



Research Article

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Differences Between Managing Face-To-Display Workers and In-House Workers (Hybrid Work Model): A Qualitative Study from Austria

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Abstract

With the outbreak of Covid-19, teams and managers had to accept the necessity of working remotely and were forced to remodel the working environment. Modern technology enables the workforce to work from home as effectively as in cubicles. This study analyses hybrid work models, in particular how the management of face-to-display workers differs from that of in-house workers. This study asked 10 Austrian participants about their perceptions of managing face-to-display workers. A qualitative investigation was carried out through semi-structured Skype interviews. Blending in-house and face-to-display workers presents some challenges. Based on data, a hybrid model seems to be the strongest working model, especially these models: face-to-display first and cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed. Conclusions were drawn which outlined that time, culture, trust, feedback and social connectedness are important differences in managing both types of employees. However, it is equally evident from the data that managing hybrid workers can be challenging, and managers face some obstacles.

Keywords: *face-to-display workers, e-working, hybrid work model, managing, Austria*

1. Introduction

When Covid-19 started in late 2019, e-working appeared to be a temporary solution. But e-working has evolved into a long-term solution (Eurofound, 2020). The latest study on unemployment in Central Europe in the pre-Covid era and during the pandemic concludes that unemployment decreases with age (Beno, 2021a). In this study, we define e-work as work by face-to-display employees (partly or fully remote workers) who work at home regularly, but not exclusively. Note also that face-to-display activities are technologically and sector mediated and are done by employees who have not been forced to work remotely.

Beno et al. (2021a) conducted a study in which working professionals were asked to share their thoughts on the optimal e-working environment. More than one-third were in favour of e-working continuing post-pandemic. In these circumstances, managers should ensure that they can work at home effectively and can manage their employees who are working remotely in locations outside the organisation's premises. Apart from productivity (Beno & Hvorecky, 2021), managers should consider the impact of face-to-display work on critical issues, such as the absence of social interaction, problems with health and well-being (Berkman & Syme, 1979), how the frequency and quality of

interaction between the remote worker and the manager determines how much the remote worker feels part of the organisation (Morgan & Symon, 2002) and social and physical isolation (Bartel et al., 2012). An overwhelming amount of advice on what works and what does not work is available.

The main research question in this study was: How does the management of face-to-display workers differ from that of in-house workers? This study asked 10 Austrian participants about their perceptions of managing face-to-display workers. The study assumed that, in responding to this question, participants would make comparisons between face-to-display and in-house workers.

The next section presents a review of the literature relevant to the subject of the study. The methodology is introduced in the following section. After that, the findings are presented. The fourth section is the discussion, and the fifth section gives the conclusion of the paper.

2. E-working and Managing e-workers

2.1 E-working

E-working (face-to-display work) can be categorised as an alternative type of part- or full-time work arrangement where e-employees have moved to their homes or other locations that are connected to their workplace by modern technological tools. Academic and non-academic works have demonstrated diverse factors from an organisational point of view that have emerged and developed from e-working. One of these is a reduction of expenses (PwC, 2020). Another factor is a better response to the needs of employees, because poor work-life balance can result in a loss of employees (Kraemer et al., 2016). Furthermore, there has been an expansion of affordable and cost-effective modern computer and telecommunications technology (CitiGPS, 2020). Technology has become fully integrated into the lives of consumers and workers and into the running of businesses. Additionally, changes have been made through the sharing economy by users who consume services and contribute to value creation by means of active knowledge-sharing (Constantiou et al., 2017). The final factor to mention is the reduction of the environmental footprint (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Fu et al., 2012).

In 2020, e-working dominated, but now the discussion has shifted to the hybrid work model (partly at home and partly in the office (Beno et al., 2021a)). This is a blended model where some staff members return to the cubicles and others continue to work from home (Microsoft, 2021). According to Beno (2021b, p. 337), the hybrid work model contributes to positivity, efficiency and variation of work for sustaining a sense of mixed work techniques among office changes. A hybrid workforce is distributed across various locations, from the traditional cubicle to factory spaces to e-locations, including employees' various living spaces (Capgemini, 2021). Beno & Hvorecky (2021) stress the significance of e- and hybrid working in providing the possibility of being able to work regardless of one's location.

In the past, e-working expanded enormously from its modest beginnings in the early 1970s (Nilles et al., 1973-74; Toffler, 1984) to achieve an exceptional level today, and it is expected to continue expanding in the years to come (Kelly et al., 2011), as has happened during the Covid-19 pandemic. But areas of concern in this modern virtual workplace environment are quality assurance and quality control, and especially quality communication, quality education and training and quality technology. In this regard, an important feature of hybrid work models as strategies of quality assurance is the elimination of the clustering of the workforce in one place, thereby reducing the risk of disruption.

