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Svein Bergum · Pascale Peters · Tone Vold

Virtual Management and the New Normal

New Perspectives on HRM and Leadership since the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Shaping Hybrid Collaborating Organizations

Jeroen van der Velden and Frank Lekanne Deprez

Introduction

Due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people were forced to shift their lives and work into a "digital everything"-mode. Historically, pandemics have forced people to break with both the past and the present to refocus their view on the world. While the pandemic caused human tragedies and imposed severe restrictions on all aspects of organizations and people's daily lives, it also provided a unique opportunity to conduct thousands of "forced" experiments, innovate to some extent, develop new skills that could be applied to discover new—unforeseen—opportunities. In addition, the crisis lowered the resistance to change—crises simple *force* people to act—and stimulated organizations to get rid of deeply entrenched, dysfunctional practices that would be difficult to shed in "normal times."

J. van der Velden (✉) • F. L. Deprez
Nyenrode Business University, Breukelen, Netherlands
e-mail: j.vdvelden@nyenrode.nl; frank.zerospace@planet.nl

Our goal with this chapter is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic measurements have opened the door to widespread hybrid work collaboration arrangements, that is, combining flexible (Kossek et al., 2021) onsite and remote collaboration in and across organizations. What organizational principles should be implied to help people adapt to the challenges of hybrid work, so they can benefit most from this widespread collaboration when looking at performance, employee involvement, and innovation power? And, in addition, will the balance in flexible hybrid work differ when we look at the collaboration within teams, within organizational boundaries, and at ecosystem-level. The latter refers to the collaboration with all the outside parties that the organization is related to or collaborates with. Data collection has been based on literature research and practice, based on observations over the past two years.

Various collaboration activities at different levels of aggregation—team, intraorganizational and interorganizational (ecosystem)—are explored with the expectation that this might lead to promising combinations of activities and working practices varying per level. In this respect, the Activity-Based Working approach (Eismann et al., 2022) might be well applicable. This approach recognizes that people perform different activities in their day-to-day work, and therefore need a variety of work settings supported by the right technology and culture to carry out these activities effectively. Activity-Based Working emphasizes the creation of a culture of connection, inspiration, accountability, and trust to empower individuals, teams, and the organization to perform to their potential. On a personal level, Activity-Based Working enables each person to organize their work activities in a flexible, productive, safe, and enjoyable way that best suits what, when, where they need to do it, and with whom they need to do it (Eismann et al., 2022; Kamperman, 2020).

This chapter follows the path to three recent stages that may have led to a paradigm shift in individuals and organizations working practices, mainly induced by the lockdowns at the start of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic when offices were closed. Before the lockdowns, stage 1 (until March 2020), most collaboration activities—within teams, organizations, and ecosystems—took place in an onsite setting. During the first lockdown, stage 2, the "forced" lockdown collaboration took place in a

remote setting (March 2020–August 2020). Stage 3 (September 2020–March 2022) is portrayed as a hybrid setting—combining the two collaboration contexts of the first and second stages—where management is partnering with employees on an individual basis what works best for them, allowing employees to have autonomy to create their own paths. This so-called post-pandemic hybrid flexibility is often characterized by a largely *employer-determined* mix of remote and office work—"hybrid work"—arrangements. Each stage is briefly explored and discussed.

Before COVID: The Onsite Stage

Before the corona (BC), remote collaboration was limited. At the beginning of this century, much attention was given to new ways of working, integrating remote work or telework, as part of working practices. At that time, many research-based and practice-based articles and books saw the light of the day (or where "reused") on various topics, such as virtual organizations (Cooper & Rousseau, 1999), managing off-site employees (Fisher & Fisher, 2000), virtual work (Makarius & Larson, 2017), virtual teams (Anderson et al., 1996; Gilson et al., 2015; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000), and work and rewards in the virtual workplace (Crandall & Wallace, 1998). However, the impact and the distribution of these new ways of working were limited to relatively "digital savvy" organizations, like Microsoft, Intel, Sony, and IBM.

In addition, working from home was a privilege to only a few. For example, before 2020 about half of the 150 companies surveyed by Josh Bersin Academy (2020) did *not* permit work at home. In 2020, work at home was allowed by 99% or more. *Melanie Collins (Chief People Officer at Dropbox) stated that* prior to the pandemic, Dropbox was far from a remote-first culture, with only 3% of employees working from home (Dropbox, 2020). When the pandemic shifted its employee base to a remote model, Dropbox seized the opportunity to redesign their workplace arrangements.

During the Lockdown: The "Full/Strictly Remote" Stage

As the average person spends *over a third of their lives at work*, workplace satisfaction, or lack of it, is a common topic of conversation (FirstUp, 2022). During the COVID-19 virus outbreak, the world of work and life was hit by a tidal wave that induced a big shift in work and life practices and arrangements. The boundaries between work and our personal lives became increasingly "unbounded" and have therefore changed the work-life reality forever. Especially the introduction of "social distancing" caused the closure of offices, schools, shops, theaters, and other—"non-essential"—public services all over the world. Virtual work practices became the only way to get safely ("zero-touch") connected to each other. So instead of a limited number of "formally" privileged virtual workers, organizations were forced to switch to "remote-work-only"-scenarios in which the virtual workforce was located in "on-the-fly" adapted office/home/satellite/co-working spaces. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, these alternative approaches were tolerated because these actions were predominantly reactive due to the unprecedented crisis situation of the pandemic. According to the EU (2020), teleworking was a necessary practice for many organizations and employees during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after six months of being part of the world's largest "work-remotely experiment," remote employees really began to experience what it is like to be "always on, always connected," with work following them everywhere. Remember, "you're not 'working from home', you are 'at your home, during a crisis, *trying* to work'" (Peters, 2021, p. 222, *italics* added).

During the first lockdown (March 2020–August 2020), there were more than 100 organizations worldwide that were working *fully remote* (Wikipedia, 2021), such as GitLab, Coinbase, and DuckDuckGo. These organizations do not have a physical office (or "headquarters") where people work, but they may have a "mailbox for headquarters" (for postal and legal purposes). GitLab is a "fully-" or "all-remote" company with 1000+ employees, located in 60+ different countries and regions. GitLab's workforce works fully remotely and asynchronously often without ever

coming into contact with each other in the physical world (Choudhury et al., 2020). GitLab's chief executive officer (CEO)—Dutch born Sid Sijbrandij—thinks remote working is only effective when everyone participates. In his somewhat radical view, partial measures will create tiers of employees, dividing the workforce over time, driving away top-performing remote workers who don't want to compete with lesser-achieving onsite colleagues. "We'll see some companies … go back [to offices] and try to make the best of it, and I think they'll struggle" (Konrad, 2020, p. 1).

Looking at the impact of fully remote collaboration on organizational performance, employee involvement, and organizational innovation power during the COVID-19 pandemic, some interesting insights emerge. In service organizations, with an emphasis on financial services and information and communication technology (Oude Hengel et al., 2021), the impact of the lockdown on productivity was limited or productivity even increased. Moreover, in software development teams, for example, distributed working agile teams even performed better remotely than when gathered at a joint location (Thompson, 2021). Call center employees also appeared to be able to provide services efficiently and effectively from home. And let's not forget about the "zero location" companies, such as the current Dropbox, that can fully function without a shared office. A precondition, however, seems to be that the team members have the right competences to work together (Gilson et al., 2021; Leonardi, 2021). In some cases, we can also notice an increase in customer satisfaction (Yang et al., 2022).

At the same time, however, various organizations are reporting a limitation in their innovative capacity since fewer "chance encounters" take place within the company and because the informal network is maintained or expanded to a lesser extent (Yang et al., 2022). Also, the worldwide number of patent applications from Dutch companies and inventors in 2020 stagnated. As an example, in 2020, Philips applied for 8% fewer patents than the previous year. In addition, the CEO of Philips claimed that physical meetings are important for creative jobs (FD, 2020). Also, the HRM director at ASML claimed in an interview that the innovation process does not benefit from working from home (Telegraaf, 2020).

Hence, on the one hand, virtual collaboration undermines creativity and activities that foster innovation, such as brainstorming, and could to some extent be better performed face-to-face. On the other hand, various studies have shown that, for example, group-decision support-systems can virtually lead to good decisions and also lead to results in brainwriting (Thompson, 2021)—a more sophisticated cousin of brainstorming—because participants can anonymously contribute to a shared virtual whiteboard without significant group/team influence. In addition, various reports mention the feeling of isolation of employees in their home situation. At the same time, overall, the (private) work-life conditions seems not to be negatively affected by fully remote working practices and we see an increase in the number of working hours among home workers (Oude Hengel et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022).

A study conducted within Microsoft (Yang et al., 2022) regarding the effects of remote work on collaboration among 61,182 US Microsoft employees over the first six months of 2020 estimated the causal effects of firm-wide remote work on collaboration and communication. For long-term policy decisions regarding remote, hybrid, and mixed-mode work to be well substantiated, decision-makers need to understand how remote work can impact information work without the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. To answer this question, the researchers (Yang et al., 2022) treated Microsoft's company-wide work-from-home (WFH) policy during the pandemic as a natural experiment that, subject to the validity of our identifying assumptions, enables them to causally identify the impact of firm-wide remote work on employees' collaboration networks and communication practices. One of the interesting findings was that teams that had become remote, communicated significantly more within their teams, but less outside their teams. The authors build upon the social network research of Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties—that is, the idea that people with whom you share few connections ("your weak ties") are more beneficial to the diffusion of your ideas than people with whom you share many connections ("your strong ties"). The ability to collaborate seamlessly within and across teams/communities/networks is often initiated by chance encounters—having a quick chat around a water-cooler or coffee corners—where people do not know each other well or

perhaps not at all (the weak ties)—enable to see problems, opportunities, and solutions in novel ways.

The authors showed that "firm-wide remote work caused the collaboration network of employees to become more static and siloed, with fewer bridges between disparate parts" (Yang et al., 2022, p. 43). Teams with a shared history can often transfer information more easily, as they are more likely to share a common perspective, trust one another, cooperate with one another, and expend effort to ensure that recently transferred knowledge is well understood and can be utilized. By contrast, however, weak ties require less time and energy to maintain and are more likely to provide access to new, non-redundant information. Importantly, the results of the Microsoft study showed that the shift to *firm-wide remote work* caused business groups within Microsoft to become *less* interconnected. It also *reduced* the number of ties bridging structural holes (i.e., engage the practice of "knowledge transfer," in which experiences from one set of people within an organization are transferred to and used by another set of people within that same organization) in the company's informal collaboration network. This triggered individuals to spend *less time* collaborating with the bridging ties that remained. Furthermore, the shift to firm-wide remote work caused employees to spend a *greater* share of their collaboration time with their stronger ties, which are better suited to information transfer, and a *smaller* share of their time with weak ties, which are more likely to promote free thinking and create an environment that fosters creativity. The findings of the Microsoft study support the idea that *frequent collaboration teams* experienced less effect of remote working on their relationship than intra- or inter-organizational networks that collaborate less frequently and /or are more distant.

What can we learn from previous and current research on collaborating teams, organizations, and ecosystems in general and specifically during the stages "onsite" and "full-remote" work? At the team level, the impact of COVID-19 measures to work practices and arrangements were shown to be limited. Several studies claim even a rise in performance and an overall limited impact on employee involvement and engagement. Most of the impact can be found at the organizational level, especially regarding performance, employee involvement, and innovation power (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Lessons learned from previous and current research on collaborating teams, organizations, and ecosystems in general and specifically during the stages "onsite" and "full-remote" working during COVID-19 on performance, involvement, and innovation at team, organization, and ecosystem level

	Team	Organization	Ecosystem
Performance	Mixed effects on performance of teams: (Feitosa & Salas, 2021; Gilson et al., 2021; Sull et al., 2020) Performance same or increased (Anderson et al., 1996; Oude Hengel et al., 2021).	Mixed effects reported: Productivity before and after WFH: (Birkinshaw et al., 2020; Gibbs et al., 2021; Global Workplace Analytics, 2021).	Mixed effects reported (Altman et al., 2021; Carboni et al., 2021; Gratton, 2021; Sebastian et al., 2020).
Employee involvement	Mixed effects reported (Cable & Gino, 2021; Gibbs et al., 2021).	Interdepartmental relationships decrease – Organizational awareness decreases – Employee engagement decreases (Yang et al., 2022) – Distant networks lead to less strong collaboration bonds (De Smet et al., 2021; Hansen, 2018)	Involvement decreases – Distant networks lead to lesser strong collaboration bonds. – Work-life ecosystem: work-life/family harmony during COVID (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).
Innovation	Mixed effects reported (Cross & Carboni, 2021; Hansen, 2018; 2021; Thompson, 2021; Yang et al., 2022).	Innovation power increases: – Spotify model in ING (De Man et al., 2019) – Gitlab (Choudhury et al., 2020) – (Thompson, 2021). Innovation power decreases – Less collaboration between groups/teams (Yang et al., 2022; Zuzul et al., 2021) – Too much collaboration (Cross, 2021) – Less casual encounters, less serendipity (Cross, 2021; Hansen, 2009; Zuzul et al., 2021)	Innovation power increases: – Ecosystems/ micro-enterprises: – Bol.com (De Man et al., 2019) – Ecosystem of spaces in Fujitsu (Gratton, 2021; Gratton, 2022) Innovation power decreases – Less collaboration between groups/ teams (Yang et al., 2022) – Less casual encounters (Thompson, 2021; Zuzul et al., 2021)

Zuzul et al. (2021)—extending the research of Yang et al. (2022)—showed how full-remote working led to more intense communication *within* siloed groups. In fact, many companies around the world became *more siloed* during the emergency work-at-home measures of 2020, with employees digitally splitting off into more isolated and well-defined communication networks. Working with *Microsoft data,* researchers analysed about 360 billion Outlook emails sent among 1.4 billion email accounts at 4361 organizations over 24 months in 2019, the year before the pandemic, and 2020, the year the pandemic spread across the globe. They also analysed changes in communication within Microsoft, including shifts in employees' scheduled meetings and Teams, and chats. According to Zuzul et al. (2021),

> Dynamic siloing may reduce innovation in some organizations. Innovation often arises from novel combinations of distantly held knowledge. Interdisciplinary or cross-department collaborations provide access to new ties and information that can provoke innovative ideas. Increased isolation could reduce such access. Future research should examine the impact of shifts in modularity on innovation rates—measured through patents, publications, and so on. (p. 17)

After COVID: The Rise of Hybrid Work Collaborating Organizations

What will years be like after the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns? Are organizations globally reverting to the inflexible office buildings and physical workplaces performing work practices and arrangements from before the pandemic? According to Future Forum Pulse (2022)—a survey of 10,737 knowledge workers across the US, Australia, France, Germany, Japan, and the UK conducted from November 1 to 30, 2021

> It's time to move past the "remote versus office" debate. The future of work isn't either/or—it's both. Findings from the Pulse survey show that as of November 2021, the majority of knowledge workers have adopted a hybrid work arrangement, spending some time in the office and sometime remote. (p. 3)

Research indicates that organizations are choosing *not* to return to the "pre-pandemic workplace", but to go full steam ahead and invest in developing organization forms where hybrid work can thrive (Barrero et al., 2022; Kane et al., 2021). These hybrid work collaborating organizations enable valuable collaboration within teams, across teams and across organizational boundaries.

Recently Microsoft (Microsoft, 2021) has indicated that the shift from full-remote work to post-pandemic hybrid work arrangements has given rise to the so-called hybrid-work paradox. Satya Nadella (Nadella, 2021)—Chairman & CEO of Microsoft—believes that "every organization's approach will need to be different to meet the unique needs of their people. According to our research, the vast majority of employees say they want more flexible remote work options, but at the same time *also* say they want more in-person collaboration, post-pandemic" (p. 1). In other words, a successful shift to hybrid work will depend on *embracing* the *hybrid paradox*, in which people want the flexibility to work from anywhere, anyhow, and with whom, but *simultaneously* desire more in-person connections.

Will hybrid work will be the dominant work arrangement in hybrid collaborating organizations? Will organizations embrace the flexibility of WFH and working from the office, while collaborating within a team, across teams and across organizational boundaries? Organizations have always had and will continue to have boundaries (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Lekanne Deprez, 2016). As a result of their quest for global presence, external and internal organizational boundaries have opened up as never before. Lekanne Deprez (2016) argues that the "fitness" of a particular organizational design will determine an organization's capability toward continuous "morphing" (Rindova & Kotha, 2001), where the organization in an evolutionarily transition from one form to a different one is managed through a process of incremental steps. There is no single organizational design methodology that works well under all circumstances. Each organizational design effort can be considered an experiment and opportunity to learn. In business settings, *hybrids* involve two or more organizations that work together—that is, share, cooperate, or collaborate (Kelly, 2016)—to achieve an agreed-upon mutual goal. Hybridization—in which several forms are combined depending on

specific needs—can come in two forms: "One is mixing elements of different forms, another one is using multiple forms within one organization but in different parts of the firm" (De Man et al., 2019, p. 207). Hybrid work collaborating organizations can learn from other design options but, in the end, they *must* reinvent or reimagine their "own" blended form.

In general, *hybridity* denotes the *blending* of features that are assumed to be distinct such as public–private partnerships. With regard to *hybrid work collaborating organizations*, the focus will be on hybridi*y* as the blending of *remote first (office occasional) and office first (remote allowed)* work arrangements. In organizations, people not only want and value the flexibility of "mixing" these two work arrangements but also include *room to move* (*where, why*, *how* and *with whom* they want to work) and their *room to grow*. If not, people will vote with their feet: "If we're not growing, we're going."

As collaboration is the driver for increasing performance within *hybrid work collaborating organizations* poorly designed physical and digital collaborative organizational forms will hamper the quality of collaboration (Boughzala & De Vreede, 2015; Cross & Carboni, 2021; Leonardi, 2021; Yang et al., 2022), productivity (Cross & Carboni, 2021; Leonardi, 2021) and the loss of spontaneous interactions. Especially the loss of watercooler moments in the virtual world where chance encounters have been replaced by "overconnectivity" forcing members of teams/communities/networks to connect more often, squeezing even more scheduled meetings in a day. In such an overconnected world with more meetings, people become overloaded living within the limits of their attention's resources. Within such organizations, "go-to" persons are being increasingly required to contribute repeatedly, there is a risk of them becoming overwhelmed, emotionally drained and /or burned out. Prioritize the time they spend on focused work and encourage to set boundaries to protect it (Cross, 2021; Cross & Carboni, 2021).

The question, however, is what people actually want and expect from an organization? In their report *The great executive—employee disconnect* (Future Forum Pulse, 2021), the Future Forum Pulse surveyed 10,569 knowledge employees in the US, Australia, France, Germany, Japan, and the UK between July 28 and August 10, 2021. The results showed that

flexible hybrid work practices are now deeply ingrained and valued, and that expectations are not budging. A total of 76% of the employees want flexibility in *where* they work, where 93% want flexibility in *when* they work. Moreover, hybrid work models should be based on employee preferences and prioritize employee-driven flexibility (Kossek et al., 2021). As an example, pharmaceutical company Novartis employs a "choice with responsibility" model that empowers employees to establish new norms around their work (Pavel, 2022). The policy shifts responsibility from manager-approved to manager-informed, empowering associates to choose how, where and when they work within their country of employment (Novartis, 2020). In other words, the interpretation of hybrid cooperation and collaboration becomes the result of the choices and preferences of the individuals within the organization.

Discussion

At the beginning of 2022, it became clear that organizations were neither going to "return to normal," nor did they establish any new predictable (work) routines. The Future Forum Pulse (2022) stated that "it's time to move past the 'remote versus office' debate. The future of work isn't either/or—it's both" (p. 3). With everything disrupted and in turmoil, many organizations were pioneering in reimagining hybrid work organizational forms. They continued to experiment—introducing so called work-from-anywhere (WFA) or work-from-wherever (WFW) approaches—and to share experiences. As outbreaks of new cases and variants of the COVID-19 ebb and flow hit the world, approximately 25% of the global working population (Gottlieb et al., 2020) has to deal with *embracing* the *hybrid paradox*, in which people want the flexibility to work from anywhere, anyhow, and with whom, but *simultaneously* desire more in-person connections. In hybrid work collaborating organizations, people want to be treated like adults—responsible humans capable of good choices. They want (radical) flexibility (Novartis, 2020; Pavel, 2022) and room to grow. Management has to clear about the growing concerns among employees about "proximity bias," or the risk that

in-office workers will receive preferential treatment simply by being physically closer to their managers.

In the meantime, employee expectations during 2022 will continue to *change*. Employees' answers to the question whether one prefers "working in one place versus another" is becoming increasingly contradictory—for example, some 23% of the Microsoft employees believe that the ability to conduct online meetings makes *working from home a desirable option*, while others (70%) believe *team collaboration is a reason to be together in person* (Microsoft, 2021). These contradictory results—that is, dilemmas—imply that every organization's approach will need to be *different* to meet the unique needs of their teams/communities/networks/ecosystems and other relevant stakeholders.

Hybrid organizing should not only be perceived as an employee-driven choice, but also as a strategic management choice. Management will be fostering an organization-wide culture of trust moving from span of *control* & narrow supervision to span of *support* & guidance and feedback to *really* work together in a creative and innovative process to generate concepts, try it out, don't hold them back, unleash their potential, allow them to fail, and the manager is there to *support*. Admit that the organization is experiencing things that we have not experienced before, and it is okay to say *we don't know*. Both choices will pave the way for realizing its desired level of competitive advantage. As hybrid work is idiosyncratic, every organization must discover its distinctive matching hybrid work collaborating organization to improve its performance, employee involvement and innovation power. This requires a holistic approach combining topics ranging from strategy, organizational design, change and transformation management, technology development and implementation (Van der Velden & Van Fenema, 2006).

In order to steer the transition to a hybrid work collaborative organization in the right direction, a number of dilemmas follow that need to be taken into account. Organizations are only as productive and value creating as the quality of the interactions that take place among people. Overall, organizations should develop a hybrid work collaboration strategy in which Activity-Based Working practices are defined; instigate interventions to create employee awareness and ownership and to increase hybrid work collaboration skills, competences and capabilities.

Furthermore, make hybrid collaboration capabilities part of the employee selection and learning and development requirements. And, last but not least, develop and provide a digital collaboration infrastructure (Leonardi, 2021) taking into account the team, organization, and ecosystem perspective, the culture of the organization, and the employees' needs.

Consequently, concepts such as Activity-Based Working (Eismann et al., 2022) will have to be further developed. This concept impacts the way offices are equipped and the demands on the communication infrastructure providing safe physical and virtual access for employees inside and outside the organization—including stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, and other trusted partners. It's already been discussed that collaboration means far more than a simple "willingness to work together" (Hill et al., 2014, p. 27). Sharing something in a distinctive way likely increases the number of "moments of value" (Lekanne Deprez, 2016). The focus must be on fostering a "psychologically safe climate"—for example, creating a "fearless organization" (Edmondson, 2018)—and where people feel able to speak up when needed, feel free to contribute ideas, share knowledge, report mistakes, and have constructive conflicts.

As teams often have their structured and inclusive collaboration patterns, this is not the case at organizational and ecosystem level. Facilitating accidental, random encounters and stimulating serendipitous occurrences at the organizational and ecosystem levels can have a positive effect here (Cross, 2021; Leonardi, 2021). Full-remote collaboration negatively impacts the development of an informal network at intra organizational level. Inter-team or interdepartmental interactions both on a formal and informal organizational level should be fostered (Gibson & Grushina, 2021). One needs a collaborative attitude to put all their experience, all their ideas, all their openness to failure to come together and really contribute to the fullest. As an example, onsite informal meetings should be part of the onboarding process for new employees as they not yet join the informal networks at interorganizational and ecosystem level. When looking at benefits, such as people being more productive at home and working longer hours, also weigh the costs such as high productivity of employees often masking an exhausted workforce (Microsoft, 2021). When dealing with remote workers that have switched off, engagement

will drop refocus, your key workers will become unhappy, become burned out, and plan to leave (Cable & Gino, 2021).

Provide the digital collaboration infrastructure (Leonardi, 2021) that is needed and enable seamless team support for online/offline collaboration. This implies that reliable tools will be provided to the employees that collaborate remotely. Also provide a secure and state-of-the-art digital infrastructure that enables communication within and outside the organizational boundaries. Redesign and reimagine hybrid collaboration organizations including hybrid workplaces and onsite offices (Fayard et al., 2021) with a better fit for Activity-Based Working (Eismann et al., 2022).

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