

Leaders as orchestrators of relationships in hybrid workplaces

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Summary

As hybrid work arrangements, a combination of remote and onsite work, are becoming pervasive in the current business environment, their impact on workplace social dynamics requires further investigation. Despite the contributions provided by prior research on virtual collaborations, hybrid work differs from earlier approaches like telework and fully remote work since it implies dynamic switches across three interrelated dimensions, namely modality, space, and temporality of work. The present research aims to contribute to this debate, understanding how informal communication and networks in a hybrid work context are cultivated, focusing the attention on leaders and delineating the different facets of the role of orchestrators of such interpersonal relationships. The study relies on a single-case study, analysing the interventions implemented by the company in a ten-year period, deepening the understanding of how leaders facilitate the social connections within their team after the introduction of hybrid work arrangements. The findings highlight the role of leaders in supporting the activation of meaningful connections, fostering collaboration through both synchronous (real-time meetings) and asynchronous (written or recorded exchanges) communication methods. Moreover, the study describes the interventions leaders promoted to prevent the erosion of social capital in the workplace.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the rise of digital technologies enabling new work arrangements, accelerated the dissolving of the boundaries between office-based and remote work (Bell et al., 2023). One prominent example of these evolving models is hybrid work, which differs from earlier approaches like telework and fully remote work (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). Hybrid work entails “ongoing switches between traditional and non-traditional work modes in relation to how, where, and when to perform work activities” (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025: 1), representing the growing fluidity in modern work environments. This model implies dynamic switches across three interrelated dimensions: modality, space, and temporality of work.

Prior studies showed digitally mediated communication over a long time period influences group cohesivity and team spirit negatively (Pyöriä, 2011). Space switches that make employees more or less co-located or distributed may also influence the integration of behavior and people, as space sets boundaries in forming relations of accessibility and visibility (Wineman et al., 2009). In terms of time, recent studies underlined a raise in asynchronous communication in hybrid work environments (Yang et al. 2022), at the expenses of synchronous and informal encounters. This suggests hybrid work has somehow altered workplace social dynamics (Keppler et al., 2023). Thus in this paper we aim to provide a better understanding of the way in which interaction that is shaped by timeliness and multilocality redefine social relationships management in the workplace.

To do it we employed a qualitative methodological approach through the use of a single-case study. The case allowed an in-depth analysis of the interventions implemented by the company in a ten-year period, deepening the understanding of how leaders facilitate the social connections within their team after the introduction of hybrid work arrangements.

2. Theoretical background

With advances in technology and increasing demand for flexibility, forms of virtual work have been gaining popularity in the last decades (Kumar et al., 2024). Recently, scholars have tried to clarify the terminological boundaries of hybrid work in contrast to the more popular forms of virtual work such as teleworking and remote working (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). “Hybrid” refers to the combination of two or more things that in the case of the workplace implies switches between traditional and non-traditional modes of activities (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). Lauring and Jonasson (2025), distinguished among three interrelated dimensions, namely modality, location and temporality. Modality refers to the type of technology used by employees to execute their task individually or collaboratively, where in hybrid work, they can alternate between digital devices or virtual interactions and analog tools or face-to-face interactions. Location refers to the switches of places where the person executes the tasks, with a balance between the office-bound/co-located and non-office bound/distributed. Finally, temporality concerns the use of time in a flexible way, balancing constrained work time activity/synchronous collaboration versus non-constrained work time activity/asynchronous collaborations.

Studies on remote work contexts have acknowledged the role of technology in reshaping interorganizational collaboration networks, making them more rigid and compartmentalized (Yang et al., 2022). Moreover, recent research has identified concerns regarding a reduced sense of community and belonging to an organization in remote work settings (Jämsen et al., 2022; Moens et al., 2022; Syrek et al., 2022). In this regard, employees reported weakening bonds with colleagues and decreasing connections with their employers (Moens et al., 2022). Although most of these studies

relate to fully remote work settings, more recent advancements also underline that hybrid work environments alter workplace social dynamics, leading to reduced peer interaction and fewer connections among colleagues (Keppler et al., 2023).

