

# An Exploratory Study on the Evolution of Hybrid Work

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## Abstract

This article is an exploratory study into how hybrid work evolved from work from home and remote working and is the way forward for organisations with the advent of Artificial Intelligence. The researchers have studied previously published data and looked at various secondary sources of study especially newspapers and journals to understand the effect of COVID-19 work-from-home mandates and how it was possible as it was already in effect in organisations in a different manner. In this article, the meaning of the three types of work, that is, remote, work from home, and hybrid work, are looked at, with an emphasis on what limitations employers and employees have found in the first two methods that have served as a catalyst to start the modern method of Hybrid work. The article also looked at the origins of the concept of hybrid work and how it was a natural evolution, as a solution to the limitations that exist in remote working and working from home of employees.

## Keywords

Management, behaviour management, human resource management, sociology of work and organisations

## Introduction

Hybrid work, a form of remote working, is not new to the world of labour management. Hybrid work has been in existence since the 1960s but under different

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means and uses. Flexi-time was the concept that developed into what we now consider as 'work from home'. Hybrid work has its history in the post-World War period of labour shortages, world-over. While originally the idea was more towards the different start and stop timings, having branches and offices for reporting rather than working, the term hybrid work has come through many changes.

One of the major reasons for the development of hybrid work in its various forms was the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, work needed to get done, but the workers could not come to the factory or office. With governments enforcing strict measures to keep people off the streets, corporate offices realised that work would have to shift from offline to online platforms. One of the reasons this was possible in certain industries and not in all is based on the nature of the industry itself. Technology advancements have been so advanced that they gave certain businesses the chance to keep on an uninterrupted business but slightly differently than done previously. While this may not have been possible for a pure manufacturing industry, it was possible in industries that were more knowledge-driven and labour-intensive at the same time.

Flexi-time work gave the employee freedom to choose their work timings and one of its types was also the freedom to choose to work from home rather than at the office; the concept of remote working truly has its origins in flexi-timing. Flexi-time was a model used in companies like Accenture France as early as 2011, where employees were allowed to work three days from home in a week (Azam, 2018). Accenture has shown that it has always been a pioneer in this system, making the effort to invest in the IT infrastructure required to help people work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many organisations post-pandemic have adopted and implemented work-from-home policies as a permanent human resource working model, AirBnB, Google, Reddit and Shopify are the companies that have implemented HR policies required to keep employees working from home and have opened up various job profiles for the same (Howington, 2022).

After flexi-time what then came into the forefront is work from home, where the employee worked exclusively from home, which was used extensively by organisations during the pandemic; many fields of work, like academics, have now moved into a mixed mode. Some courses and works remain online but others have now come offline, depending on the level of communication or face-to-face communication required by these organisations, which is why the hybrid work model has now taken the stage.

Remote working meant the employee would check in from time to time at a satellite office close to where their homes were. Companies have invested in the infrastructure required by employees to do this, by providing laptops, internet facilities and even furniture required for employees to work remotely. Office spaces have been rented and leased in locations closer to employees, with less space as they do not need to host all the employees at any point in time. Remote working also adds the advantage of not making sourcing of resources to a specific place.

Hybrid work has a plethora of modes. There is no specific model that has to be used by organisations, but rather a mix of different models for different departments and uses. This flexibility based on needs gives organisations the road forward to better retain their employees and keep them satisfied.

An AT&T study has found that the hybrid work model may grow from 42% in 2021 to 81% in 2024. IWG research has shown that 72% would prefer the option of working remotely over a raise. Post-pandemic with the emphasis on work-life balance and people prioritising health and happiness, there has been a shift in the way employees are looking at the employment models offered by companies, having slightly lesser pay, but the option to work from home is being considered by employees to ensure more fulfilment in their lives.

Lately, as some organisations have started calling their employees back to work, they are implementing a mixed structure and not strictly calling employees to the office, it can also be seen that many are also trying to go completely remote as a cost-saving measure. Recently, Cognizant has converted 3 lakh jobs completely remote to retain its women workers. With a soft recession slowly working through the economy, any form of reduction in costs is seen as a boon by companies, and hybrid work, with less commute, smaller office spaces and more productivity is seen as a better option for organisations, especially in the IT field that can have it completely online.

Organisations have custom-made their version of work from home. In this article, a study is made to identify the need for hybrid working and how has it come into existence.

## **Review of Literature**

Kagerl and Starzetz (2023) noted that as per their sample, work from home has given employees better flexibility and improved their productivity. They did an extensive study on firms and their distribution of the workforce from those who could do work from home and those who could not. They noted that not all job profiles could introduce remote working, but those where it was possible to introduce showed high productivity. It is also noted that when it comes to new employees who need to be introduced into the business, it would work better for the organisation if they had a hybrid model rather than a complete remote work, to better assist them in social acclimation.

Hopkins and Bardoel (2023) discussed that the hybrid work model is a combination of different work models and that it is a mix of flexi-time with some working completely from the office and some working few days at home and few days in the office, which depends on the organisation to find its best model. They have studied the different models applicable in companies through a series of interviews with Australian human resource managers. Through their study, they were able to identify the models for hybrid work and how it must be implemented; the IT infrastructure that will be required for such work and the support structures that would be required to have hybrid work models.

Ozimek (2020) studied the future of remote work when it was initially enforced in the year 2020. He noted that remote work had been adopted by over 50% of the workforce. The author interviewed hiring managers and looked at the success of remote working from their point of view. He noted that the benefits of remote work meant less commute, fewer unnecessary meetings, and fewer overall distractions that existed in workplace settings. He also found that the biggest drawback of working from home was the technological shift that suddenly took place with many companies and employees unable to adapt to the sudden rapid change. This article discussed that hiring managers said that productivity has increased under work from home and going forward it would double from its current 35%.

Yang et al. (2021) conducted a study of remote working at Microsoft and found that while communication mediums had changed during the work from scenarios, it was not by any means inefficient. Employees discussed using email and other asynchronous modes of communication more than the direct form. They also noticed that

while working from home can be an option for some workers, it was not necessarily something that could fit all job descriptions, rather a combination of models a mixed hybrid mode depending on the job profile is what made the most sense to organisations.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Hybrid work is one of the latest movements taking place in today's workforce. With the advancement in technology, organisations are finding it increasingly easier to handle 'work from home' as a permanent option as it is in a better position to analyse the performance of the employees. While the work-from-home option started out as an option that was given to few employees with difficult circumstances, remote working was for businesses that needed a person onsite, now there is a change in the way remote work is offered to employees, with a hybrid approach with employees coming office in a few days in a week. The few disadvantages seen in remote work are being rectified with the hybrid approach. This study seeks to understand the history of hybrid work, its evolution and the models that organisations are using currently.

## **Need for the Study**

It is important for organisations to understand the desire for employees to have the option of flexi-time, with sustainability and less commute, and employee satisfaction from remote working is something to analyse. For organisations where a part of the work can be done remotely, it is a huge boon to reduce office spaces and commute time. But there are certain limitations to completely working remotely or at home and this study seeks to understand those limitations and analyse the extent to which hybrid work acts as a solution.

## Objective of the Study

1. To understand the differences between 'work from home', remote work and hybrid work.
2. To examine the limitations of remote working and working from home.
3. To analyse the evolution of hybrid work as a solution.

## Research Methodology

This article is based on a review of the secondary data that has been collected from the existing available sources including theoretical papers, case studies and other types of papers, books and journals. Extensive reading and data collection have been done through various online and offline secondary sources, which included books, journals, articles, Google Scholar, newspapers and websites.

## Limitations

1. As this is an exploratory study, only secondary data has been used.
2. Largely international sources have been used rather than Indian as more secondary data is available from international than national sources.

## The Differences Between Work from Home, Remote Work and Hybrid Work

### *Remote Work*

Remote work is an option for a workforce where the employee would not be logging into the central office that the organisation had rather. They would be given different options of either working from their homes, sharing spaces with co-workers, having a centralised location, or anything that is outside of a traditional workspace.

Remote working was not always possible pre-pandemic, as it required employees to keep in constant communication through phones. After the pandemic, there is a shift in the way this has evolved, so more organisations are able to give this option to their employees. Ten years ago, it was only available to those doing voice processes, those in sales or customer care, as their work did not require as much communication between employees, rather it was between the employee and the customer (Hamingson, 2023).

Shared workspaces were a concept that was used in remote working that slightly differed in practice, with different organisational needs. Remote working cannot always be called working from home, while that can be considered as one of the working spaces, it is not the only choice. Rather it is working from any location other than the office.

While the employee does the work primarily from home, this option would also mean an employee working offsite, closer to locational requirements rather than the office, for example, journalists. Magazine and article writers use this method when connected to one main office, but needing to go to the story.

### *Work from Home*

Telenetworking and teleconferencing became so advanced especially out of necessity during the pandemic that something that was only provided in unusual circumstances and very rarely by organisations is now easily possible to implement. Pre-pandemic, the concept of work from home did exist, but organisations rarely provided opportunities to their workers unless absolutely required.

Companies had been slowly developing their teleconferencing solutions during the late 2000s but only took up the allowance of work from home for employees if a very serious situation prevented the employee from being able to commute to the office. Communal violence, natural disasters and emergencies were the rare situations when organisations offered employees the option to work from home (Livemint, 2023).

This had gone through its largest change during the pandemic and the post-pandemic years when governments shut down all non-essential offices focusing on having people stay home. The organisations that could work virtually completely were easily able to switch their offices. Even those who initially found this hard, for example, academicians, had faculty being trained and upskilled to move their work completely online, so students would not lose out on their learning for a particular year.

The pandemic forced the workforce to adapt to work from home, at the same time, organisations were also forced to put systems in place to monitor the productivity and work performance of the employees. New technology was developed to make it possible; the data could be tracked and upper-level management was trained to monitor these employees to ensure that the work was being completed and their requirements to do the work were met.

### *Hybrid Work*

Hybrid work was a term coined in recent years when employees required differential handling. Some jobs required complete work from home or could be permanently done out of the office, but there were several disadvantages to it. New employee's adaptability, upper-level management checks and even promotional possibilities were hampered when the employee only worked from home.

With these disadvantages, a solution has now been formulated, with a mix of the two options, remote working and work from home, which has now led to hybrid work. The employee may, based on the job requirements, spend the lion's share either at home or at the office, but will have to spend parts of the week at the office depending on requirements.

Hybrid work gives the best options as the employee is also satisfied and has the option to take some days at home, maybe even weeks, and the employer gets the

benefit of having the workers in the office and being able to communicate directly. This option was especially important in organisations where they need higher-level management to be available in the office at certain times.

The hybrid model is now being discussed by organisations, and organisations are creating their own models based on their requirements in the field. The transformation from remote work being applicable only to a few employees in difficult circumstances to every employee due to the pandemic has led to this third option, a mix where the employee does have the option of being remote, but also does have to come from time to time to the office.

Organisations such as Amazon and Meta are following the hybrid work model where employees are expected to work from the office a couple of days a week (Gautam, 2023).

## **The Limitations in Remote and Work from Home**

COVID-19 and its sudden economic shutdown brought a lot of companies to a standstill in the year 2020. Within a month, most companies came up with a fall-back policy and built systems so their processes could go on with employees working remotely. This was something that was already seen in the IT industry with remote working making it possible for people from diverse locations to meet and exchange ideas. Headquarters of major IT companies were in different parts of the globe and with employees deployed to various locations, video conferencing and remote working were necessary for teams to work.

While this was already a practice in IT firms, other online businesses also trained themselves in the same field in 2020. With Zoom opening up its platform for free usage and Microsoft introducing its own Microsoft Teams, the world and businesses could now work remotely. Work from home was easy to adapt in BPO, KPO, and IT industries, but even academic fields adapted to the situation and came up with options for students to study from home. An HR practice that was mostly used in industries with night shifts or needed employees to work remotely now become prevalent in several diverse fields. Many work-from-home opportunities and businesses rose to the forefront in 2020 and kept up its pace in 2021.

Another important factor to be noted is that a lot of employees felt a better work-life balance while working remotely, saved commute hours, with flexibility in timing to run errands. Remote working became a big boon for female employees in organisations as it gave them the work-life balance that they needed. In a survey conducted by McKinsey, 41% of respondents said that they are more productive working from home (Boland et al., 2020).

While this was a stop-gap solution for companies during the lockdown, it has changed and evolved into a model for HR in companies that were able to implement it properly. There are also reasons for the evolution of complete work from home to remote or hybrid work.

Kagerl and Starzetz (2023) in their study carried out in Germany, of the sample size, have observed that organisations are moving on from complete work from home or remote working due to the following reasons.

1. Not all organisations or processes can be modified to work from home, and this is one of the biggest reasons that companies do not prefer the work-from-home policy. While certain elements can be brought into all processes, mostly knowledge process organisations and creative works are the areas that can be done remotely.
2. Cooperation where teamwork is the foundation for the task is slightly more difficult online as certain works need the entire team to be in the same place to catch up and discuss and brainstorming would not be as effective in certain areas.
3. The corporate culture of exchange of ideas, the hierarchy, and succession planning is more difficult when employees work from home.
4. IT requirements in organisations were not as easy to meet as maintaining the culture of work from home. Wi-Fi capacity, network bandwidth, good software, and technical problem solvers are the basic infrastructure requirements that are plausible for all organisations.
5. The expectation of a high increase in productivity is not realised by organisations allowing their members to work from home. Employees perform as they do in the office.
6. There have been concerns about data breaches and how to maintain company secrets.
7. New trainees found it difficult to acclimate to the organisation and its culture while working completely online; although video conferencing has been used extensively, the social credit was not reached while working from home.
8. Some of the difficulties faced by organisations are the skill gap that needs to be filled in the employees. In organisations with younger employees, the learning curve was steeper, but with those with a larger number of older employees, their ability to pick up processes and bridge the gap is difficult. Not all tasks are suitable for work from home.
9. Management had to themselves go through training which revamped existing structures to suit the requirements of productivity and efficiency maintenance. Many existing management structures were unsuitable or the manager lacked the skills required to lead teams that worked virtually. While these look at the situation only from the employer's side, there were problems for employees also working completely from home.

Al-Habaibeh et al. (2021) in their study looked at the situation from the employees' side and found the following issues. They have noted several problems that employees have faced and the pitfalls that existed during the pandemic work-from-home policies:

1. IT infrastructure requirements are noted to be an area where employees felt it was difficult to match. A corporate office's level of structure would far exceed what an employee could have at home.
2. Health issues, managing children, and managing work hours properly were all problems that were felt by employees, whereas office work had a



start and stop time, working from home had no such restrictions leading to the extension of hours of work.

3. Documents and the expertise available to clear doubts were not always accessible in an online or complete work-from-home arrangement.
4. The element of socialisation and informal discussions of ideas and problem-solving is not accessible at home. Team building especially was not possible for employees, although some organisations did try to bridge the gap with online team events, they were not felt as effective as when conducted face to face.
5. The dedicated facilities are available in offices for those doing specialised work, labs, software, and technical infrastructure were sorely missed while working completely from home.

Mainly the overall feeling was that there was no proper line between work and family and work-life balance was missing. Employees also felt that the system did not allow them to have any networking or socialising opportunities, and the connection that is required in a system work created a disconnect in employees.

Based on these limitations, rather than doing away with working from home completely, organisations instead evolved the existing mechanism to create hybrid working, which was a mix of work from home, remote working, and working at the office. This mix depends on the requirements of the organisations and each of them is made to fit the needs of each department or function.

Through this, hybrid work has now come into force. Employees are aware of the practical difficulties faced by organisations, but more than 75% still prefer to work from home and are not ready to work from the office full time. Hence, a medium has been reached where a mix of both called hybrid work has come into existence.

## **The Evolution of Hybrid Model from Work from Home**

Hybrid work is a form of work arrangement where the employee spends a few days in a week or a month at a designated office. Sometimes the arrangement is such that the employees meet together for special occasions or are called into the office for meeting with important clients. Depending on the need, the employer and employee come to an arrangement for the worker to come to the office.

The advantages of working remotely or from home are more than its limitations hence most employees do want to continue to work from home. Hybrid work acts as a solution to this problem, by covering the limitations faced in remote working.

1. The need for commuting is far lesser in the current scenario of being more sustainable, it is one of the biggest benefits of work from home. Hybrid work gives the best of two options because it allows the employee to reduce commuting hours drastically, but still get the benefit of having the employee at the office. With the cut down in travel requirements, it is

easier for employees to schedule their personal lives around the needs of the job while working in a hybrid manner.

2. There are fewer distractions while working at home, such as fewer coffee or lunch breaks, but the negative impact, that is, the lack of socialisation, can be addressed by the employee showing up to work a few times a week.
3. Important client meetings can be arranged and employees are informed to be available as required.
4. Employees can update the management on their requirements. Artificial intelligence has become such a large part of different organisations' infrastructure needs that are being met by these technological changes which has got a large push through remote work.
5. Women employees are increasing in the workforce as hybrid working gives them a chance to manage their families as well as their careers when they can spend the lion's share of their work at home.
6. Hybrid and remote working give better options for disabled workers and those who have health problems, reducing their time at the office.
7. Employees have the chance to base their homes everywhere which adds the advantage of sourcing talents for the organisation not being limited by location and hybrid work continues to add that benefit.
8. Organisations are not limited by way of infrastructure requirements. Less workspace renting reduces the carbon footprint and promotes sustainability. Employees can be sourced from anywhere which further broadens the possibility for organisations.
9. Employee retention increased through hybrid working as the employee still gets the advantages of remote working and the employers' requirements are also met.
10. With the advances made in technology, artificial intelligence is allowing organisations better possibilities to manage their human resources working hybrid hours.

## **Findings**

Through the vast study of various secondary sources, research papers, newspaper articles and statistics, the following observations have been made.

1. A hybrid work concept of flexi-time has been in existence since the 1960s, so this is not a new concept that came into existence during the pandemic but a system that existed in a nascent form.
2. A lot of information technology advancements took place in organisations during the pandemic to meet the needs of the employees working from home. New software was released and adaptation took place for running a department.
3. Remote working is the concept of having a satellite office rather than one designated place of work, while the office could be at home, there is no restriction on the work having to only take place at home, it could be co-sharing or even café and hotels depending on the requirements of the job.

4. Remote working was mostly done by gig workers and those who had to go to the place of work, as work could be anywhere in the city, state or country.
5. Work from home was a necessity that the pandemic created, and as the country or state put restrictions on the travel of any kind, organisations had to adapt themselves to the situation.
6. Work from home was applied extensively in 2020 and 2021, although a form of it had already been in effect prior as a form of remote working by IT companies.
7. Hybrid work is a recent evolution that has come as a solution to problems existing in remote work and work from home.
8. Hybrid work is a form of work, where the employee works some days at the office and the other days at home. Based on the requirements and needs of the job profile, the employee or employer decides the number of days that the employees come into the office.
9. There were limitations in the work-from-home and remote working culture from the employer's point of view as some jobs could not be converted to full offside. New employees were not able to make the connections necessary.
10. IT requirements were deficient. In some cases, employee's productivity while good had not exceeded expectations when the employee worked outside the office. Management had to be trained and come up with new policies to manage the remote workers.
11. Employees feel that exclusively working from home leaves out the social interaction that they require. The network and connections that they get when going to the office are missed.
12. The level of infrastructure and documentation, especially the dedicated lab requirements are met better at work, which employees feel can be accessed when required, if they work more remotely.
13. Hybrid gives organisations employees a lot of advantages in terms of work-life balance, they do not need to move to their jobs and rather can stay where they are and check into the offices some days.
14. Hybrid work meets the needs of the employee and employer, both can compromise on how many days to work at home and at the office.
15. Many of the limitations seen in remote working are solved with organisations using hybrid work as it allows the organisation to meet their requirements, as well as retain employees.

## **Conclusion**

The rapid change in the structure of the workforce when taken a step back and studied can be noted to be a gradual change. What started out as flexi-time and remote working changed to work from home during the pandemic and has now come to its final form of a hybrid work model.

With artificial intelligence further helping in management and more employees preferring a hybrid profile over an office job, organisations need to reconsider

their hiring strategies. A total of 94% of employees working hybrid models want to continue to do so, according to a 2022 Gallup survey.

Hybrid work gives the employees and employers a bridge to compromise on their individual requirements. Companies like Google were already working in these models proving to be ahead of the crowd in all spheres. There were limitations to remote and work-from-home options that have clearly been managed better with hybrid models and it is a natural evolution from an existing system.

Hybrid work gives solutions to the limitations that exist in remote working, provides better flexibility and work satisfaction, reduces commute time and requirement for office space, meets the needs of organisations and provides better job satisfaction to employees.

### Research Gap

Further studies on how artificial intelligence can be used to give employees the option to continue to work remotely but meet the industry needs can be studied and how hybrid work has helped retain employees and provide better work-life balance are all avenues that HR in companies can study.

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