2.2 Managing e-workers

Recruiting the right people is crucial when implementing e-working (Snell, 2009). Clark et al. (2012, p. 32) declare that an efficient e-worker should be self-motivated, self-disciplined, flexible, innovative, organised, a strong communicator, task-oriented, trustworthy and have a limited need for face-to-

face contact. Therefore, e-employees suitable for this kind of work should possess a strong balance between technical and social skills.

Whitford & Moss (2009) discovered that transformational and visionary leadership created identical levels of engagement from in-house and remote employees. Kowalski & Swanson (2005) reveal that support, communication and trust lead to success for e-workers. Merriman et al. (2007) add that the e-employment relationship creates less inherent trust than exists in an in-house relationship (manager and employee). Boswell & Olson-Buchanan (2007) stress that e-working may decrease face-to-face interaction, reduce the frequency and intensity of communication and limit personal social presence, which will result in weaker interpersonal bonds with colleagues and managers. Hansen et al. (2012) conclude that working together over a distance emphasises a number of issues, especially with regard to trust, coordination of work, conflict, culture and communications technology.

Dahlstrom (2013) assumes that a relationship-oriented leader will be a more efficient talker who is better able to develop trusting relationships with e-employees. Gajendran & Harrison (2007) point out that information scarcity is a major worry of e-workers. Staying connected to work while working remotely leads to a blurring of lines between work and non-work (Reyt & Wiesenfeld, 2015). According to Colbert et al. (2016), leaders need to create a more fulfilling work environment and avoid the rather disappointing effect of automation to undo the promise of a transparent and multivalent work environment in which information could play an enlightening role. This is in the same vein as the statement by Hansen et al. (2012) that managerial and/or leadership responsibility includes team development, leadership and motivation.

Managing e-workers seems to be challenging. Hertel et al. (2007) indicate that direct supervision over work is very problematic, which leads to managers adopting delegative management principles. In other words, e-employees are expected to meet these delegated responsibilities. But if an e-working environment is to be successful, there must be clear definitions of objectives, roles and responsibilities (Horwitz et al., 2006). Additionally, in the early phase of development, an e-employee may misinterpret constructive criticism as abusive (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004).

3. Methodology

Skype, being a free-of-charge medium, was selected for collecting data. With 300 million active monthly users (Smith, 2021), Skype is one of the most widely known alternatives to in-person interviewing. This tool is a cost- (Edje et al., 2013) and time-effective method for carrying out qualitative research and is environmentally friendly (Hanna, 2012). The size of the sample may be limited by possible interviewees not having a Skype account and/or reliable Internet access. According to Hanna (2012), video calls are safer for the interviewer and respondent because of unfamiliar locations and some people prefer not to have their space imposed upon. Also, familiarity with user communication etiquette is imperative. The main aim of the study was to investigate how management of face-to-display workers differs from management of in-house workers.

3.1 Sampling

Managers of face-to-display workers with variations of a hybrid model were specifically asked to participate in this investigation. Three of the participants were sought through personal contact by the author, while the remaining seven were obtained by snowball sampling. This is a sample achieved through referrals by people who know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

The sample included 10 participants from middle management who were selected from across the services sector in Austria. This sector requires a different type of middle manager from the type in a conventional hierarchical organisation (Whitehurst, 2015). This author adds that middle managers need new skill sets. The sample consisted of five females (F-J) and five males (A-E) with ages ranging from 40

to 54 (see Table 1). Different hybrid models (blending in-house and remote workers) were preferred in the managers' organisation. Once the participants were identified, an email invitation was sent.

Table 1: Breakdown of Sample Participants

Country	Participants	Gender	Age	Hybrid model
Austria	A	M	42	face-to-display first
	B		45	cubicle-occasional
	C		40	face-to-display first
	D		51	cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed
	E		54	cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed
	F	F	44	face-to-display first
	G		49	cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed
	H		41	face-to-display first
	I		48	cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed
	J		43	cubicle-occasional

3.2 Data collection

The selected participants were contacted via Skype after an email invitation and their indicated timeslot was confirmed. Consequently, a pilot interview was conducted with one manager of face-to-display workers and the intended questions were redefined. Each respondent was interviewed via Skype for 45 minutes. Respondents were asked the following questions:

1. What kind of hybrid work model is there in your organisation?
2. How does management of face-to-display workers differ from management of in-house workers?
3. What is the hardest part about managing a face-to-display workforce?
4. What are the challenges of managing face-to-display teams?