The increasing use of collaboration technology to interact showed mixed results in terms of perception of social connectedness. This is explained by a widespread higher quality perception in face-to-face communication (Braun et al., 2019), as well as evidence of a potential loss for spontaneous conversations (Mitchell, 2023). Similarly, Kantola et al (2024), recognizes non contingency, defined as the lack of chance encounters, as a key characteristic of hybrid work. This shortage of chance encounters challenges the creation of relationships and trust (Trevor & Holweg, 2023). Moreover, scholars recognize that hybrid work is characterized by discontinuity and (dis)rhythm (Kantola et al., 2024), which refer to the changed nature of collaboration where social interaction is often limited and preplanned (Waizenegger et al. 2020). This former evidence suggests that hybrid work challenges both the creation and the sustaining of quality social relations, by reshaping and breaking social interaction into a narrow and dispersed format.

The present research aims to contribute to this debate, understanding how informal communication and networks in a hybrid work context are cultivated, focusing the attention on leaders and delineating the different facets of the role of orchestrators of such interpersonal relationships. Prior studies highlight the challenges leaders face in the hybrid workplace and have recently started to investigate the new behaviours they are expected to implement to manage both face-to-face and virtual environments (Hill, 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2024). Preliminary findings from Yuzi and Mbokota (2024) suggest a surge of relationship management skills needed by leadership working in hybrid work environments. Bula et al. (2024) show that in the face of perceiving difficulties in emotionally connecting with team members, leaders gave higher priority to guaranteeing presence (also virtual one), establishing connections outside work-related topics, and fostering connection among team members. Despite this evidence, scant attention has been devoted to understanding how leaders become aware of their role in promoting valuable human connection in a hybrid workplace. Thus, the research question addressed is the following: *How do leaders foster socialisation in the workplace considering the physical separation and technology-mediated communication that characterise hybrid work arrangements?*

3. Methods

3.1 Research design and research setting

In this study, we employed a qualitative methodological approach through the use of a single-case study. The method was selected due to its appropriateness in areas where empirical research is scant (Yin, 2014), involving a deep dive into the case-specific context, namely GAMMA (a pseudonym), the Italian subsidiary of an global company operating in the design, construction, and maintenance of transportation systems. GAMMA was formed through a series of strategic mergers and acquisitions of companies with a tradition in the sector of over one hundred years. In 2025, the company presents nine sites located in the Italian territory with more than 4,000 employees.

GAMMA was theoretically chosen for its suitability in addressing the research question. It is characterized by a strong commitment to fostering a supportive, inclusive, and flexible workplace for its employees. These efforts contribute to GAMMA's reputation as a top employer, driven by

initiatives that prioritize well-being, equality, and work-life balance. Coherently, GAMMA introduced the hybrid work in 2016 and further developed and formalised this new way of working after the COVID pandemic. The shift towards hybrid work was promoted by a bottom up project led by a team of middle managers in 2015 and then significantly facilitated by the human resources department. GAMMA was a pioneer in its sector considering that in 2015 only 17% of the large companies in Italy presented systematic projects aiming at implementing some forms of hybrid work (Osservatorio Smart Working, 2016).

The case allows the in-depth analysis of the interventions implemented by the company in a ten-year period, deepening the understanding how leaders facilitate the social connections and the informal networks with collaborators, that prior the introduction of hybrid work were spontaneously activated by the employees.

3.2 Data collection and research protocol

Following Yin's (1994) guidance for case study design, data was collected from various sources. Data was gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews with key informants, and reviews of archival materials reconstructing the process of implementation of the hybrid workplace from 2016 to 2025.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom using a predefined set of questions to maintain uniformity, while allowing flexibility to refine these questions after each session to deepen the relevance and insight into the topics discussed. Informed written consent to take part in the research was obtained from the participants in accordance with European regulations to ensure compliance and protect confidentiality.

