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Regenerating Employee Engagement in Hybrid Work: The case of a multinational high-tech organisation

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Abstract:

The global adoption and popularity of hybrid work, a form of workplace transformation that combines remote and in-person work, has been brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. This work model presented opportunities such as flexibility and autonomy but also challenges for leaders and employees in relation to employee connection and engagement. This study explores how employee engagement can be regenerated in the context of hybrid work. A qualitative case study on a multinational organisation was conducted. By adopting thematic analysis, the study revealed that three key factors contribute to fostering employee engagement in this context. These include digital transformation, a care-focused workplace environment and inclusive leadership approaches. The study findings advance our understanding of employee engagement in the hybrid work context, including digital transformation, leadership practices and workplace culture. These findings also have practical implications for leaders and organisations who aim to regenerate employee engagement whilst managing the challenges of hybrid work.

Keywords: hybrid work, employee engagement, digital workplace transformation, leadership, case study

Word Count: 7030 words

Introduction

The pandemic has disrupted our work as we had to suddenly shift to alternative forms of work. The enforced remote work caused by the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated hybrid work. Hybrid work is a form of workplace transformation that requires employees to combine both remote and in-person work. While some employees return to the in-person work environment others continue to work remotely in a binary model, though variations exist within this model (Spataro, 2022). According to Mandviwalla et al. (2021), remote work has proven to be successful with the notion of the place to work becoming a voluntary choice of employees post pandemic. Hybrid work is a form of workplace transformation that requires employees to combine both remote and in-person work. Although many people have enjoyed the new benefits and flexibilities of remote working, some have struggled with working conditions and family situations that make remote work challenging. As hybrid workplace model has created new opportunities, it has also surfaced new challenges such as siloed teams and digital exhaustion. As employee and industry expectations continue to change, we predict that flexible hybrid work will remain a highly popular and preferred work arrangement for many roles.

Organisations are pursuing strategies to protect the health and wellbeing of their employees in the hybrid work. However, there is also a need to focus on reorienting operations, as well as providing support to reduce any critical threat in the systems resulting in societal paradox (Branicki et al., 2022; Spataro, 2022). While employees seek flexibility in work arrangement, they prefer both remote and in-person interaction. Spataro (2022) presented the hybrid work paradox; that is the desire by employees to experience the flexibility of remote work but also the ease of in-person work results in challenges to sustain employee engagement in hybrid work. Evidence of increased working hours, feeling of burnout, blurring of the work-life divide, and lack of social interactions have been reported in recent studies (Nayani et al., 2022; Rahrovani, 2020). Productivity paranoia about whether employees are productive in hybrid work, even though employees are working harder, is yet another challenge reported in this context (Hooijberg and Watkins, 2021). Management literature has already argued that the new hybrid world requires leadership skills that enable leaders to operate across not just traditional mode but also in virtual mode to be able to lead hybrid teams (Hooijberg and Watkins, 2021; Gratton, 2021). As organisations adapt and transform into hybrid work practices, there have been calls for changes to work cultures and workplace technologies to ensure that communication, collaboration, and overall engagement of both remote and in-person employees is maintained and supported (John et al., 2023). Existing research has predominantly examined employee engagement within traditional, collocated work settings, and therefore there is a need to examine employee engagement within alternative forms of employment such as hybrid work.

Hence, the aim of this study is to explore influencing factors in a knowledge-based organisation that contribute towards the regeneration of employee engagement in hybrid work. Specifically, the research question addressed in this study is ***“How is employee engagement regenerated within the hybrid work context, in the post-pandemic era?”***

In what follows, we review literature on employee engagement and present current understandings in this area. We then introduce the context of hybrid work and the opportunities and challenges that this provides to employees and organisations. In this section we also posit for the need to regenerate employee engagement within the hybrid work context. The paper

then describes the adopted research methods and presents the key findings and their implications.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement in the workplace, also known as work engagement, has been defined as “the harnessing of organisation members’ selves to their work roles” (Kahn 1990, p.694). Some researchers have shown that such employees have a sense of strong connection and identification with the work as well as the organisation (Gruman and Saks, 2011), while others have linked engagement to an increase in productivity and performance. Though there has been a growing literature on work engagement in the recent years (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Rayton and Yalabik, 2014; Amor et al., 2020), research so far has focused on traditional and permanent work arrangements in collocated organisations. New forms of work, such as virtual teams, are challenging conventional understanding of employee engagement (Auer et al., 2014).

In a virtual work context, job resources and demands are expected to be different due to the nature of such work (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). As employee engagement is a motivational concept that draws on self-involvement, the understanding of engagement in a hybrid work environment is also expected to contribute to the effective management of virtual teams for organisations. In their study of employee engagement within virtual project teams, Panteli et al (2019) argued that engagement is not a one-off practice. Instead, notwithstanding the increased dependence on communication technology, it requires ongoing effort that should be evident and supported across the different phases of a virtual project. Appropriate information and financial provision as well as leadership support, encouragement and feedback are resources which are deemed important to the development of employee engagement in the context of virtual teams.