3.3 Data analysis

The analysis of the textual data (the interview transcripts) involves a demanding conversion process and requires a systematic data-processing approach. A two-level coding scheme (see Table 2) was therefore developed by standardising the textual units so as to organise and make sense of the qualitative data derived from the interviews. The first level of units comprised: Hybrid work model, Hybrid model team management and Obstacles. The second level further distinguished: (1) Face-to-display first, cubicle-occasional, cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed; (2) Time, culture, trust, feedback, social connection; and (3) Space, lack of face time, miscommunication, social interaction, cohesion. The data processing involved a detailed analysis and comparison of the examined hybrid work model arrangements, identifying similar or contrasting approaches, perceptions, preferences and particular features.

Table 2: Coding Scheme

Code level 1	Code level 2	Items
Hybrid work model	Face-to-display-first	Fully remote, exceptions, virtual and physical, cubicle as primary place, remote
	Cubicle-occasional	
	Cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed	
Hybrid model team management	Time	Time belt, meetings and calls, physical distance, employee autonomy, results, one-to-one meeting, communication, work habits and ethics, culture and language, relationships
	Culture	
	Trust	
	Feedback	
	Social connectedness	

Code level 1	Code level 2	Items
Obstacles	Space	Physical distance, face-to-face interaction, writing emails or messages, team spirit, working in silos
	Lack of face time	
	Miscommunication	
	Social interaction	
	Cohesion	

3.4 Ethical considerations

All participants who engaged in the interviews were fully informed regarding confidentiality, privacy, sensitivity and data protection. A consent form was issued before the interview was conducted. All respondent participation was voluntary.

4. Results

This section presents data from semi-structured interviews carried out with 10 managers who were all managing a hybrid work model. The following codes were identified in order to address the research question. Two major topics emerged from the analysis of the current data set: hybrid work model and management of e-workers.

4.1 Hybrid work model

It was shown that managers found the combination of remote and in-house work, even before the pandemic, gave their employees the opportunity to experience face-to-display work extensively. All the respondents believe that a hybrid work model yields formally structured virtual and/or physical routines, and this helps employees to understand the importance of timelines, rules and duties of the workplace. All these components help them to keep their work habits.

Participants were asked to comment on the nature of their hybrid work models. Based on the analysis, hybrid work models can be divided into three groups: 1) face-to-display first (A, C, F and H); 2) cubicle-occasional (B, J); and 3) cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed (D, E, G and I). Face-to-display first was explained by respondents A and H as “a company that behaves like a fully remote firm, but keeps office space for those who would prefer that”. In addition, participant C added that “face-to-display first does not mean that we do not meet and see each other; we give employees the opportunity to meet and choose whether they want to work together.” Respondent B described the cubicle-occasional model as “workers not going fully remote but keeping their offices”. Additionally, participant J added “we keep our cubicles and require the workforce to spend some time in them.” Finally, the last model was outlined by E and I as “the option to maintain both cubicles (primary place) and face-to-display work (optional)”. “This was the standard arrangement before Covid-19 with a small ratio of e-workforce, and the rest worked from the main office environment,” participant G added. Likewise, respondent D explained that “it depends on a specific team whether they are mostly in-house or some of them are remote.” “The workforce of this model may be seen as run-of-the-mill,” participants E and G gave as a possible drawback.

This generates a number of discussions about the future work model: all-cubicle, all-remote or hybrid. Participants D and G consider the future of work as “to mix a drink with a few fundamental ingredients”. Seven out of 10 respondents highlight these essential ingredients: “flexibility, asynchronous communication and connectivity”. Manager I stresses that “there is no hybrid, no face-to-display, no cubicle, only teams (physical/virtual) and their culture is what the individual makes of it.”

4.2 Hybrid model team management

All the participants agreed that “in the past, expanding the team easily was done by placing an advertisement or using a recruitment agency for the needed job, meeting applicants face-to-face for an interview, and selecting the best one to work with your in-house team.” Respondents D, E, G and I agree that “this is still the most popular way to grow a team.” On the contrary, the rest of the participants do not prefer using only this method but “also hire a face-to-display team”.

4.2.1 Time

During the interviews, all the participants explained that “within a hybrid team, there are usually colleagues from different time zones.” Especially in the face-to-display first model, respondents A, C, F and H stated that “as a manager, you need to organise a timetable for meetings and calls that work for every team member.” According to interviewees B and J, “setting deadlines has to be in accordance with time differences.” “These issues will disappear when you have only an in-house team,” participants E and I pointed out.