Specifically, we developed two interview protocols. The first protocol was designed for the HR department, aiming to gather data on the evolution of the implementation of HRM practices related to hybrid work and the factors considered to formulate the HR strategy in line with the changes in the company's strategic orientation. The second protocol was designed for the members of the leadership team of the first organisational unit in GAMMA that experimented with the pilot project of hybrid work. The unit encompasses more than 1,000 employees and is specialised in crucial components of the transportation system ensuring safety and optimising the capacity on the lines. The organisation unit was selected in 2016 to implement the pilot project for two main reasons. First, the type of business facilitated the adoption of the hybrid work arrangements, since the unit is primarily in charge of engineering activities that do not require to be performed in the workplace. Second, the unit works across four sites located in the center and the south of Italy, thus employees and their managers already experienced virtual ways of coordinating activities on common projects. The protocol was administered to all the members of the unit leadership team, asking how leaders approached hybrid work, and specifically if:

- a) there are any characteristics of the activity that influence the decision to perform the task remotely or in presence (e.g. interdependence, degree of standardisation),
- b) the transition to hybrid work changed their perception of working in presence,
- c) they implemented interventions to enhance the value of the physical presence,
- d) any changes in the space configuration have been promoted,
- e) which behaviours they reinforce with the transition to hybrid work and which ones they reduced/abandoned

- f) the modes of interaction adopted differ when they deal with people in presence or remotely.

We interviewed the Director of the unit and his direct reports, namely the executives in charge of the different functional areas (e.g. operation, finance, engineering, R&D, quality, safety, planning). All interviews were recorded with the consent of the research informants and subsequently transcribed.

The interview data was integrated with internal documents provided by the company (e.g., hybrid work policy, the company's presentations, materials related to the training programs and the performance management system) and media archives (e.g., articles published in newspapers, the company website's documents) were used to further enhance the understanding of the companies being studied. This approach enabled the triangulation of data collected from interviews, a crucial process for ensuring the validity and reliability of our findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). Table 1 summarizes the main data sources of the research.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

3.3 Data analysis

The data were coded independently by each author using thematic analysis. The process began with coders reading each interview transcript and collecting documents, creating memos to outline emerging themes. Subsequently, the authors developed a concept-evidence table, listing all concepts identified during the analysis alongside supporting evidence from the data. The team convened to review the coding, engaging in debate and discussion to resolve any disagreements. Preliminary versions of the case study reports were shared with the company's members to confirm the accuracy of the information. This member-checking process helped to validate the analysis and enhance the credibility of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

4. Results

4.1 The roadmap to implement a hybrid workplace

The motivations that lead the company to approach this new way of working are related to the opportunity to enhance employees' work life balance and reduce the commuting time, also considering the distribution of the firm sites in different geographical areas. Moreover, GAMMA aimed at fostering a leadership approach based on delegation and accountability, replacing the culture based on the physical control that permeated the relationship between leaders and followers. Furthermore, the company viewed hybrid work as a means to positively impact on environmental sustainability and to increase the firm's attraction in the labour market. The company started to experiment hybrid work to a small group of employees, progressively monitoring the achievements through a period climate survey.