Like virtual work, hybrid work implies that employees work remotely in a work from home setting, therefore increasing reliance on the use of technology for communication and collaboration. A study by Brummelhuis et al. (2012) shows that new ways of doing work (e.g., flexible working) have a positive impact on the daily engagement of employees. However, as in other previous studies, the setting of their study included only permanent employees in a large, traditional organisation, who were working on flexitime schemes. Our study extends research in this area by examining how engagement develops within the hybrid work context, echoing the work of Auer et al. (2014) who argued that there is a need to understand engagement in non-traditional organisational settings.

Most of the work on employee engagement has been done by studying engagement in the traditional face-to-face setting or in conventional virtual team settings. However, there is a need to further explore employee engagement in the modern hybrid work environment, especially that hybrid work is becoming a globally adopted work model following the pandemic. Within the hybrid work context, similar to the virtual team context (see Panteli et al., 2019) there are several factors that could constrain employee engagement. First, visibility of work is a great challenge as hard work carried out by employees in the virtual environment may not be visible to managers and where suspicion in employee productivity can build up into productivity paranoia (Hooijberg and Watkins, 2021). This has implications on employee accountability and trust. Equality and changing meeting dynamics are other areas that require consideration where organisations need to implement inclusive strategies to ensure everyone is seen and heard. These challenges are equally important for employees and organisational leaders.

Employee engagement has also been linked to the notion of employee connectedness – the extent to which employees engage with each other, with stakeholders and customers, with information and knowledge, and with ideas (Dery et al., 2017). There are various innovative approaches along with relevant information and communication technologies which can improve employee connectedness. Therefore, in what follows, we explore these and other engagement related challenges and opportunities for organisations, leaders and their employees in the context of hybrid work.

Hybrid Work

According to Gratton (2021), the hybrid work model can be conceptualised along two dimensions, those of time and place and the flexibility embedded within these. This is reflected in the shift by employees to working from the office or being ‘place-constrained’ to being able to work anywhere or being ‘place-unconstrained’. Similarly, hybrid work captures the shift from having employees work synchronously with others or being ‘time-constrained’ to a model where there is flexibility to being able to work asynchronously or being ‘time-unconstrained’ (Gratton 2021). This heightened flexibility in place (including number of hours as well as time of work) presents multiple sources for diversity which needs to be accommodated for. This includes remote vs in-person work and synchronous vs asynchronous work. The hybrid work model has increased the need to explore better ways to help employees self-manage their work by increasing their focused and productive work while also achieving balance with being connected and engaged. As leaders are found to play a great role in supporting these dynamics, there is a need to revisit the role of leaders in the hybrid work context to ensure employees remain engaged with their work and organisation despite their increased autonomy. Leadership has been identified as critical in the success of the workplace transformation in the post covid context (Chamakiotis et al., 2021) and digital workplace in general (Schneider and Kokshagina, 2020). Chamakiotis et al., (2021) identified engagement, trust and relationships along with digital wellbeing and work-life boundaries as added responsibilities of new e-leaders.

Responsive leadership has been identified as key in fostering employee engagement in alternative forms of work (Panteli et al, 2019); responsive leadership refers to initiatives taken towards activities that focus on the development and continuous improvement of employee experience in the organisation (Dery et al., 2017). The influence of this leadership approach on people is in empowering individuals to take part in the processes that result in changes in the culture and approaches of an organisation. Such transforming leadership behaviours should not just be exhibited by leaders only but also by subordinates and employees to their peers (Burns, 1978).

Research Methodology and Analytical Approach

Our study adopted a qualitative exploratory approach, with a single in-depth case study design. The case study is based on a multinational organisation, which we anonymously refer to as Sigma, where hybrid work following the pandemic became popular amongst employees. Sigma, a knowledge-based organisation, was selected as a suitable organisation for exploring the phenomenon under study as it demonstrates an organisation that has undergone shifts in work arrangements, providing an avenue for a comparison in the construct of engagement along the three time periods of interest to the study – before, during and after Covid-19. Given the multinational nature of the organisation, some elements of flexible, remote and virtual work were expected before the pandemic, which indicates that the organisation under study has undergone digital transformation and demonstrates readiness for supporting its employees in

remote and hybrid work. Considering this, it presented as a suitable organisation for exploring employee engagement while operating in these varying settings.

The study was longitudinal in nature as we set out to understand the participants' work arrangements before, during and after Covid-19. This allowed us to follow the changes in work configuration of employees prior, during, and after coming out of Covid-19 and the trajectory followed by Sigma to formalise its hybrid work arrangement. Within this trajectory, we captured the challenges experienced by both employees and organisational leaders in the process of developing engagement with their work. This approach informed how these changes shaped emerging and current engagement practices adaptive to hybrid work.