4.2.2 Culture

As participant A said, “it is all about the individual’s demands.” All the respondents conveyed the view that “your team members will decide whether to go back to the cubicles or continue doing remote or hybrid work.” They also said that “a hybrid model culture keeps things running smoothly” and “this approach enables your workforce to do their jobs successfully no matter where they are.” In comparison with this, participant I expressed the view that “even if you have employees working on-site, focusing on a hybrid model culture helps you to settle on the right methods for them to do their work.” Four (A, C, F and H) of the 10 participants commented on the cultural aspects of their employees. Based on their findings, “managers of a hybrid work model have to find their focus with regard to: language barriers, interpreting messages/emails and becoming more familiar with mixed cultures.”

4.2.3 Trust

All participants expressed the opinion that “the future of work is trust, not monitoring.” Moreover, they argued that “regardless of sector, size of the firm, number of employees, or manager/leadership modes, a high trust policy (culture) is needed.” In a similar manner, respondent B, C, F and J said that “with a workforce everywhere, it can be challenging to look after their every step.” In comparison with this, all agreed that “a crucial component of their autonomy is trust” and emphasised that “when employees have issues, they can ping me.” Similarly, “if your employees feel trusted, they have more responsibility, and if your employees are responsible, they earn more trust,” respondent A stated. In the same vein, participant H said that “trust drives trust.”

4.2.4 Feedback

Feedback was a common theme throughout the interviews. “No matter where you are and where you finish your work tasks, feedback is needed,” the respondents stated. Seven out of 10 participants added that “not all of them know how to provide it.” In the face-to-display first model (A, C, F and H), cubicle-occasional model (B, J) and cubicle-first, face-to-display allowed model (D, E, G and I), participants stated the importance of “one-on-one meetings (physical or virtual) at least one or twice per month”. This indicates interest and offers possibilities to gather feedback. Manager I proposed asking employees the following questions: “How has going to work in-house, remote or hybrid been?”, “What obstacles and challenges do you have with team collaboration?” and “Do you have any

suggestions, improvements?”. Clearly, there is nothing worse than working for a know-it-all manager.

4.2.5 Social connectedness

All the participants emphasised the emotional part of the hybrid work model. But, as respondent F stated, “some employees say: I am at work to do my work, not to make friends.” In the face-to-display first model (A, C, F and H), interviewees stated, “in this model something is missing compared to a co-located work environment” and highlighted “face-to-face interactions”. A similar statement was made for the cubicle-occasional model, where some respondents (B, J) said that “it is harder to build and keep contacts and relationships remotely.” All the respondents agreed that their e-workers miss “the water cooler chatter”. Based on these data, they therefore miss the opportunity to have informal conversations. However, online social connections offer many social benefits.

4.3 Obstacles

Throughout the interviews, managing hybrid models seems to be the difficult part. But for respondent F “not managing is difficult because if you try to manage, control, track employees, you will fail... the hurdle is when employees manage themselves without team spirit.”

4.3.1 Space

During the interviews, all the participants said the main challenge was the “physical distance” between team members when working remotely. They added that this is affected mostly by “communication within the team” and “tracking employees’ outcomes”. Respondent C stated “we are a global company and adapt to the different spaces and zones, and ensuring consistent, productive communication is very hard.” However in contrast to these views, four participants (A, B, F and J) said “the absence of body language, facial expressions and in-person cues cuts both ways. Having a so-called tough day with colleagues is different from contact via a call or video team chat.”

4.3.2 Lack of face time

A number of participants conveyed the view that “humans are social creatures”, and this involves a workplace environment. “Small talk in the kitchen, at the copier, glances across the table... these are vital elements of team communication and office spirit that are lost when you work remotely,” participants D, G and I indicated. And the data from respondents A, C, F and H show that “when all cubicle communication is reduced to a quick call or video call each day, employees may feel isolated or unheard.” Moreover, “without the comfort of seeing/meeting team members each day, it may take longer to get information or identify problems,” participant J said. However, in contrast to these views, all the respondents provided different solutions, for example “to communicate more often when face-to-face is not possible” and “to work on projects with the teams”. Interestingly, respondent B highlighted the importance “of making sure your employees are happy... in a virtual work environment you can’t see them and must rely on virtual communication...”

4.3.3 Miscommunication

According to the data, respondents explained that “writing emails or messages is the main communication tool in the virtual world” and “the meaning of these can be easily misconstrued.” Moreover, four (A, C, F and H) out of 10 participants commented that “generational or cultural diversity may intensify miscommunication.”

4.3.4 Social interaction

Undoubtedly, “balancing socialising in a virtual work environment with not working in silos” seemed to participants to be the hardest part of managing a hybrid (remote) workforce. Working in silos has been explained as “working towards the same objectives/goals but without sharing information,” according to respondents A, C, F and H. In addition, participant B explained further that “if you do not see a person during the day, every day, you have to learn how to connect, engage and build a rapport when there is not a real water cooler to create chance encounters.” To interviewee J it appears that “on-site, a sense of camaraderie may be achieved in daily communication, but a hybrid team lacks the daily interaction around the common water cooler.” It goes without saying that you must “build off- and online camaraderie” (participant E).

4.3.5 Cohesion

The findings suggest that participants believe that when communication and social interactions are limited, overall cohesion suffers. Respondent I commented as follows: “the most difficult part is to ensure that every member of the team feels connected to the team, firm, organisation.” Similarly, respondents B, D and G added that it is important “to have on-site team events, virtual events and video meetings... it can be difficult to verify that every employee feels connected.” This issue is even more important when “you do not see your team members in a cubicle on a regular basis,” participants A, C, F and H stated.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to ascertain perceptions regarding the management of face-to-display workers and in-house workers. Can a hybrid work model be the future of work? A recent PwC report (2021) expects the hybrid model to become the new normal, but without the clear split between working at home and in-house. Accordingly, three different hybrid models (face-to-display first, cubicle-occasional, cubicle-first) were examined in this study as they deal with the relationship between managers and employees and the number of days spent in the office.

Generally, the key to a successful and sustainable workforce is hiring top talent. As stated by Keller & Meaney (2017), the best workers do the best and the most work. These days, we are able to find suitable candidates who will thrive in a physical and a virtual working environment, as confirmed by our data. As expected, and in line with the data, when managing a hybrid workforce, it is important to recognise that some employees are based in the office while others prefer to work remotely. According to recent data from a study by Beno et al. (2021a), only 29.22% of professionals would like to work in the office. Further evidence indicates an increase of the e-working proportion by an average of 57.14% (Beno & Hvorecky, 2021). This raises the question of how to manage a hybrid workforce effectively and in a suitable way. A possible explanation is offered by the statement: “Not managing is difficult because if you try to manage, control and track employees, you will fail... the obstacle is when employees manage themselves without team spirit.”

In this study, all participants expressed the opinion that “the future of work is trust, not monitoring.” Similarly, a recent study highlights that e-monitoring seems to be a blocking factor in e-working culture (Beno et al., 2021b, p. 103).

Cormican et al. (2015) agree on the need to understand the managing of virtual teams. This study presents valuable insights into the nature hybrid teams, but certain issues require further research. Among the obstacles of managing a hybrid staff found in this study, note especially this argument: “There is no hybrid, no face-to-display, no cubicle, but teams (physical/virtual), and their culture is what the individual makes of it.” This is in line with data from the Gartner survey, where 30% of leaders were concerned with maintaining the corporate culture with a hybrid work model (Baker, 2020).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study provides insights into different hybrid work models and the management of team members. Face-to-display first, cubicle-occasional and cubicle-first models have a direct impact on the workplace environment. E-working and the resulting Covid-19 pandemic require a different type of management.

Semi-structured interviews with 10 managers about the hybrid work model, hybrid model team management and obstacles were conducted. The findings of the qualitative data were used to answer the research question and achieve the objectives of this study.

The main research question investigated in this paper concerns the differences between managing face-to-display workers and managing in-house workers (a hybrid work model).

The shift to hybrid work models is seen in this study as the people's choice. According to the data collected, this shift depends on enabling factors such as time, culture, trust, feedback and social connectedness. As staff members move from a traditional specific location to a more hybrid environment (in this case face-to-display first, cubicle-occasional and cubicle-first model), the relevance of the employee's in-house or face-to-face contact with others must be recognised. It is equally clear from the data that managing hybrid workers can be challenging, and managers face some obstacles. In this paper, space, lack of face time, miscommunication, balancing socialising and cohesion are identified as the main obstacles encountered in managing a hybrid workforce.

The success of e-working, which was brought about by the pandemic, and the redesigning of office space to aid social distancing are forcing managers to act promptly and start rethinking the future of working in cubicles. Also, suitable quality assurance and quality control remain very important in the workplace, no matter where employees carry out their tasks.

There are aspects of this issue that offer potential for future research. These could include further analysis of a sample of in-house-, hybrid- and e-workers who have this kind of work model in their organisations. Additionally, future research could usefully investigate this issue further by examining a wider sample from different countries. Another topic could arise from asking how we maintain quality when working remotely.

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