“So we selected teams which were already familiar with working with people spread over four locations, we involved young and innovative team leaders in order to receive quick feedback on the

experimentation, who had no special needs for connection or access to laboratories for e.g. verification, data validation.” (Bid Manager Director)

The positive outcomes obtained from this preliminary introduction of hybrid work led GAMMA to extend this way of working in other sites progressively involving a larger number of employees. During the experimentation the employees and managers were supported by the HR department and the continuing training on how to effectively implement hybrid work. By 2017 the new way of working was extended to the overall company population. Before the pandemic, the internal policy allowed one day in a week to work remotely, that the employee has to define in concern with the supervisor:

“We had indicated that the request should be sent at least one week in advance to the manager. And so that became a way of planning for the manager and the employee, and of course with the possibility for the manager also to say no on the day because perhaps on that day he/she needed the person to be present or perhaps also to ensure that there were days in the week when the whole team was present.... the fact that there was never the whole team present at one time was really a very disruptive thing at that time and therefore the request had to be sent in advance and had to be authorised by the manager.” (Talent Management Director)

With the COVID-pandemic, after experimenting with full remote working during the lockdown, the company decided to extend to two days a week and progressively to nine and then ten days a month the number of days an employee can work remotely, as illustrated by the Bid Manager Director:

After the pandemic a second working group, which involved the HR department, some colleagues from operations and I started to work on a second policy, that extended the use of hybrid work up to nine days per month. So we worked on many aspects that were also a bit more specific, for instance the possibility of not having to be in one's own home, but being able to be freely in any space that guaranteed confidentiality of data, and of course of conversations. We cleared the fact that you had to use the full day, but you can use the half-day under certain conditions that do not undermine the benefits that hybrid work brings. We went so far as to say that we were mature enough as an organisation to say nine free days per month and no longer two per week. And that was quite an important change from a managerial point of view and also in terms of trust.

The lockdown periods demonstrated that the employees' productivity was not influenced by work remotely and this evidence allowed managers to overcome cultural biases that still were associated with home working and discouraged employees from benefiting from it.

We made it clear that people are valued for the contribution they can make and not just for the number of hours they spend in the office (Director of the pilot unit).

The company started a redesign of the internal spaces in order to promote moments of aggregations of employees when they work in presence. This is due to the fact that GAMMA adopts a matrix project-based organisational structure, thus the team working and collaboration among employees even located in different geographical sites represents a key feature of the work design, as explained by the Talent Management Director:

“the issue on which we have insisted a lot over time is that we work on projects, and therefore for us the logic of working in a team is fundamental...thus there are dynamics that are better experienced when you are here, we are together, there is information that circulates when we are at the coffee machine, when we have lunch together, perhaps it is not the fundamental information because that is obviously given to each other in the teams and to everyone. ..But it actually happens that in the gaps between one meeting and another a lot of information circulates even more... how should I say the

most nuanced, unofficial things, which perhaps in the meeting you do not even think is important to share”.

To support managers in the new hybrid working context, a particular attention was played by training, which covered both more practical issues, such as the safety of domestic working environments and respect for working hours, and more strategic ones, such as the development of the soft skills necessary to manage people even when they are not present: *“It was also necessary to work... We also did a lot of training for managers, from the training that tells you to be careful of health and safety, not to have flying cables around the house because maybe there is a family member who trips and gets hurt.. So from the most basic things to those that involve more the soft skills aspect of managers, such as the ability to delegate by specifying clearly what is required or understanding if there is a topic of an asset that is not eligible to carry out the activity remotely.”* (Design Engineering Department Head).

4.2 The challenges posit to the social context by hybrid work

The HR professionals and the executives also highlighted the mindset change necessary to implement a hybrid workplace, taking into consideration the different sensitivity and approaches to learning as reported in the following quote:

“However, it was a process that required years of maturation, also because there are several generations in the company, at least in a company like GAMMA there are at least four generations, and it goes without saying that the people with more experience are naturally less inclined to manage work remotely.” (Design Engineering Department Head).

The introduction of hybrid work had an impact first and foremost on top managers, who had to identify new styles of managing activities and relationships with their collaborators: *“For managers, the challenge related to hybrid working concerns the greater responsibility for the collaborator, greater responsibility for the team leader who must, let's say, find a way to evaluate the collaborator, delegate activities to the collaborator on the basis of the eligibility of the activity, because clearly not all activities can be carried out remotely.”* (Design Engineering Department Head).

