# Navigating Interactions, Relationships, Trust, and Collaboration in Hybrid Workplaces

## A Qualitative Study of Employees Working in MNCs

**Christos Akritidis**

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Supervisor: Vedran Omanović

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# Abstract

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how hybrid work has shaped interactions due to the partial absence of physical presence and the impact of these interactions in relationships and trust. Additionally, it will explore the role of managerial practices and communication technologies in shaping trust, relationships and collaboration in hybrid teams.

**Theory:** This thesis builds on the concepts of interactions, relationships, trust, and collaboration, and it applies SET and LMX to understand how these elements function in hybrid work. It incorporates interpersonal trust to examine trust between colleagues, but also employees with their managers. System trust is also employed to investigate whether employees place greater reliance on technology or leadership to facilitate trust, relationships and collaboration

**Method:** To explore these dynamics, a qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with ten hybrid employees in MNCs. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to identify participants with relevant hybrid work experience.

**Result:** This study reveals that trust and strong relationships with managers often resulted in greater informal flexibility that sometimes overrides formal policies. Trust and relationships among employees is built easier through in-person interactions, but it is also possible remotely depending on the person, its productivity and communication. Flexibility, autonomy, availability and engagement were theorized by employees as the most critical factors that a manager should do to gain their trust.

# Foreword

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and motivation throughout the course of this thesis project. I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Vedran Omanović, for his guidance and knowledge during these challenging months.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to my classmates, whose honest feedback and thoughtful insights during the review seminars contributed to the development of my work.

Most importantly, I want to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants that took part in my study. Thank you for sharing with me your valuable time, experiences and insights, this thesis would not have been possible without your contributions.