Data collection took place through a series of semi-structured interviews with managers and employees with varying roles and seniorities within the Australia/New Zealand (ANZ) region of Sigma. A combination of purposive as well as snowball sampling techniques were used to select participants from Sigma who demonstrate having gone through this transition in work arrangement. No inclusion or exclusion criteria were used as all employees working at Sigma were relevant to our study. A total number of 27 participants, 13 females and 14 males participated in the interviewing process. The participants' role profile included 9 managers and 18 employees. Roles varied from solution architects, engineers, networking specialists, experience product manager and others as summarised in Table 1. In addition to role and gender differences, study participants also varied in terms of how long they have been with Sigma at the time of their interview, ranging from as little as 1 month to as long as 28 years as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Study Participants Summary

Participant	Gender	Position Title	Employment at Sigma
P1	F	Networking Specialist	4.5 years
P2	F	Communications Executive	3 years
P3	F	Architect	1 month
P4	M	Principal Consultant	10 years
P5	F	Corporate Communications Director	4 years
P6	M	Product Marketing Manager	1 year
P7	F	Digital Sales Leader	21 years
P8	F	Marketing Operations Team	10 months
P9	M	Partner Account Manager	10 years
P10	M	General Manager	5 years
P11	M	Senior Consultant	4 months
P12	M	Engineer	28 years
P13	F	Senior HR Business Partner	8 months
P14	F	Global Specialist Employee Experience	5 years
P15	F	Business Group Manager	19 years
P16	M	Technology Strategist	14 years
P17	M	Lead Defence Readiness	2 years
P18	M	Sr Cybersecurity Consultant	6 years
P19	F	Cloud solution architect	1 year
P20	M	Platform Engineering Manager	16 years

P21	M	Senior Customer Engineer	3.5 years
P22	M	Principal Data and Applied Scientist	4.5 years
P23	F	Solutions Specialist	4 years
P24	M	Change Manager	4 years
P25	F	Business Group Leader	9 years
P26	M	Cloud Solution Architect	9 months
P27	F	Education Director	5.5 years

Interviews averaged an hour in duration. Participants were asked about their interpretation of digital workplace transformation and about their work arrangements at Sigma before, during and after the pandemic (where applicable). The interview protocol of the study was designed based on the driving research question. Questions such as *“How did the engagement with your team transform?”*, *“Share about your work life balance and your experience in managing the hybrid work model?”*, *“What were the leadership practices that helped you to support your work and engagement?”*, *“What ICT tools did you use for engagement? Share your experience with respect to both successes and challenges?”* etc. were included. The interview questions also specifically enquired about engagement with managers and team members, team collaboration, meetings, socialisation, corporate events, learning and other aspects of work. Participants were also prompted to report on challenges experienced as well as management and leadership initiatives that supported their experience, particularly, during and after the pandemic.

Each interview was transcribed and imported into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software for the coding process. Data analysis was inductive in nature with the focus on identifying shifts in work patterns, challenges experienced by managers and employees, and shifts in employee engagement practices as Sigma transitioned into hybrid work. The study adopted a thematic analysis approach which is widely used in qualitative studies (Nowell et al., 2017). We also followed on the guidance of Gioia et al., (2012) in the development of our key themes. While being profoundly informed by the data, the identification of the challenges and emerging practices for employee engagement as Sigma transitioned into hybrid were guided by concepts from our literature review relating to employee engagement and hybrid work such as digital wellbeing, trust and relationship building, work-life balance, and productivity (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). This process led to the emergence of the study findings presented next. To ensure the validity of our findings, our data collection included participants who have managerial and leadership responsibilities as well as employees across a range of departments and seniorities (e.g.business, marketing, communication, IT department and people leaders) to triangulate multiple views and experiences on engagement. Efforts were also made to document the analysis process and keep an audit trail of how our key themes emerged through an inductive process. While data from secondary sources were not reported in this paper, several secondary sources were also explored in the form of publicly available reports published by Sigma on work trends over the Covid-19 period including corporate findings on engagement and wellbeing challenges faced by employees during and after the Covid-19 lockdown.

Findings

This case of Sigma shows the transformation of employee engagement between the pre and post pandemic periods, with a shift from flexible work arrangement before the Covid-19 pandemic; enforced remote work during the pandemic; and hybrid work post pandemic to-date. In the first part of the findings section, we report on the different work models adopted within

Sigma. In the second part, we focus on Sigma's hybrid work model and report on the different factors that contributed to the regeneration of employee engagement within this context.

Sigma's Evolving Work Models

At Sigma, the work model prior to the pandemic was mostly based on the conventional physical office work with some roles having national and international travel requirements. Several participants reported on their pre-pandemic work arrangement including an element of remote work, sometimes described as 'working from home' or 'flexible' work. Typically, this would be due to the flexibility that the role requires such as need for travel, client engagement, working with team members across different time zones and attending annual kick-off events abroad. However, this hybrid arrangement was reported at a small scale and on a case-by-case basis.