The impact of hybrid work also emerges differently among people and the difficulties are highlighted above all in people who have been present in the company for longer and who perceive the change more: *“(the use of the camera) I must say that it is still a little not fully mature. And then it is not completely mature perhaps for certain types of people, especially those who have an average long experience, maybe with the guys who have been with us for two or three years it's a little easier. People who have more experience and are used to working in a certain way, they have had a slightly more progressive adaptation to everything in agile working, no?”* (Design Engineering Department Head).

Even for employees, the dynamics with their older managers change, initially perceiving their difficulties in establishing a new working style and change the mindset: *“I had a manager at the time who did a bit difficult to adapt to the new way of working (..) For example, there was a regular monthly meeting and for that he always wanted everyone to be present. (..) there was a bit of criticism in not being present but I would say that everything came quite attenuated naturally (..) But it's a mindset, because whether you're in an office or at home or anywhere else, you're always far away, there's no physical closeness.”* (PM leader).

As regards online meetings, the ease with which people can be called risks causing an excess of even long meetings, unnecessarily occupying the time of some employees: *“A meeting when it's 30*

minutes, 45 minutes... when we go over an hour - we happen to be even more than ten in a meeting - it starts to be a little too complex. Too often there are people who are... There are people who need to communicate or in any case have team work to do. But sometimes there are also people who just listen, right?" (Design Engineering Department Head).

People are therefore perceived as often busy, also causing them to lose the habit of meeting in person even when they are in the office: *"I believe that now there is an excessive number of meetings, people are difficult to contact and we have lost the habit of going to a colleague's office or changing floors or changing buildings on the same site to go and talk to the colleague, so let's say a minimum of detachment in the interpersonal relationship I think we can see it here"* (Design Engineering Department Head).

4.3 Orchestrating social relationships in hybrid workplace

Leaders recognised that the implementation of the hybrid work place required a stronger attention to the social dimension, in order to nurture not only a sense of belonging to the team and to the organisation, but also to promote the quality of interpersonal relationships and allow informal communication to occur. In the full presence workplace such relationships are expected to emerge spontaneously, whereas when employees combine remote and onsite work, the social context of work needs to be intentionally sustained, especially through leaders' interventions.

"This kind of approach requires a greater focus on the team, in the sense that in my opinion, hybrid work has many advantages but also some aspects that need to be paid attention to in my opinion that is when you do a lot of hybrid work is the fact that the glue of the team is a little bit less." (Bit Manager Director).

In the empirical setting analysed, leaders started to manifest new behaviours and implemented dedicated practices aiming at intentionally fostering informal communication and building relationships both in the virtual and physical workplaces.

The interviews clearly highlighted the importance ascribed to leaders to one-to-one meeting with their collaborators. In particular, one-to-one meetings are the most frequent because they allow people to exchange ideas even when they are at a distance, despite the fact that they require a greater predisposition to listening and particular attention to the interaction method to make communication easier. Team meeting help to keep the team cohesive and the people involved, with the possibility to share ideas; however they do not replace one-to-one online meetings between manager and individual collaborator, with the aim to try to maintain and reinforce the relationship between single people and where people feel less shy about speaking up than in group meetings:

"This is to always keep people on board to try to consolidate that individual relationship with the collaborator" (Design Engineering Department Head)

"Meetings have certainly increased a lot, even one-to-one: obviously it was the only way to discuss. They replaced a bit the coffee machine time (...). It definitely takes more predisposition to listening in my opinion" (Development Centre Director)

Hybrid working also requires leaders to make a good planning of activities, letting people to feel respected and maintaining reciprocal relationships, but it does not have to be overly formal. When hybrid working was implemented, managers inserted formal tools to facilitate in-person meetings, for example a shared excel was created where everyone had to declare their presence to allow colleagues to be able to find them in the office if necessary. Over time this tool has no longer been used, in favor of a more spontaneous organisation between people since there is no substantial difference between

online and in-person meetings: simply people go to the office and meet who is there at that moment: *"I still don't see a huge criticality in looking for oneself with simplicity (...) The interaction, whether I do it via chat or in person, more or less hasn't changed much for me, so typically when I go (to the office) I know that I will find the four people with whom I can have a few conversations in person."* (Development Centre Director)