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# Table of contents


**1. Introduction ..... 1**

1.1 Problem statement ..... 2

1.2 Purpose and Research questions ..... 3

1.3 Disposition ..... 3

**2. Previous research ..... 5**

2.1 Hybrid work ..... 5

2.2 Benefits and Challenges of Hybrid Work ..... 6

2.3 Interactions and Relationships in Hybrid Work Environments ..... 7

2.4 The Role of Communication in Hybrid Work ..... 7

2.5 Interactions' importance on trust, relationships and collaboration ..... 9

2.6 Trust ..... 10

2.6.1 Definition and Types of Trust ..... 10

2.6.2 Building and Maintaining Trust ..... 10

2.6.3 Linking Trust with Collaboration and Performance ..... 11

2.7 Collaboration ..... 12

**3. Theory ..... 14**

3.1 Social Exchange Theory (SET) ..... 14

3.2 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) ..... 16

3.3 Theoretical Framework ..... 17

**4. Method ..... 18**

4.1 Research design ..... 18

4.2 Sampling strategy ..... 18

4.3 Data collection ..... 19

4.3.1 Interviews ..... 19

4.3.2 Interview guide ..... 21

4.4 Data analysis ..... 22

4.5 Ethical considerations ..... 24

**5. Results ..... 25**

5.1 Hybrid work ..... 25

5.1.1 Organizational policy and hybrid work flexibility ..... 25

5.1.2 Benefits of Hybrid Work ..... 27

5.1.3 Challenges ..... 29
5.2 Interactions ..... 31
5.2.1 Physical vs Remote interactions ..... 31
5.2.2 Informal interactions ..... 33
5.3 Relationships ..... 35
5.3.1 Building Connection and Relationships in hybrid environments ..... 35
5.3.2 Challenges and Differences in Remote and In-Person Relationships ..... 37
5.4 Trust in Hybrid Work Environments ..... 38
5.4.1 Criteria for building interpersonal trust ..... 38
5.4.2 Managers gaining employees' trust ..... 40
5.4.3 Barriers to trust ..... 41
5.4.4 System Trust ..... 42
5.5 Collaboration in Hybrid and Global Teams ..... 44
5.5.1 Hybrid Collaboration ..... 44
**6. Analysis and Discussion ..... 46**
6.1.1 Organizational policy and hybrid work flexibility ..... 46
6.1.2 Benefits of hybrid work ..... 47
6.1.3 Challenges ..... 47
6.1.4 Physical vs remote interactions ..... 49
6.1.5 Informal interactions ..... 50
6.1.6 Building connections in hybrid environments ..... 52
6.1.7 Challenges and Differences in Remote and In-Person Relationships ..... 53
6.1.8 Criteria for building interpersonal trust ..... 54
6.1.9 Managers gaining employees' trust ..... 55
6.1.10 Barriers to Trust ..... 56
6.1.11 System Trust ..... 57
6.1.12 Hybrid Collaboration ..... 58
**7. Conclusion ..... 60**
7.1 Practical implications ..... 61
7.2 Limitations and Future Research ..... 62
**8. References ..... 63**
**9. Appendix ..... 68**

# 1. Introduction

In March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a global pandemic due to the spread of Covid-19. This led many governments to declare full or partial lockdowns that drastically changed the lives of many people. This sudden shift forced many organizations to change the way they were operating in order to survive, pushing the transition from physically present work to work from home (WFH). This flexible arrangement was widely adopted by both private and public organizations and persisted not only during the pandemic but also in its aftermath. Post pandemic some companies returned to the office, others continued remote work, while many introduced hybrid work, which is a flexible arrangement combining remote and in-person work (Nakash & Bouhnik, 2023).

A critical enabler of this shift is the rapid evolution of communication technologies. Tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams facilitated this transition and enhanced the work experience. Although hybrid work may be the new way of working that offers new opportunities like flexibility, it also introduces significant challenges to organizational culture and daily work that need to be investigated (Sailer et al., 2023). The challenges include collaboration, trust, and workplace relationships, elements crucial for team dynamics and organizational success. Such challenges seem to occur due to the replacement or supplementation of face-to-face communication and interactions with communication technologies.

On the positive side, hybrid and remote work offer several advantages such as flexibility, job satisfaction and autonomy, which may eventually result in increased trust and commitment to the organization (Stavrova et al., 2023). Additionally, they can positively affect employees' work engagement that may lead to increased productivity and job performance. This could provide organizations with a competitive advantage over other competitors. These arrangements can also strengthen employees' work-life balance, allowing them to spend more time with their families by being there and without wasting time commuting. (Bollestad et al., 2022; Eng, Tjernberg, & Champoux-Larsson, 2024).

On the other hand, hybrid and remote work could pose several drawbacks for employees. Those arrangements could lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection

from their workplace due to lack of social interactions and difficulties in managing interpersonal relationships with other colleagues. These can negatively affect employee satisfaction and well-being. Employees also experience "Zoom fatigue" due to the continuous use of video conferencing, which can lead to exhaustion (Meluso et al., 2022; Bentley et al., 2016).

Even though the number of studies on remote and hybrid work is increasing, the majority of it has focused on outcomes such as productivity, work-life balance and technology. Less attention has been given to trust and relational creation and maintenance, but also the managerial impact on them, especially in hybrid work arrangements. Sailer et al. (2023) refers to such post pandemic challenges that hybrid working organizations are facing and suggest to further explore them. Such challenges regard how employees communicate, connect, collaborate and maintain trust, particularly in the partial absence of physical presence and interactions. This study addresses this gap by investigating employees' perspectives and experiences who work in multinational companies.

Ozkaya (2021) view hybrid work as the "new normal" and argue that the combination of both remote and in-office work makes it an ideal model, leveraging the strengths of both models while mitigating their respective drawbacks. This approach may provide long-term advantages for both employees and organizations in the near future. Yet, this evolving model also introduces new challenges regarding relationships, communication, trust and collaboration, which remain underexplored in academic research. This underscores the importance of further research and attention on hybrid work, as it has the potential to redefine the future of work (Eng, Tjernberg, & Champoux-Larsson, 2024).

