have been implemented to help employees adapt and review new working practices. These initiatives emphasize the need to align all decisions around hybrid working with Mars culture and values, ensuring agreement with teams and prioritizing the company’s Five Principles. Employees also had the opportunity to work together on a list of habits to implement in the new model. Each team has been allocated an engagement budget encouraging them to get together regularly for team-building activities as well as social events beyond work-related tasks.

Particular attention has been given to equipping leaders with the necessary skills and behaviours as they have the greatest influence and impact on how employees feel and perform. MWP offers a line managers forum and provides materials to help them manage hybrid employees effectively. Regular discussions are held regarding how they can enhance their support for employees and their wellbeing. A series of workshops have been conducted to help equip and support managers in adjusting to effective hybrid

working practices. Ongoing support and communications are facilitated through the local and Mars-wide share points fostering the exchange of ideas, addressing challenges, and providing support.

“We create an environment where employees feel that they are not left alone and where questions are not left unanswered or without advice.”

### 3.3 Holistic Approach

The implementation of the hybrid model naturally changed the design of the office space to enhance support hybrid working. The company engaged in extensive consultations with employees regarding the use of office space and what they needed for their optimal performance. Offices with desks previously assigned to individual employees were turned into work zones. They created a space for hot-desking, a space for collaboration or quiet spaces for work requiring concentration. In addition, videoconferencing facilities in meeting rooms were expanded to ensure inclusivity. The company has learned that it is important for people to use their time in the office purposefully and find a balance between individual focus time and collaboration with team members. This means reducing the amount of time spent in meetings and increasing the use of tools that enable employees to contribute based on their own schedules. All employees were encouraged to view the office as a purposeful destination, for collaboration, socializing, and team meetings.

The Public Relations department has also developed clear expectations and guidance for managing key stages of the employee lifecycle in a hybrid environment, for example, onboarding, performance management, creating development plans as well as how to approach other aspects such as giving support and giving feedback.

“Hybrid working does not just refer to whether you work from home or from the office. It encompasses all HR practices from the moment an employee enters the organization until they leave. And it is calibrating all the processes while addressing culture and values, and then gaining understanding from employees that has been and continues to be the biggest challenge.”

The company is currently in the process of reviewing both the principles and the operation of the model at a global level.

“My conclusion is that this [hybrid] working model will certainly evolve and is not implemented once and for all.”

## 4. Discussion

The results of the data analysis and interpretation show that hybrid working is a team-managed flexible working arrangement where employees can work both in the office and remotely. It is a people-first approach that aims to maximise productivity and job satisfaction. This means that employees have the freedom to choose between the office and remote work, taking into account their own needs and the needs of their organization, enabling them to work where they can be most productive. Our study confirms that decisions on the specific rules for organizing hybrid work schedule lies with the respective departments and teams [82], thereby increasing employee satisfaction [83]. When setting the rules for hybrid working, it is important to adapt them to the preferences of the team, as each team knows the nature of their work and how they work most effectively. Insight into employees' preferences and viewpoints will require managers to adopt a different approach to managing hybrid teams, including tailored support and the development of additional competencies. All this ensures that hybrid working is not a one-size-fits-all model, as not only every team, but also every organization has its own unique characteristics that will be critical in its implementation. This can account for the uniqueness of the model, which will consequently have an impact on achieving an organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, and further benefits for companies implementing the hybrid model [84]. However, our study analysis reveals that there are certain factors that will favour the implementation of the hybrid working model. Employees should not only be connected, but they should also feel connected. This means ensuring that hybrid working employees are not only technologically empowered with access to work tech tools that enable them to work effectively, but also have the freedom to work in their preferred way through equal access and asynchronous team collaboration. This primarily means that employees believe they have strong connection to organization, leadership team, and to their direct team and immediate colleagues. This belief not only reinforces the potential for effective collaboration, but also has a positive impact on the identification with the company's goals and values as well as promoting psychological safety and team identity. These elements have been identified in the research as crucial to consider when introducing flexibility at work [85]. Access to resources and information is the antecedent of psychological safety because such contextual support helps reduce insecurity and defensiveness among team members [86]. However, in the era of digital collaboration and tech empowerment, many business leaders find it difficult to build new bonds of trust between the organization and the employee now that the traditional, continuous “line of sight” no longer exists [87]. This suggests the need for a cultural shift. There is no such thing as an ideal culture, but rather a suitable one [88]. New hybrid arrangements, whatever they are, should accentuate company's values, support its culture [65] and blend the need for accountability with the need to protect relationships and build trust. Following Bass and Avolio [89] typology, predominately or moderate transformational organizational cultures exhibit the qualities necessary in the context of hybrid working. They describe such cultures as those having a sense of purpose where both leaders and followers share mutual interests and go beyond their self-interests. Trust does not depend on formal agreements and the organization is flexible, adaptive, and emphasizes potential of its individual employees who go above and beyond for the good of the company.

Finally, hybrid working is not as simple as employees deciding where they will work. Successful and sustainable hybrid working models are those where leaders adopt a holistic approach which means setting a clear strategy addressing culture, technology, and employee experience, but also constantly looking at the changes being made, continuously improving and transforming.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the hybrid workplace model offers significant advantages, including flexibility, cost savings, and access to a broader talent pool. However, it also presents challenges related to communication, data security, and employee well-being. The success of the hybrid workplace model in HRM in India will depend on how effectively these challenges are addressed and how well HR can adapt to the evolving needs of the workforce. Hybrid work is a people-first approach to managing the workforce that drives increased productivity and job satisfaction while addressing the major challenges of remote work, such as isolation and lack of community. A hybrid work model provides employees with greater flexibility and the option to work from home or anywhere they can be productive. With hybrid work, the workplace is no longer inside the four walls of the corporate office its ecosystem of employees working from home, in co-working spaces, and the office. Team members can migrate between various locations depending on the work they need to get done.

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