It is interesting to underline how the idea of creating "non-meeting days" was taken into consideration, but then it was preferred to leave people free to decide, pointing to the leading example of top managers: *"In the end we didn't follow up on this initiative, so we left complete freedom, the only thing was that we didn't set any rules, we didn't set any constraints, we just tried to give best practices and be the first examples of how meetings are conducted."* (Design Engineering Department Head) Furthermore, another critical aspect, especially in online communication, concerns the risk to limit the active participation of some team members. In this regard, leaders highlighted the importance of carefully managing time, so that everyone can participate, receive feedback and ask questions: *"In general, in a remote meeting you also need to be careful about the timing of letting others speak because sometimes it is easier to cut people off."* (Development center director)

In meetings organized online, leaders feel particularly important that people understand the relevance of turning on the camera - without having to impose it - in order to be able to capture the non-verbal expressions of the participants and understand how the communication is progressing:

"I must say that on average people are still a little afraid, despite the time we have been applying this mode, to open the camera. So the team leader typically opens the camera, tries to act as an example because the non-verbal expression, even if not in person, in my opinion gives you that extra value, you notice.. it makes you understand if the message has arrived, how it arrived, you also communicate with your gestures. (...) I personally would like it if there was a greater willingness to be seen because I think this also brings together and creates empathy, exchange of emotions". (Design Engineering Department Head).

"I find a fair difference in that mode (with camera on) both from a psychological point of view and also from an effective point of view because it forces you to stay. The meeting is the meeting, otherwise it's listening in another room." (Development Centre Director).

Leaders narrated that in order to improve the quality of communication among team members they decide which meetings organise remote or in-presence depending on the contents of discussion. In presence meetings are encouraged and are perceived with more value when the themes addressed require informal and emotional information to be understood or when the topic is particularly complex and requires times to be discussed:

"We prefer to organise some team meetings in presence undoubtedly because non-verbal communication is much easier, i.e. human contact helps much more, it is clear that one does not do the team meeting every day and therefore maybe does it once every fortnight or once a month can make sense (Director of the pilot business unit).

"This is a theme that I would like to underline: typically, we also have moments, let's call them workshops, moments in which we decide to meet on specific topics and carry out prolonged analyses." (Development Centre Director).

To exploit the full potential of the physical communication, in organising meetings in presence, leaders implemented tools to gather information about the number of people that are expected to work in presence in order to meet them also in informal moments during the meeting *"So we have a excel file on the web where we have a sheet for each year with all the people divided by location so that if I go to a specific site because I have to go there to do the activities meetings or something else, I know that the employees maybe will be present 2/3 on that day maybe it's the thing where I say to the third person that has planned remote work for that day - Look, evaluate if you have the possibility know that I am present, so if you are also present maybe we eat together"* (Bid Manager Director).

Face-to-face meetings remain fundamental for managing particular moments, such as when there is a critical issue to address or when there is a new person hired and it is important to encourage its integration into the company: *“there are moments when it is better to be there, if there is a difficulty in part of a team, difficulty for some people, induction of new hires, then we do it in person where possible because at least the relationship with all company functions is also created.”* (PM Leader)

Another moment in which physical presence is important is when many people on a team change in a short time. For a manager for example, whose team changed of 80% in few years, meeting in person was so important that she was the one who moved to meet people in the different locations to establish a relationship and work together as best as possible: *“it served me not to affirm a positioning, a hierarchy, but to create the relationship and to create moments of normality in working together regardless of location.”* (PM Leader)