## 1.1 Problem statement

Former studies have emphasized the workplace as a space purposefully designed to promote social interaction, enabling employees and managers to build relationships, communicate, and collaborate effectively (Meluso et al., 2022; Fayard & Weeks, 2007). Physicality has played a key role in trust-building and collaboration (Bond-Barnard et al., 2018). However, the rise of remote work has significantly diminished these face-to-face interactions, leading to challenges in relationship-building, trust development, and overall collaboration (Fayard, Weeks & Khan, M. 2021).

Hybrid work has emerged as a potential solution by allowing employees to return to the office for part of the week, offering opportunities for in-person communication. Yet, this model does not fully resolve the issue, as some employees work exclusively remotely, while others are primarily onsite, creating a fragmented work environment. This partial absence of physical presence may affect how relationships are formed, the levels of trust among employees and managers, and, ultimately, how effectively teams collaborate.

While previous research has extensively examined trust, relationships, and collaboration in remote and onsite work contexts, the hybrid model presents unique complexities, as it involves a dynamic mix of both. Limited research has explored how this hybrid structure influences interpersonal workplace dynamics, making it necessary to investigate its implications (Eng, Tjernberg, & Champoux-Larsson, 2024).

## 1.2 Purpose and Research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how hybrid work has shaped interactions due to the partial absence of physical presence and the impact of these interactions in relationships and trust. Additionally, it will explore the role of managerial practices and communication technologies in shaping trust, relationships and collaboration in hybrid teams. Based on the purpose of this study the following questions raised:

- How do employees interact in hybrid work environments, and in what ways does the absence of physical presence affect these interactions?
- How do hybrid interactions influence the development and maintenance of interpersonal trust and relationships between colleagues and managers?
- What roles do communication technologies and managerial practices play in facilitating or hindering trust, relationship-building, and collaboration in hybrid teams?

## 1.3 Disposition

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the background of the study, outlines the research problem and presents the purpose and research questions that need to be answered. The second chapter examines relevant previous research and identifying gaps in the literature regarding interactions, relationships, trust and collaboration. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework that this study is based

upon, focusing on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). Chapter 4 outlines the study's methodological approach, including sampling strategy, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the results derived from interviews with employees working in multinational companies in Greece, Germany and Sweden. Chapter 6 provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of the results, linking them to previous research, research questions and theoretical framework. Finally, chapter 7 offers concluding reflections, summarizes key findings and provides suggestions for future research.

# 2. Previous research

## 2.1 Hybrid work

The pandemic has altered the preferences of many employees in favor of remote and hybrid work. According to Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2023) remote and hybrid work are considered flexible working arrangements (FWA) allowing employees to choose the time and place of their work. However, these arrangements are unique in nature and their implementation is based on information and communication technologies (ICT).

Remote work was initially introduced as teleworking in the 2000s when ICT got more advanced. Telework is defined by Di Martino and Wirth (1990) as "… a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, with no personal contact with coworkers, but the ability to communicate with co-workers using ICT" (as cited in Bentley at el., 2016). Over the years, various terms such as remote work, telecommuting, distributed work, and virtual work have been used by many scholars interchangeably to describe teleworking (Gohoungodji, N'Dri, & Matos, 2023). However, in this thesis only the term of remote work will be used in order to avoid misunderstandings by using multiple terms.

In contrast, hybrid work is a distinct and increasingly popular approach that emerged after Covid-19. It encompasses both remote and in office work and allows employees to divide their time and days of work between these two modes (Wu et al., 2023 & Sailer et al., 2023). A key aspect of hybrid is the degree of remoteness, which indicates the time allocation of one's work remotely opposed to in office. This is a critical measurement, as various levels of remoteness may influence employee experiences and opinions, including relationships, trust levels and collaboration with colleagues or managers (Wu et al., 2023).