During the pandemic and with the enforced remote work that followed, a set of engagement challenges were reported in relation to employee-to-employee connection, manager-to-employee connection, and organisation-to-employees connection. In terms of employee-to-employee connection, participants reported a sense of isolation and difficulty performing innovative knowledge work with colleagues in the absence of face-to-face contact and being physically co-located. Managers also faced the challenge of having to find new ways to gain visibility over their teams' working patterns and engagement behaviours, often achieved through having more frequent one-on-ones. At the organisational level, Sigma faced the challenge of having to overcommunicate with its employees to keep them informed about fast paced changes that were happening. Such communications were channelled through daily updates, announcements and news relating to pandemic and impact on employees and work. These challenges have been experienced by employees and managers alike to varying degrees:

"The main difference was that..., making sure that you needed to over communicate." – P27

With the lifting of the lockdown, Sigma implemented a staged return to in-person work. Employees at Sigma first returned to the office officially in March 2022 while also maintaining some remote work arrangement – resulting in the post pandemic hybrid work model. In our study, some employees returned to the office, while many continued to work from home. From an engagement point of view, participants reported that they continued to experience many of the lockdown period challenges such as wellbeing issues, difficulty in the management of self and work-life balance, lack of socialization but further experienced concerns about being disadvantaged if they choose to continue to work from home or work in-person. This presented Sigma with a new challenge whereby the organisation needs to manage employees who continue to work from home but also those who choose to work in-person. Figure 1 illustrates the shifts in engagement practices along the three periods.

Several initiatives were reported to demonstrate workplace and leadership practices that pay attention to employee engagement and wellbeing to help overcome digital fatigue in the hybrid work. Empowering employees with flexibility of work and creating an inclusive environment were found to help employees improve their engagement in the hybrid work.

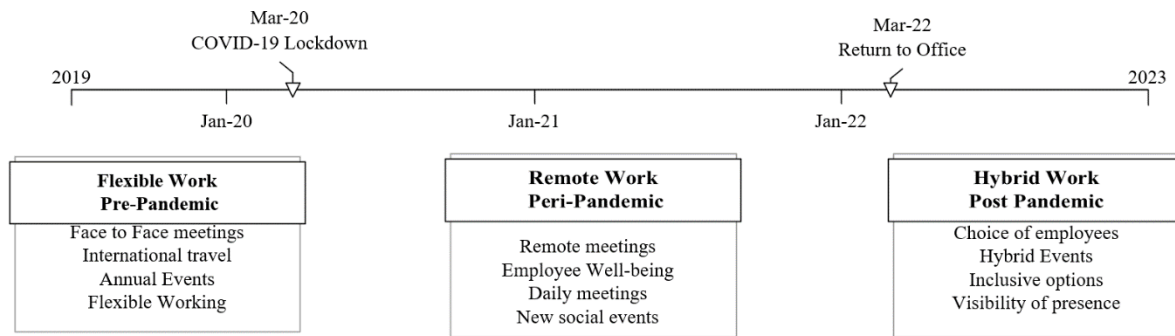


Figure 1: Longitudinal view of changes in work models at Sigma and corresponding engagement practices

Factors Fostering Employee Engagement in Hybrid Work

Employee engagement at Sigma can be conceptualised as a construct that captures elements of autonomy and empowerment of employees to choose where they work from, builds trust, prioritises physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, have a sense of connection to team members, customers and the organisation, supportive leadership, resources provision, and foster an inclusive organisational culture of individualised circumstances. These dimensions of engagement capture how we have come to understand employee engagement at Sigma. Therefore, in what follows, we present the different factors that contributed to renewed opportunities for fostering employee engagement in the hybrid work setting. These include a) digital transformation, b) workplace culture, and c) employee-leader relationship. Collectively, these factors were found to impact employee engagement in a hybrid work model as will be detailed next.

1. Accelerating Digital Transformation

During the period of study, Sigma was found to undergo an acceleration in its digital transformation. Such change not only impacts work routines but also the way in which existing technological tools are used. Accordingly, our study revealed two observations in relation to this, the emergence of new ways to use existing technological tools and the development of new technologies, both of which are believed to contribute to regenerating employee engagement in hybrid work.