Given the number of people that managers have to manage even remotely (due to hybrid work but also because employees can be located in different geographical locations), to make them feel "on boarding", weekly one-to-one online meetings are compensated with the attention to organizing in person meetings both formal, such as training moments on soft skills (development of resources, teamwork, development of skills...) and informal, such as drinking a coffee together: *“then when we are both at the office we see each other and maybe even have a coffee, but we have given it to each other a bit as a good practice. Here these two types of meetings are certainly something that has brought benefits precisely in the sense of belonging, sense of team, given that remote working can sometimes also be perceived as a bit alienating, right?”* (Design Engineering Department Head)

Furthermore, leaders promote the organisation of in-presence activities especially when they are functional to support the transfer of company culture and of the implicit social rules, as in the case of onboarding and handovers programmes.

Some people even expressed the desire for in presence interactions during the pandemic, people felt the absence of the colleague, as well as the absence of what is called the corporate DNA. The corporate DNA, the imprinting, the way of working: every company has its own. And for a while you really have to live it. As in own... smells, words, movements... you see it, you understand it, it's something you don't teach, it's practically something you perceive. (Director of the pilot business unit).

Finally, team building events have been intensified since the implementation of the hybrid workplace, as highlighted by the HR Director explained:

“We have done a lot more team building in the last few years than in the previous ten years and in some ways it was necessary to rethink the way we work, so it is true that we manage everything remotely, but then it is necessary that the managers meet in presence their collaborators working in the different sites” .

These events aim to build bonds, improve collaboration and foster the commitment toward a common identity.

That is, we have lost a bit of the sense of team, the sense of belonging to a solid company that gives so many possibilities. So through this team building tool we want to recreate that cohesion that existed before the pandemic, or at any rate to counteract this disenchantment with what the company used to be seen as. (Planning Manager)

5. Discussion and conclusion

The hybrid work model offers significant advantages, both from an organizational perspective and for individuals. Prior studies underlined benefits in terms of higher flexibility, improved work-life balance, and increased efficiency. However, this working arrangement also presents challenges, particularly when it comes to fostering strong interpersonal relationships and activating professional networks (Keppler et al., 2023). In traditional office settings, informal encounters often play a crucial role in knowledge exchange, innovation, and the development of trust among colleagues (Kantola et al., 2024). The shift to hybrid work risks reducing these spontaneous interactions, potentially leading to weaker relational ties and siloed communication (Trevor & Holweg, 2023).

Our study analysed how this challenge is addressed by team leaders, showing that in response to this challenge, team leaders take on the role of orchestrators of relationships. This means they are responsible for facilitating meaningful connections, and fostering collaboration through both synchronous (real-time meetings) and asynchronous (written or recorded exchanges) communication methods. Additionally, leaders actively create opportunities for employees to interact in hybrid settings to prevent the erosion of social capital. In this regard, we found leadership promoting i) visibility, both on site and online leaders tended to give higher relevance to being visible to their team members; ii) reachability, by planning one-to-one meetings to exchange ideas in a direct and personal way; iii) spontaneity in the organization of time and meetings. Moreover, we found that the switching between virtual and face-to-face working modes was mainly derived by the content and meaning of the activity at stake. These results highlighting the relationship orchestrator role played by leaders in hybrid settings is in line with recent studies highlighting a shift in leaders' role and competencies when in hybrid or remote working environments (Yuzi & Mbokota, 2024; Weber et al., 2022).

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TABLES

Table 1 *Data Sources and Use*

Data Source	Type of Data	Use in the Analysis
Internal document	● Company hybrid work policy ● Company training programs ● Company documents on the redesign interventions (training programmes, performance evaluation etc.) ● Company's surveys administered to gather information on organizational climate	● Familiarize with the organizational context ● Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews
Media archive	● Articles published on company's social media platforms and company's website ● Articles published in national and local press ● Reports from national observatory on smart working	● Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews

