

Information Systems Journal: Special Issue

The new wave of hybrid work:

An opportunity to revise assumptions and build theory

Special Issue Guest Editors

- Efraxia D. Zamani, Information School, University of Sheffield, e.zamani@sheffield.ac.uk
- Pamela Abbott, Information School, University of Sheffield, p.y.abbott@sheffield.ac.uk
- Angela Lin, Information School, University of Sheffield, a.lin@sheffield.ac.uk
- Mary Beth Watson-Manheim, Managerial Studies, The University of Illinois at Chicago, mbwm@uic.edu

Introduction

This special issue focuses on the recent resurgence of interest in, and accelerated implementation of, hybrid working practices in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Abdullah et al., 2020; Hilberath, 2020). Hybrid work comprises work arrangements that combine physical work space and time with virtual work space and time (Halford 2005; Jacobs, 2021; Messenger & Gschwind, 2016; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). It encompasses practices such as working-from-home, remote working, telecommuting and nomadic work, where there are significant spillovers and collisions between an employee's work and personal life (Hubers et al., 2018; CIPD, 2020). Hybrid workers expect to have some amount of autonomy and flexibility in arranging their work patterns, while employers wrestle with maintaining the status quo while managing these new working arrangements (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Both rely heavily on information systems and digital technology more broadly as an enabling or mediating interface, tool or infrastructure (e.g. Kingma, 2019; Dorow & Jean, 2021).

Hybrid work as a “third way” of working

In general, telework and remote work involve using ICTs for communication, coordination, and connection (Sullivan, 2003). With respect to work flexibility, location of work, and number of days working away from the office there is little difference between telework and hybrid work. The nature of telework and hybrid work are different, however.

First, hybrid work has become part of popular public discourse, being described as the “new normal” during lockdowns and a “third way” of working in the future. Before the pandemic, the opportunity and right to work remotely were offered and limited to specific socio-economic groups and a small number of people in organisations. In a study of telework, Felstead et al. (2005) found that the opportunity to choose the location of work tends to be limited to being “male, highly educated, better paid on average and in higher grade occupations” (p. 217). A survey by the UK government carried out in 2019 also indicates that those who have higher education degrees and in managerial positions are likely to work at home regularly or occasionally (Office for National Statistics, 2020). In contrast, the current public discourse suggests that hybrid work is a universal social phenomenon and more people could be potentially affected by it. **Second**, hybrid work is more inclusive in terms of more people being offered the opportunity to work flexibly and away-from-office, and it affords more job categories and tasks, therefore its impact on work configuration and social relations at work is greater than telework. **Third**, the scope of IT governance in a hybrid work setting is greater than in a telework setting because (1) more people require off-site IT support (2) a variety of ICTs are required to create

a hybrid working environment (3) investment in ICTs increases and (4) ICT training is required to upskill employees' digital literacy. In relation to this, in most cases ICTs constitute merely components of a wider organisational information system. As such, a point that requires attention is that there are multiple IT systems that need to be both technically and socially integrated to support organisational work (Baskerville et al. 2022) and by extension hybrid work.

Hybrid work thus requires us to think about the interrelated activities/processes/mechanisms involved in creating this "third way of working" between employees located in different spatial and temporal settings and to consider the consequent impacts on social relations in and outside of office settings. Taking such a perspective allows us to reorient our thinking and conceptualisation of the issues related to hybrid working away from individual-level concerns towards a more critical consideration of how these experiences are embedded and influenced by pre-existing systems of unequal power relations and social inequalities. Similarly, such a perspective also allows us to interrogate conflicts and contradictions at organisational and individual levels that arise when reconfiguring work production through hybrid working arrangements.

Understanding the technology and hybrid work nexus

Previous work on hybridity in the workplace conceptualises it as a confluence of three kinds of space: physical office-based space, home-based domestic space and virtual online cyberspace (Halford, 2005). The dynamics of the social relations and spatial arrangements that co-exist and co-evolve in such spaces have been variously explored in the literature, especially on homeworking and teleworking (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997; Felstead & Jewson, 2000; Gurstein, 2001). Hybrid working can thus be construed as work arrangements combining both aspects of virtuality and materiality. We take virtuality to mean the temporal and spatial disembedding of human activity and its subsequent re-creation in online and digital spaces (Nardi, 2015). Materiality, we define as the persistence of features or properties of a technology over space and time regardless of differences in its use (Leonardi, 2012). While it is acknowledged in organisational research literature that technology is intricately entangled with the virtual (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Robey et al., 2003), research about new ways of working that explicitly explores this relationship by foregrounding the technological artefact is scarce.

Typically, in hybrid work research, the entanglement of the social and technical and its implications tend to be underplayed, by considering technology as co-occurring with, or implicated in, social processes (e.g. Abelsen et al., 2021; Bélanger & Allport, 2008; Greenhill & Wilson, 2006; Leung & Zhang, 2017; Messenger & Gschwind, 2016) without necessarily focusing on the properties of technology as an artefact or its agency in producing the researched social phenomena. Exceptions to this include: work that takes a practice theory-based approach drawing on sociomateriality as a theoretical lens (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021); studies using concepts from the sociology of technology studies, such as the mutually shaping roles of technology and work (Richardson, 2021); work from the cognate field of computer supported cooperative work (CSCW), which proposes further research into technology mediation especially regarding new collaborative digital tools (Bullinger-Hoffmann et al., 2021); studies drawing on the media and communication literature for inspiration in this space (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2016); and studies focusing particularly on the materiality of technology through affordance theory (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Gibson, 1979; Norman, 2002) thus offering a conceptual foundation for some of this work (Hacker et al., 2020; Waizenegger et al., 2020).

Affordance theory has been especially useful in uncovering the role of technology in mediating new work modalities (Hacker et al., 2020) and in creating new spaces of connectivity (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Hybrid work, though, offers the opportunity of investigating not just the affordances of virtual spaces but of these in combination with material aspects, i.e. a virtual-material nexus of action

possibilities. This phenomenon also offers opportunities to re-engage with scholarly debates on technological agency from the perspective of intertwined virtual and material aspects of hybrid work, using tried and tested theoretical lenses as above or new perspectives arising from cognate fields or new conceptualisations.

Details of the kinds of submissions

In this special issue, we invite submissions that (a) take a perspective on theorising, conceptualising or understanding the intertwined organisational and individual level impacts of hybrid work arrangements and (b) reveal insights into the processes and mechanisms through which technology both enables and constrains hybrid work arrangements. We welcome submissions that help us reorient our thinking with regards to hybrid work at the individual level, the organisational level and the interactions between them following a more critical perspective. Perspectives theorising, conceptualising or understanding the intertwined organisational and individual level impacts of hybrid work arrangements could include those drawing upon *activity theory* (Engestrom, 2010), *systems theory* (Anderson, 1999) or *critical theory* (Cooper, 2002), which consider whole-system views of the problem space. Equally, we welcome submissions with a more specific technology focus that can reveal insights into the processes and mechanisms through which technology both enables and constrains hybrid work arrangements like critical realist perspectives on technological affordances (Volkoff & Strong, 2013) or radical new design perspectives (e.g. Suchman, 2020).

We use the term ‘workers’ broadly to reflect and include all the different types of employees across the different levels of the organisation, including freelancers.

Below is an indicative list of questions we would like authors to address:

- How does technology increase or decrease the accessibility of hybrid work for different social groups (marginalized and minoritised workers) and/or job roles (different kinds of collar workers)?
- How do workers perceive and experience agency, choice, freedom and flexibility in hybrid work? What are the possible negative implications due to structural inequalities?
- How does technology produce new hybrid work arrangements? How can we design technology to avoid the marginalisation of minoritised workers in hybrid work arrangements?
- How do workers perceive hybrid work and how do they attribute meaning to work-related activities?
- How do workers decide where to work from and when their autonomy and flexibility increase? How do/can information systems support their decision and enable their autonomy and flexibility?
- How do information systems mediate the experiences of workers, especially where emerging technologies might be involved?
- How can we problematise tensions, conflicts and contradictions when physical presence and synchronicity are continuously (re)negotiated among different job roles and when hybrid work arrangements collide with stakeholders’ expectations?
- How can we conceptualise or problematise hybrid work? What are the potential conflicts due to synchronicities between team members?
- What are the consequences for workers when flexibility regarding work location and time increase?
- What are the consequences for organisations regarding work arrangement and their relationship with workers when flexibility regarding work location and time increases? What and how technologies and information systems in particular are or can be used to facilitate flexible working without losing the integrity of the work?
- How can we theorise technology-mediated interactions when workers are co-located or not?

Timeline

The submission deadline is **January 31st, 2023** which will not be extended. Authors will need to follow the ISJ's Author Guidelines when preparing and submitting manuscripts. Submissions will be made through <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/isj> You will have to indicate that your manuscript is for the particular Special Issue. The Special Issue Guest Editors will first screen all submitted papers to assess the fit to the special issue. All papers that pass through this initial screening will be double blind peer reviewed.

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