Prior to the pandemic, the work model at Sigma was that of a conventional physical office work with few employees reporting remote work arrangements, indicating a flexible work model, though of a limited scale. Participants reported relying on the use of Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) as part of their daily work:

“Everything happened on Teams pretty much anyway, because we would have teams that are in different locations to begin with.” – P20

Of interest is how the use of these existing technologies has been further extended during remote and hybrid work to capitalise on existing features. For instance, participants reported using visual tools to engage and connect with team members such as Teams built-in camera feature. However, it was found that not everyone is comfortable with being visually present due to vanity, distraction, lack of appropriate office space and others. To compensate for this,

conversation and dialogue were used alongside. This is an area where the chat feature has been utilised more than ever before as an avenue to drive engagement and dialogue:

“I try actively to encourage people to participate. Often there’ll be a chat going, some people write in the chat, and you can ask a question and say you know Steve, you made a comment, would you mind expanding on it ... getting them to open up, it’s like there’s almost a skin, you’ve got to break in any meeting.” – P22

In relation to team collaboration, study participants also reported an increase in the use of whiteboards as a form of synchronous collaboration tool when working with team members and clients:

“We utilize digital whiteboards so that we can, you know, use stickies and other things to kind of work through like instead of physically being in the office ... I’ve never ever bothered using ever before.” – P24

Evidence also suggests efforts to integrate existing standalone and siloed technologies to enhance the employee experience in hybrid work. Study participants reported on the adoption of an employee experience management (EXM) platform – MS Viva as a technological tool that is aimed at enhancing the employee experience, develop connections and achieve closer identification with work teams and the organisation at large. Study participants also reported relying on Viva generated analytics on employee online activity to create awareness of work habits. These platform-generated insights contribute to creating awareness and empowering employees to reflect and take decisions to maintain work-life balance and take control of their own wellbeing:

“There are ways we can see the trends. If people are disengaging, not individuals, but teams. It’ll say to me you if I hadn’t like’ you haven’t had a one-on-one with this direct report for two weeks.” – P15

Sigma adopted Viva to bring together many applications to support employee wellbeing, learning, connection, and collaboration, all in the flow of work. With its core modules of 1) Viva Learning, 2) Viva Topics, 3) Viva Connections, and 4) Viva Insights, the platform supported training, growth and building of a culture of learning across the organisation (Viva Learning), connecting relevant content and harnessing of knowledge and expertise (Viva Topics), facilitating internal communication and access to corporate intranet and resources (Viva Connections) and revealing individualised and aggregated team insights into work patterns and routines that could potentially lead to burnout and impact employee engagement:

“Viva is a four-module system, that is all about learning and skilling, insights, and well-being. Microsoft Viva insights is intelligent insights about the way you work and collaborate with people across the organisation, and it sort of sits as your personal assistant and makes recommendations to remind you of things which I think is a great point when you’re in an office environment or particularly working in the same office as your manager.” – P6

Features in Viva contribute towards employees staying connected and enhance employee visibility to their colleagues and managers. With many built-in functionalities that support employee learning and development, connection and collaboration, self and work task

management, the emergence of this platform is reported to enhance the employee experience and overall work engagement.

Thus, accelerated digital transformation is evidenced at Sigma with the extended ways of using existing technological tools but also emergence of new technologies that are responsive to the uniqueness of the hybrid workplace model that can drive and support employee engagement.

2. Developing a Caring Workplace Environment

Along with the accelerated digital transformation, our study also revealed shifts in the workplace culture that parallels the changes in Sigma's work model. The first notable of these shifts relates to the conduct and dynamics of work meetings. Employees reported an increase in the number of meetings in the initial period of enforced remote work and later development of hybrid work, causing them to experience digital fatigue and burnout. Sigma and its leaders' community empowered their employees to implement strategies to help them handle with situations such as taking leave, booking focus time and adjusting their calendar settings by default to a shorter meeting time:

"In Outlook, you can set up so when you create a new meeting, if it's a 30-minute meeting, it automatically defaults to 20 minutes and if you do an hour meeting it default to 50 or 45. So we implemented that." – P7

Further, employees reported being given a voice and ownership over managing their workload to prevent burnout:

"One of the initiatives that we looked at was really around meeting culture and really empowering employees to start, you know, feeling empowered to say, actually, no, I don't want to join, or you know, you've got four people from my team so I'm going to leave it to them." – P14

In addition to work related meetings, it has been reported that virtual social catchup meetings emerged. While partially contributing to the increased number of meetings during and after the pandemic, these virtual catchups emerged to compensate for the lack of incidental face-to-face catchups and conversations. Such incidentals were being reinstated through pencilled meetings that had no agenda. While these catchups helped reinstate connection, a common cultural understanding around these meetings emerged whereby people adopt a mindset that these meetings must be short and focused:

"We have to be much more respectful of people with time than we ever were ... because we don't have those informal connections, you know over the divider of the desk or the coffee shop or the water cooler or whatever. We tend to replace those with an official meeting request in the diary." – P10

In addition to the increased frequency of meetings, our study also indicates changes in the level of formality of meetings whereby these meetings had more focus on checking on people, sharing vulnerabilities and problems and learning from each other. These were reported in relation to manager-team meetings as well meetings within the leadership community.

Apart from meetings, another cultural shift has been reported towards creating virtual events that resemble their in-person counterparts such as virtual birthdays:

“The other one was we would never celebrate birthdays ...now we do like birthday meetings with cake. Like we’d send a cake to someone ... it was about creating the social with the work.” – P15

As part of developing a caring work environment, new and creative forms of rewards and recognition were reported, often relying on non-monitory forms. These were adopted to show employees that their organisation (Sigma) values and recognises their work and achievements:

“Out of nowhere I would get a little package sent to my home with like blankets and beanies, and then months later, I will get a little package with chocolates. There was a lot of these kind of little things ... making sure that we know that we haven't been forgotten like someone still knows that we exist.” – P21

Events were also a notable way of showing care in this new work environment. Participants reported on a host of events and initiatives that aimed to re-instate social connection with others such as virtual coffee catchups and virtual lunches, sharing holiday pictures, virtual escape rooms, virtual cocktail making nights, virtual concerts, virtual cooking classes, feel good Fridays, trivia nights, and others. However, when employees returned to in-person work and some of these events were run face-to-face, managers and employees at Sigma further ensured that there is a digital option where possible, and those who cannot attend in both modes can have access to recorded content and shared resources where they feel included:

“This year you know we did a hybrid kick-off event ... and yes, we offered a digital option ... increasingly we're designing for hybrid, but more and more I would say people are opting for in person, particularly as it pertains to social connection” – P25.

Developing a workplace culture with care and empathy by creating new avenues for virtual social connection and empowering employees with the freedom of flexibility is evident at Sigma. Such emerging practices contribute to creating a digital social fabric where employees, teams and leaders managed to find ways to recreate social connection and develop a work environment where employees continue to feel engaged and have a sense of belonging to their team and organisation.

3. Practising Inclusive Leadership

In the case of Sigma, a leader-employee relationship that promotes engagement is evident in our findings, achieved through practices and behaviours that reflect an inclusive leadership approach. Leaders and managers at Sigma have been reported to having more frequent one-on-one meetings where they prioritise and offer one-on-one. Participants (including both managers and employees) reported having more one-on-one catchups than ever before that were largely focused on personal check-ins. This has been reported to significantly influence employee morale and feeling sense of connection:

“The support that he was giving us was just that personal connection ... before lockdown, we would spend 5 minutes talking about that [personal life] and 25

minutes about work. Whereas during lock down he switched it over and he was maybe 20 to 25 minutes about, you know, personal life and then maybe 5 minutes about work.” – P21

The lack of face-to-face connections has challenged employees’ sense of connection. Building a culture where people are encouraged to have visual connection has been one of the shifts during remote and hybrid work. Managers reported that they always use their cameras, not only to establish connection, but also to communicate that they are accessible to their employees. In doing so, managers contribute to the recovery of personal connection by modelling presence and accessibility:

“you’re running a meeting and five people have Camera on, two don’t like to, but they don’t report to me ... I don’t want people to turn their cameras on because I tell them to ... so, it’s how do you build a culture that people want to have that visual connection?” – P7

A similar approach that relies on modelling desired behaviours has been reported in relation to empowering employees to reinstate work-life balance. Such desirable work habits would build on the work patterns of physical work and performing of work during office hours rather than stretching the workday into the evening and late hours of the night, weekends, and other times that are outside the conventional working day:

“I want to manage work-life balance, but also because I want to set the example ... I generally won’t switch my teams on until 9:00 AM ... so I don’t show up as available. And then I will try and cut it off at 5pm ... I’ve never looked at e-mails on the weekends ... I don’t want other people to see those emails at 3:00 AM on a Sunday morning and go, I should be doing the same thing.” – P22

The nature of the leader-to-employees relationship has also been observed to experience a shift where leadership in remote and hybrid work can become a shared responsibility. This is illustrated when a manager seeks help from their team to indirectly check on their employees or assign them the responsibility of finding solutions:

“What happens is, if you have an issue, that issue gets outsourced to you to fix, not my leaders ...so we did present this audit presentation, it was sort of time management and how you can do that with your tools with Outlook and teams and everything else.” – P4

Humanised and empathetic leadership behaviours were also reported, perhaps, featuring more than ever before and in new forms and shapes. These manifest through showing empathy and consideration to other people and their individualised circumstances, both at the professional as well as the personal level where people are more understanding of each other, creating a ‘concertina’ kind of effect:

“There was this evolution to being a little bit more personal, a little bit more connected ... we came more understanding of each other and then we started to be a little bit kinder of each other in our times ... so then this concertina kind of effect started to kind of come back to a little bit more tenable.” – P24

Demonstrating empathy also manifested in shifting the mindset in the organisation where work and productivity became outcome rather than task driven. This shift signals a sense of trust, founded on understanding that people have different circumstances that can delay or impede their productivity such as lack of home office space, parental and caring responsibilities, burnout, mental wellbeing, sense of isolation and others:

“Even this childcare leave like no one was like really counting ... it is all based on trust.” – P1

Furthermore, the underlying message and tone of communications coming from the leadership community and managers shifted towards care and wellbeing which have been reported as to largely feature in the organisation’s listening system during and after the pandemic. Leaders were more open and authentic to the employees which made them more approachable. They support an inclusive workplace culture by handling multimodal scenarios and giving the choice of flexibility in hybrid work. Leaders demonstrated empowering their employees to make the decisions that suit their circumstances depending on their diverse needs and to accommodate employees’ work preference and where they feel they belong:

“To accommodate a workforce that is hybrid so that no one is disadvantaged by choosing to be working remote from home, and so I'm choosing to be in the office, and you know we refer to being sort of inclusive, so you don't accidentally exclude anyone.” – P25

Thus, leaders at Sigma considered engagement strategies that do not put anyone at a disadvantage because their preference is to work from home or to be physically in the office. As they empower their employees by being limitless and by giving them the autonomy and freedom to work from their preferred location, leaders made sure that they deliberately include rather than accidentally exclude their employees and team members (John et al., 2022).

Discussion

The study was driven by an interest to examine employee engagement within the hybrid work context. The longitudinal nature of the study has allowed us to show the trajectory followed by a specific organisation to formalise its hybrid work arrangement. Within this trajectory we have also captured the challenges experienced by both employees and organisational leaders in terms of developing engagement with their work. These include visibility, relationship building, and onboarding of employees in hybrid mode, digital fatigue and well-being of employees, socialisation and leading a hybrid team effectively.

With our focus on hybrid work, we have been able to unpack attempts by the organisation to foster employee engagement. The factors that contributed to this were in relation to the acceleration of digital transformation within the hybrid work setting and notably the use of employee experience platforms (i.e., Viva); a caring work environment where employees’ wellbeing is given priority; and where there is an inclusive and human-centred leadership approach. Collectively, these contribute to developing employee engagement in the hybrid work setting as illustrated in Figure 2. We argue that there is a need to understand the emerging and successful workplace culture, digital technologies, and leadership practices that enable to strengthen employee engagement as we move towards the new hybrid work environment.

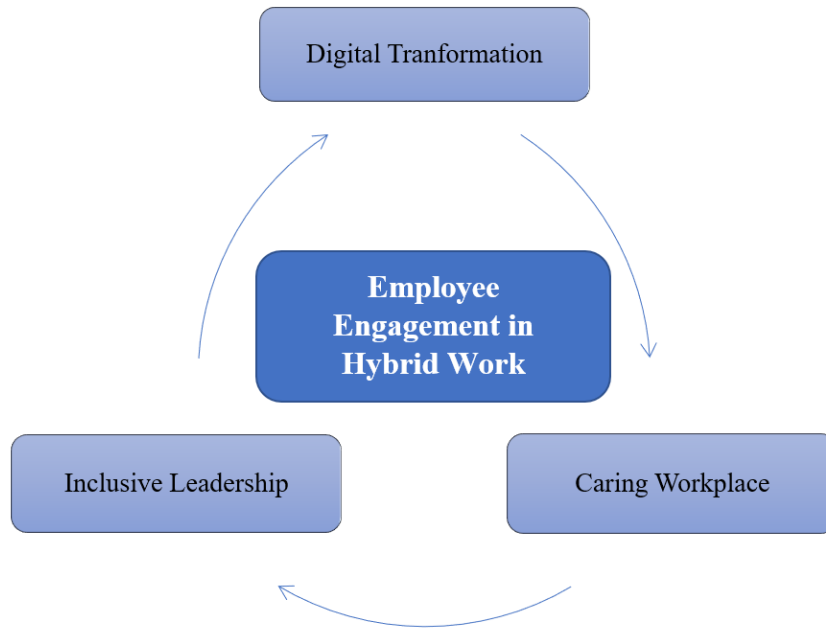


Figure 2: Employee Engagement in Hybrid Workplace

In figure 2, the notion of digital transformation has been linked to the use of technological tools to transform business processes and activities and the ways in which work is performed to increase organisational effectiveness. A digital workplace is defined as “*the physical, cultural and digital arrangements that simplify working life in complex, dynamic and often unstructured working environments*” (Dery et al., 2017, p. 136). This definition implies that in a digital workplace, technology is intertwined with physical spaces and social rules (Baptista et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2023). This transformation is believed to increase organisational effectiveness, transform the ways in which work is done, but also lead to the emergence of new workplace routines that are enacted using technology (Zimmer et al., 2023). As digital workplace technologies like EXM and other AI augmented systems get embedded into the flow work, visibility of hybrid work and management of hybrid work becomes more effective, thus fostering employee engagement (John et al., 2023).

The emergence of digital work where the ‘place’ dimension is no longer a defining feature of work, has also brought about new cultural practices that contribute to an engaged workforce in hybrid work. We present our findings to these emerging practices under the notion of workplace culture. In general terms, culture relates to how things are done in an organisation where organisations can have a corporate culture, defined as “*values and practices shared across all groups in an organisation*” (Manley et al., 2011, p. 3) as well as a workplace culture that is more local (groups and units) and directly impacts employee experience and motivation (Manley et al., 2011). Extending this understanding of a workplace culture, our study findings suggest several emerging workplace cultural practices for employee engagement when operating in remote and hybrid work settings including empowering employees to take leave and book focus time, adjusting calendars to default to shorter meetings, emergence of virtual catchup events (virtual coffee, lunch, birthdays, concerts, cooking classes trivia nights, etc.), and creative forms of rewards and recognition. Thus, as illustrated in figure 2, empowering employees by creating a digital social fabric in a caring workplace result in fostering employee engagement in hybrid work.

As noted earlier, leadership has been identified as critical in the success of the workplace transformation and digital transformation (Hooijberg & Watkins, 2021). Effective leadership contributes to more functional team interactions, improved team viability, performance, and satisfaction. Leaders need to take initiatives that focus on the development and continuous improvement of employee experience in the organisation. In contributing to research efforts on emerging and successful leadership practices suitable for a multimodal workforce, our study findings indicate that an inclusive leadership that puts emphasis on care is key to an engaged workforce in the hybrid work context as illustrated in figure 2 (Roberson & Perry, 2021). Inclusivity here recognizes diversity, not only cultural diversity but also diversity in individual needs, circumstances, and work styles in a hybrid work environment. Empathy is demonstrated through understanding, trusting and empowering employees to work from where they belong and to ensure that no one is disadvantaged and is proved to be a key success factor for engagement in hybrid work.

Thus, our study highlights that we can derive the design and implementation of initiatives that demonstrate responsiveness to the changing nature of the workplace and employees individualized requirements. As given in figure 2, hybrid work place needs to be an intertwined digital social fabric with an intersection of digital technology getting embedded into the flow of work,, empowering employees in a caring workplace, and inclusive leadership strategies adopted by leaders in a multimodal work environment resulting in effective employee engagement in a hybrid workplace.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in highlighting on digital workplace transformation which involves transforming how work is done to create digital workplaces and improve employee experience. This study emphasizes the contributing factors of digital workplace transformation that foster employee engagement through different phases of the pandemic by adopting various work models. It explicitly implies using digital technologies to drive significant changes in the work model by using data driven insights in the digital workspace to reflect on engagement and enhance collaborative work environment. Employee experience platforms like Viva is a classic example of how it helped towards regenerating employee engagement in a hybrid workplace.

Second, it extends literature on employee engagement in alternative forms of work as most of the literature in this area has primarily focused on traditional in-person, collocated work settings. The study findings advance our understanding of employee engagement in the hybrid work context, including digital technologies, leadership practices and workplace cultural factors. Empowering employees in a hybrid workplace environment with care found to enrich new avenues for hybrid social connections and engagement by creating a digital social fabric where employees have a sense of belonging to their team and workspace irrespective of the place and time.

Third, this study contributes to the leadership literature within the hybrid work context by identifying leadership practices which are appropriate in the post-pandemic era. As a team becomes more diverse, multicultural, multigenerational, and global in a hybrid work model, inclusive leadership needs to take extra step towards facilitating a hybrid work model that fits everyone. Our study shows that a hybrid workplace requires an inclusive leadership that recognises diversity, responds to individual needs and work styles, and actively listens to team members' voice. Empowering employees based on their diverse needs is an essential leadership

practice to accommodate employees work preferences and engagement in a space where they feel they belong.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

While conventional dimensions of employee engagement remain relevant in today's hybrid work setting, it is believed that new and emerging practices further contribute towards regenerating employee engagement as organisations are faced with the challenge of having a hybrid workforce. Therefore, a fresh perspective on employee engagement provides an insight into how organisations can continue to engage and be inclusive of a workforce operating across varying spatial and temporal dimensions.

Our empirical findings indicate that organisational leaders can develop employee engagement and help to overcome the challenges of hybrid work by accelerating digital workplace transformation, creating a caring workplace culture and demonstrating inclusive leadership all of which are believed to improve the employee experience. This will advance towards improving employee experience by building a care-focused workplace environment and leading the digital workplace transformation with inclusive leadership approaches.

The study informs the agenda for future research in this area. Research is required to understand employee experiences within the hybrid work context. In this study we took the case of a single high tech multinational organisation. Despite this, it is our position that the findings and contribution of the study are transferrable to other organisations as trajectory experienced in Sigma has been common among other organisations due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the study needs to be extended to other organisations in different sectors and of different sizes. Further employee engagement may be different among employees of different gender, age, and professional backgrounds.

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