Building on this, this thesis explores how the degree of remoteness affects relationships, level of trust and collaboration between, for example employees that work hybrid to their remote colleagues or vice versa. By understanding how the degree of remoteness impact hybrid group dynamics, managers could build a clear picture that will help them create strategies, policies and how to better compose teams.

## 2.2 Benefits and Challenges of Hybrid Work

Hybrid work offers advantages that could moderate many of the disadvantages associated with fully remote settings. Halford (2005) predicted that hybrid work will offer employees improved flexibility and autonomy, allowing them to schedule their working hours and locations according to their needs. This flexibility may alleviate the isolation and loneliness often linked to fully remote work, which limits physical presence, informal interactions and the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Bollestad et al., 2023). By bringing employees back to the office for part of the week, enabling them face to face communication with co-workers may lead to increased collaboration and a culture of inclusivity (Rahmatullah et al., 2024). According to Eng et al. (2024) such factors contribute to a healthy environment that is characterized by employees' work-life balance and well-being.

At the same time hybrid work presents several challenges. According to Gohoungodji et al. (2023), trust, relationships, communication and collaboration are some of the most crucial factors that lead to successful remote work. These factors are also essential for hybrid work, where communication through ICT and partial absence of physical presence may complicate interactions between employees. While important, these elements were also posed as challenges on remote work, but in hybrid environments another layer of difficulty is added due to the coexistence of remote and on-site employees (Ozkaya, I., 2021). Additionally, without the provision of the proper tools and technology to foster them, along with the support of managers, these benefits may not be realized (Wu et al., 2023; Gohoungodji et al. 2023). Bula et al. (2024) argue that although tools and processes play an essential role, trust is the key determinant of success in hybrid work.

While hybrid work employees have been associated with reduced stress, improving productivity and work life balance (Bula et al., 2024; Eng et al. 2024), managers often report increased stress. They face the challenge of overseeing, while simultaneously ensuring fair treatment and satisfaction among hybrid teams (Sailer et al., 2023). Managers are a crucial part of a company, as they play a vital role in fostering trust, relationships, communication, and collaboration. They are responsible for developing effective strategies and policies, as well as ensuring the efficient use of communication technologies to support their implementation (Gohoungodji et al., 2023).

While hybrid work presents clear advantages, it also introduces new challenges that affect employees and managers differently. Understanding how trust, relationships, and collaboration evolve in this hybrid setting remains an area requiring further research, particularly given the growing adoption of this model in the post-pandemic workplace.

## 2.3 Interactions and Relationships in Hybrid Work Environments

Traditionally, physical workplaces have played a crucial role as a social function that could foster social talks, informal relationships and unplanned social interactions like water cooler conversations (Sailer et al., 2023). However, with the onset of Covid-19 and remote work the nature of social interactions and relationships has significantly altered due to the absence of physical presence and the reliance on communication via technology.

Meluso et al. (2022) stress that lockdowns made people value human interactions, connections and the relationships that they build, making them a critical factor in shaping the future of work environments. Many scholars have long engaged in the design of workspaces, whether initially physical or afterwards virtual and nowadays hybrid, from an architectural and social perspective to enable co-existence, formal and informal communication and relationship creation with the use of photocopiers or communication technologies. These studies emphasize the importance of structured and spontaneous interactions in fostering workplace cohesion (Meluso et al., 2022; Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Fayard, Weeks & Khan, M. 2021).

This thesis may offer valuable insights into workplace design by exploring the strengths and challenges that hybrid models present for interactions and group dynamics. Investigating managers' strategies, understanding what employees value most, and examining how managers can enhance scheduling and activities to foster informal interactions from employees' perspective could provide useful findings. Similarly, analyzing the use of communication technologies and their optimal implementation can contribute to more effective workplace strategies and interactions.

