Managing Hybrid Work Teams: Leadership Strategies for the Post-Pandemic Digital Workplace

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally transformed workplace dynamics, accelerating the adoption of hybrid work models that combine remote and in-office arrangements. This qualitative study explores effective leadership strategies for managing hybrid teams in the post-pandemic digital workplace. Through semi-structured interviews with 45 senior managers and team leaders from technology, financial services, and professional services firms across three countries, we identify key challenges and successful approaches to hybrid team management. Using thematic analysis, we uncover five critical leadership strategies: establishing digital-first communication protocols, building trust through outcome-based performance management, creating inclusive virtual cultures, facilitating knowledge sharing across distributed teams, and maintaining team cohesion through intentional relationship building. Our findings reveal that successful hybrid team leadership requires a fundamental shift from traditional command-and-control approaches to more adaptive, empathetic, and technology-enabled leadership styles. The study contributes to the emerging literature on digital workplace management by providing a comprehensive framework for hybrid team leadership that balances flexibility with organizational effectiveness. These insights offer practical guidance for leaders navigating the complexities of the new work paradigm while highlighting the importance of continuous adaptation in response to evolving workplace technologies and employee expectations.

Keywords: Hybrid work, Digital leadership, Remote team management, Post-pandemic workplace, Qualitative research, Organizational change.

1   Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed an unprecedented transformation in how organizations structure and manage work (Tran, 2024). What began as an emergency response to health restrictions has evolved into a fundamental reimagining of the workplace, with hybrid work models emerging as the dominant paradigm for knowledge-based organizations (Paavola et al., 2025). This transformation presents unique challenges for leaders who must now navigate the complexities of managing teams that are neither fully co-located nor entirely remote. The hybrid work environment demands new leadership competencies, communication strategies, and organizational structures that can accommodate the flexibility employees now expect while maintaining productivity, innovation, and organizational culture (Benabid & Abdalla Mikhaeil, 2025). Despite the widespread adoption of hybrid work models, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of effective leadership strategies for this new context.

While existing literature has extensively examined remote work management and traditional team leadership, the hybrid model presents distinct challenges that require specific investigation (Usama et al., 2025). The simultaneity of managing both in-person and remote workers, ensuring equity across different work arrangements, and maintaining organizational cohesion in a distributed environment represent novel managerial challenges that traditional leadership theories may not adequately address (Hussain et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological change and evolving employee expectations continue to reshape the hybrid work landscape, necessitating adaptive and evidence-based leadership approaches.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the following research questions: First, what are the primary challenges leaders face when managing hybrid teams in the post-pandemic workplace? Second, what strategies have proven effective in addressing these challenges? Third, how do successful hybrid team leaders adapt traditional management practices to the digital workplace context? Through a qualitative exploration of leadership experiences across multiple industries, this research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of effective hybrid team management strategies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of Remote and Hybrid Work Models

The concept of remote work has evolved significantly over the past three decades, driven by advances in information and communication technologies. Early research on telecommuting focused primarily on individual productivity and work-life balance outcomes, with studies generally finding positive effects on both dimensions when remote work was voluntary and well-supported (Kim et al., 2025). However, these pre-pandemic studies typically examined remote work as a limited arrangement affecting a small percentage of the workforce, rather than as a dominant organizational model.

The pandemic-induced shift to remote work represented a qualitative change in both scale and scope. Unlike voluntary telecommuting arrangements, the mandatory remote work period forced organizations to rapidly develop new capabilities for virtual collaboration, digital communication, and remote performance management (Šmite et al., 2023). This experience has fundamentally altered employee expectations and organizational capabilities, creating conditions for the emergence of hybrid work as a permanent feature of the organizational landscape.

Hybrid work models, which combine elements of remote and in-office work, represent a distinct organizational form that cannot be understood simply as a combination of traditional and remote work practices (Hussain et al., 2025). The hybrid model introduces unique coordination challenges, including managing synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, ensuring equitable participation across different work locations, and maintaining organizational culture when employees have varying levels of physical presence. These challenges require new theoretical frameworks and practical strategies that account for the complex dynamics of hybrid teams.

2.2 Leadership in Digital Contexts

The digital transformation of work has profound implications for leadership theory and practice. Traditional leadership models, developed primarily for co-located teams, often emphasize physical presence, direct observation, and face-to-face interaction as key mechanisms for influence and control (Tran & Khoa, 2025). In digital contexts, these mechanisms are either unavailable or significantly altered, requiring leaders to develop new approaches to motivation, coordination, and team building.

E-leadership, defined as leadership mediated by information technology, has emerged as a distinct field of study addressing these challenges (Van Wart et al., 2019). Research in this area has identified several key competencies for digital leaders, including technological fluency, virtual communication skills, and the ability to build trust without physical presence (Avolio et al., 2000). However, much of this research predates the pandemic and focuses on either fully virtual teams or occasional technology-mediated interactions, rather than the continuous hybrid environment that now characterizes many organizations.

The concept of digital leadership extends beyond simply using technology to replicate traditional management practices (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022). Effective digital leaders must fundamentally reimagine their role, shifting from direct supervision to enabling and empowering distributed teams. This includes

developing new approaches to performance management that focus on outcomes rather than activities, creating virtual spaces for informal interaction and relationship building, and using data and analytics to understand team dynamics and individual needs. The hybrid context adds additional complexity, as leaders must simultaneously manage these digital leadership challenges while also coordinating between remote and in-office team members.

2.3   Challenges in Hybrid Team Management

The hybrid work model presents several distinct challenges that differentiate it from both traditional and fully remote team management (Lamovšek et al., 2025). One of the most significant is the risk of creating a two-tier system where in-office employees have advantages in terms of visibility, access to leadership, and career advancement opportunities. This proximity bias can undermine team cohesion and create perceptions of unfairness that affect motivation and retention.

Communication and collaboration in hybrid teams require careful orchestration to ensure all team members can participate effectively regardless of their location (Cheng et al., 2016). The challenge is not simply technical but also social and psychological. Hybrid meetings, where some participants are co-located while others join virtually, often result in suboptimal dynamics where remote participants struggle to engage fully in discussions. Similarly, informal knowledge sharing and spontaneous collaboration, which occur naturally in co-located teams, require intentional facilitation in hybrid settings.

Maintaining organizational culture and team identity represents another critical challenge in hybrid environments (Cousins et al., 2007). Culture traditionally develops through shared experiences, regular interactions, and physical artifacts in the workplace. In hybrid settings, leaders must find new ways to create shared experiences and reinforce cultural values across distributed team members who may rarely interact in person. This includes addressing the challenge of onboarding new employees who may have limited exposure to organizational culture and fewer opportunities for informal learning and mentorship.

3   Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore leadership strategies in hybrid work environments. The qualitative approach was selected for its ability to capture the complexity and nuance of leadership experiences in this emerging organizational context (Khoa et al., 2023). Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the need to understand not just what strategies leaders employ but also how and why they develop these approaches, qualitative methods provide the depth and flexibility necessary for meaningful insights. The interpretivist paradigm underpins this research, recognizing that leadership practices are socially constructed and context-dependent. This philosophical stance acknowledges that effective hybrid team management strategies may vary across organizational contexts, cultures, and industries, and that understanding these variations requires engaging with the lived experiences and interpretations of practitioners. The research design prioritizes depth over breadth, seeking to develop rich, contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity across relevant dimensions including industry sector, organizational size, geographic location, and leadership experience. The primary inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two years of experience managing hybrid teams, with at least six months of this experience occurring after the initial pandemic response period. This ensured that participants had experience with intentional hybrid arrangements rather than emergency remote work. The final sample comprised 45 participants, including 18 senior managers, 20 team leaders, and 7 executives with organization-wide responsibility for hybrid work policies. Participants represented organizations from three sectors: technology (n=18), financial services (n=15), and professional services (n=12). These sectors were selected due to their high adoption rates of hybrid work models and the knowledge-intensive nature of their work. This variation allowed for exploration of how organizational scale affects hybrid team management strategies. Gender balance was actively pursued, with the final sample including 23 female and

22 male participants. The average leadership experience was 8.5 years, with specific hybrid team management experience averaging 2.8 years.

Data collection occurred between March and August 2025 through semi-structured interviews conducted via video conferencing platforms. The use of video interviews was both practical, given the geographic distribution of participants, and methodologically appropriate, as it allowed researchers to observe how leaders engage in virtual communication. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was recorded with participant consent for subsequent transcription and analysis. The interview protocol was developed based on the literature review and refined through pilot interviews with three participants. The protocol covered five main areas: the participant's background and organizational context, specific challenges encountered in managing hybrid teams, strategies developed to address these challenges, outcomes and effectiveness of different approaches, and reflections on the future of hybrid work. Questions were designed to be open-ended, encouraging participants to share specific examples and critical incidents that illustrated their experiences. To enhance data quality and depth, participants were asked to provide concrete examples of successful and unsuccessful hybrid management initiatives. Follow-up questions probed for details about implementation processes, stakeholder reactions, and lessons learned. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on how their leadership approach had evolved since the beginning of their hybrid work experience and what they would do differently with current knowledge.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis, chosen for its systematic yet flexible framework for identifying patterns in qualitative data. All interviews were professionally transcribed, resulting in approximately 850 pages of text data. The analysis began with familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts while noting initial impressions and potential themes. Initial coding was conducted using NVivo software, with codes generated inductively from the data rather than imposed from predetermined categories. The first author coded all transcripts, while the second author independently coded a subset of 15 interviews to establish inter-coder reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, resulting in a refined coding framework that was then applied consistently across all data. The initial coding process generated 287 codes, which were then collated into potential themes through an iterative process of grouping and regrouping based on conceptual similarity. This process resulted in 23 preliminary themes, which were further refined through reviewing coded extracts and considering the coherence of each theme. The final thematic structure comprised five main themes with associated sub-themes, representing the key leadership strategies identified in the data. To ensure analytical rigor, we employed several validation strategies. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with a subset of participants for feedback on accuracy and resonance with their experiences. Peer debriefing sessions with colleagues experienced in qualitative research and organizational studies provided external perspective on the analysis. An audit trail documenting analytical decisions and theme development was maintained throughout the process.

4   Finding

4.1   Establishing Digital-First Communication Protocols

The most consistently emphasized strategy among participants was the need to establish clear, digital-first communication protocols that ensure information accessibility and engagement across all team members regardless of location. Leaders described moving away from ad-hoc communication practices to more structured approaches that prioritize transparency and inclusivity.

Successful leaders reported implementing what they termed "digital by default" policies, where all important communications and decisions are documented in shared digital spaces accessible to the entire team (Al-Muwil et al., 2019). A senior manager from a technology firm explained: "We learned quickly that hallway conversations and impromptu desk visits create information asymmetries in hybrid teams. Now, everything goes through our digital channels first – even if we discuss something in person, we summarize it online

for the broader team." This approach addresses the challenge of ensuring remote workers have equal access to information and decision-making processes (Schou & Pors, 2019).

Participants also emphasized the importance of establishing clear expectations about response times and availability. Rather than assuming constant connectivity, effective leaders worked with their teams to establish "communication contracts" that specified when team members should be available for synchronous communication and when asynchronous work was acceptable (Dresp-Langley, 2009; Rama et al., 2022). A team leader from financial services noted: "We created team agreements about core hours when everyone should be reachable, but outside of that, people have flexibility. This respects different working styles while ensuring we can collaborate when needed."

The findings reveal that successful digital-first communication goes beyond simply choosing the right tools. Leaders described the need to be intentional about communication channel selection, using video for relationship building and complex problem-solving, instant messaging for quick questions and social interaction, and asynchronous tools for detailed feedback and documentation. One executive observed: "The medium really is part of the message in hybrid work. Choosing the wrong channel can undermine your communication effectiveness and team dynamics."

4.2 Building Trust Through Outcome-Based Performance Management

A fundamental shift from activity-based to outcome-based performance management emerged as a critical strategy for building trust in hybrid teams (Benabid & Abdalla Mikhaeil, 2025; Hongli et al., 2022). Leaders consistently reported that traditional methods of management based on observation and presence were neither practical nor effective in hybrid settings. Instead, successful leaders focused on clearly defining outcomes and empowering team members to determine how best to achieve them.

Participants described developing new frameworks for goal-setting that emphasized measurable outcomes while providing flexibility in how work is accomplished (Cheng et al., 2016; Wakhyuni et al., 2024). A senior manager in professional services explained: "We moved from tracking hours and activities to focusing on deliverables and impact. This required us to get much better at defining what success looks like and creating clear metrics, but it's led to both higher performance and greater employee satisfaction." This shift requires leaders to invest more time upfront in clarifying expectations but reduces the need for continuous monitoring.

Trust-building in this context extends beyond performance management to encompass psychological safety and team dynamics. Leaders reported that demonstrating trust in their team members' ability to manage their work independently was crucial for fostering reciprocal trust and engagement. One participant noted: "When you show people you trust them to deliver without micromanaging, they actually become more accountable and communicative about their progress and challenges."

However, participants also acknowledged the challenges of outcome-based management, particularly for roles where outcomes are difficult to quantify or involve long-term projects (Alves et al., 2023). Successful leaders addressed this by combining outcome metrics with regular check-ins focused on progress, obstacles, and support needs rather than surveillance. A team leader reflected: "The one-on-ones became less about status updates and more about coaching and removing barriers. This actually strengthened my relationships with team members even though we see each other less frequently in person."

4.3 Creating Inclusive Virtual Cultures

The challenge of maintaining and evolving organizational culture in hybrid settings emerged as a significant concern, with successful leaders developing innovative approaches to create inclusive environments that engage both remote and in-office workers (Cimperman, 2023; Rama et al., 2022). Participants emphasized that culture-building in hybrid teams requires deliberate effort and cannot be left to chance.

Leaders described creating virtual rituals and traditions that parallel but don't simply replicate in-office culture. A technology firm executive shared: "We realized that trying to force remote workers into office-designed cultural activities wasn't working. Instead, we created new traditions that are inherently hybrid – like virtual coffee roulettes where random team members are paired for informal conversations, or 'demo days' where team members showcase their work via video regardless of location." These digital-first cultural initiatives ensure that all team members can participate equally.

Inclusion efforts extended to rethinking meeting dynamics and participation structures. Successful leaders implemented practices such as "remote-first meetings" where even in-office participants join from their individual computers to ensure equal participation. A senior manager explained: "We found that hybrid meetings where some people are in a conference room and others are on screen created an 'us versus them' dynamic. Now everyone joins individually, and we use breakout rooms and digital collaboration tools that level the playing field."

Participants also highlighted the importance of creating informal spaces for relationship building and social connection (O'Meara & Cooper, 2022). While acknowledging that virtual interactions cannot fully replace in-person relationships, leaders described success with structured informal interactions such as virtual lunch groups, online game sessions, and "water cooler" channels in messaging platforms dedicated to non-work conversations. One leader noted: "You have to be intentional about creating spaces for the casual interactions that used to happen naturally. It feels forced at first, but over time these become genuine spaces for connection."

4.4   Facilitating Knowledge Sharing Across Distributed Teams

The challenge of knowledge sharing in hybrid teams emerged as a critical concern, with leaders recognizing that traditional mechanisms of knowledge transfer through proximity and observation are diminished in distributed settings. Successful leaders developed systematic approaches to capture, share, and transfer knowledge across their teams (Abbas et al., 2022; Dhruba Lal Pandey et al., 2024).

Documentation practices emerged as a fundamental strategy, with leaders emphasizing the shift from oral to written knowledge sharing. A professional services manager explained: "We had to overcome the tendency to rely on verbal knowledge transfer. Now we have a 'document everything' culture where decisions, processes, and learnings are captured in our knowledge management system. This creates a searchable repository that benefits everyone, especially new team members." This approach requires initial investment in creating documentation standards and systems but provides long-term benefits for team effectiveness.

Participants described implementing structured knowledge-sharing sessions that go beyond traditional meetings. These include "lunch and learn" sessions conducted virtually where team members share expertise, project retrospectives that capture lessons learned, and cross-training initiatives designed to reduce knowledge silos. A team leader noted: "We realized that knowledge sharing couldn't be passive in a hybrid environment. We need active mechanisms to surface and share what people know."

Mentoring and onboarding processes required particular attention in hybrid settings. Leaders described creating structured onboarding programs that combine self-paced digital learning with scheduled virtual meetings with key team members (Kim & Bang, 2021; Otte, 2024). Buddy systems were adapted to include regular virtual check-ins and collaborative projects designed to facilitate knowledge transfer. One senior manager reflected: "Onboarding someone you may never meet in person requires much more structure and intentionality. We created detailed onboarding roadmaps with clear milestones and multiple touchpoints to ensure new team members develop both technical knowledge and cultural understanding."

4.5   Maintaining Team Cohesion Through Intentional Relationship Building

The final major theme centered on the challenge of maintaining team cohesion when team members have limited face-to-face interaction. Successful leaders recognized that team cohesion requires intentional effort in hybrid settings and developed specific strategies to foster connection and collaboration (Luster et al., 2023).

Regular in-person gatherings emerged as important but required careful planning to maximize value. Rather than simply returning to pre-pandemic patterns, leaders described designing in-person time for activities that specifically benefit from physical co-location. An executive explained: "We bring the team together quarterly, but we don't use that time for regular meetings or work that could be done remotely. Instead, we focus on strategic planning, creative brainstorming, and relationship building. We're very intentional about making in-person time count."

Leaders also described the importance of creating shared experiences that build team identity. This included virtual team challenges, collaborative projects that require cross-functional cooperation, and celebrating achievements collectively regardless of location (De et al., 2023; Kohn, 2024). A team leader shared: "We created a virtual 'wall of wins' where we celebrate individual and team achievements. Everyone can contribute, and we review it in our weekly team meetings. It helps maintain that sense of shared purpose and collective achievement."

The findings reveal that maintaining team cohesion requires leaders to be more intentional about relationship facilitation. This includes actively creating opportunities for collaboration between team members who might not naturally interact, facilitating conflict resolution in virtual settings, and ensuring that remote workers are not inadvertently excluded from informal networks and relationships. One participant reflected: "In the office, relationships often develop organically. In hybrid teams, leaders need to be relationship architects, deliberately creating structures and opportunities for connection."

5   Conclusion

5.1   Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to several theoretical domains within management and organizational studies. First, they extend e-leadership theory by identifying specific mechanisms through which leaders can exercise influence and build relationships in hybrid settings. While existing e-leadership literature has focused primarily on fully virtual teams, our findings reveal that hybrid leadership requires a distinct set of competencies that bridge physical and digital domains. The concept of "digital-first" leadership that emerged from our data represents a philosophical shift rather than simply a tactical adjustment, suggesting the need for new theoretical frameworks that account for the simultaneity of physical and virtual leadership presence.

The emphasis on outcome-based management and trust-building challenges traditional theories of managerial control that assume the ability to observe and directly supervise work activities. Our findings suggest that hybrid work accelerates the shift from behavioral to output control mechanisms, with important implications for agency theory and the nature of the employment relationship. The success of outcome-based approaches in our study indicates that traditional concerns about shirking and opportunism in remote work may be overstated when appropriate management systems are in place.

The cultural challenges identified in our research extend organizational culture theory into new territory. Traditional conceptualizations of culture as embedded in physical spaces and face-to-face interactions require revision to account for distributed and digitally mediated cultural experiences. Our findings suggest that hybrid cultures are not simply diluted versions of traditional organizational cultures but represent distinct cultural forms with their own artifacts, rituals, and transmission mechanisms. This has implications for how we theorize cultural formation, maintenance, and change in contemporary organizations.

5.2 Practical Implications

For practitioners, our findings offer several actionable insights for managing hybrid teams effectively. The five strategies identified provide a framework that leaders can adapt to their specific contexts. However, implementation requires careful consideration of organizational factors including industry norms, technological infrastructure, and employee preferences. Leaders should view these strategies not as a prescriptive checklist but as principles that require contextual adaptation.

The shift to digital-first communication protocols requires investment in both technology and training. Organizations must ensure that all team members have access to appropriate digital tools and the skills to use them effectively. This includes addressing potential digital divides based on factors such as home working conditions, technological literacy, and generational differences in technology adoption. Leaders should also recognize that establishing new communication norms is a gradual process that requires consistent reinforcement and adjustment based on team feedback.

The move to outcome-based performance management has significant implications for organizational systems and processes. Human resource departments need to revise performance evaluation criteria, job descriptions, and promotion processes to align with outcome-focused approaches. This transition also requires developing new competencies among managers who may be uncomfortable with reduced direct oversight. Organizations should invest in training programs that help leaders develop skills in goal-setting, performance coaching, and trust-building.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into hybrid team leadership, several limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on knowledge-intensive industries may limit the generalizability of findings to other sectors where work is less amenable to remote arrangements. Manufacturing, healthcare, retail, and other industries with significant physical components may face different challenges and require different strategies. Future research should explore hybrid work management in these contexts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The cross-sectional nature of our data provides a snapshot of current practices but cannot capture the dynamic evolution of hybrid work arrangements. As organizations continue to experiment with and refine their approaches, longitudinal research is needed to understand how leadership strategies evolve over time and which approaches prove sustainable in the long term. Future studies could track organizations through different phases of hybrid work implementation to identify critical success factors and common pitfalls.

The qualitative methodology, while appropriate for exploratory research, limits our ability to establish causal relationships or quantify the relative effectiveness of different strategies. Future quantitative research could test specific hypotheses derived from our findings, such as the relationship between digital-first communication protocols and team performance, or the mediating role of trust in the relationship between outcome-based management and employee engagement. Mixed-method approaches could provide both depth and breadth in understanding hybrid team dynamics.

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