## 2.4 The Role of Communication in Hybrid Work

Effective communication is essential in hybrid contexts and their success, but when not managed properly, it can lead to detrimental effects. Managers play a crucial role in ensuring information sharing, maintaining frequent communication and providing

feedback. All of these could contribute to fostering formal and informal interactions, inclusivity, connection and a sense of belonging among remote and office workers (Bula et al., 2024). However, the complexity of communication in a hybrid workplace often leads to disputes due to the lack of spontaneity in interactions. Additionally, digital communication tools have limitations, as they often fail to fully replicate face-to-face communication, which encompasses not only verbal exchanges but also essential non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, that help facilitate information flow and prevent misunderstandings (Bleakley et al., 2022; Schaubroeck & Yu, 2017; Bula et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, researchers, managers, and IT experts are developing strategies and tools to enhance digital communication. For example, Bleakley et al. (2021) proposes a new and fresh perspective to fostering informal interactions like water cooler conversations, by using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to simulate social interactions and relationship-building. These video conferencing (VC) tools provide remote workers with opportunities to have a social talk, helping them to foster bonds, relationships and collaboration with colleagues. However, on a hybrid workplace, remote workers might not be included in conversations or other social interactions due to the fact that office employees might create stronger bonds with other on-site colleagues because they share the same physical space (Graevenstein, J., 2023).

Emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) offer innovative solutions for enhancing social presence and interaction. McVeigh-Schultz and Isbister (2022) turn the attention to VR as a medium of communication that goes beyond the traditional CMC tools. VR not only can show facial cues, but also can facilitate the embodiment of someone’s social presence. This may enable teams and individuals to explore new and alternative ways to interact that may result in connection, collaboration and trust. Similarly, Wu et al. (2023) claim that the ease to use CMC tools like social media platforms have enabled employees to preserve work related relationships with their colleagues.

Since remote and hybrid work represent the future of organizational workplaces and heavily depend on CMC tools, a key concept of this thesis, it is essential to investigate from employees' lens how these tools can be improved, what features may be lacking, and how they can be better utilized. By acknowledging these suggestions, managers

can gain valuable insights into the necessary adjustments and areas that require greater focus to enhance workplace communication, collaboration, and overall employee experience.

## 2.5 Interactions' importance on trust, relationships and collaboration

Despite the effectiveness of the technology employed by companies, previous studies argue that in-person interactions are difficult to be replaced, and they remain essential for fostering better collaboration and building trust (Bula et al., 2024; Fayard, Weeks & Khan, M. 2021). Fayard and Weeks (2007) investigate the crucial role of informal interaction, which is a spontaneous meeting between colleagues, on strengthening trust and collaboration on physical work environments, such as the office or shared spaces like the photocopy area. They also mention that a discussion on these places could grow stronger relationships between colleagues by not only talking about work but for personal matters as well and this could lead to creating a sense of community in a workplace. Informal communication about personal life like family may result in increased commitment and colleagues' relationships (Fay & Kline, 2011). Additionally, Fayard, Weekupd and Khan (2021) emphasize that human moments are those that create relationships and end up in trusting each other and that informal interactions could enhance team collaboration.

In office relationships with colleagues can be described by advanced trust and interactions that could provide better information flow and social support, leading to enhanced job performance. In contrast, remote employees face barriers and have less opportunities for informal communication and relationship creation, notwithstanding their significance (Fay & Kline, 2011). Research by Yakubovich and Burg (2019) highlights the creation of informal ties through formal interdependence, where employees form relationships by work interactions on a common assignment or project. This process applies for employees that had never worked or met before in the past too. Doing an interdependent task supported by trust may result in new relationships, successful collaboration and team effectiveness (Yakubovich, & Burg, 2019 & Bulińska-Stangrecka, & Bagieńska, 2019).

Overall, while hybrid work presents opportunities to combine the benefits of remote and on-site work, it also introduces challenges in maintaining relationships, trust, and

collaboration. Addressing these challenges requires intentional efforts from organizations, managers, and employees to create inclusive, communicative, and trust-driven hybrid workplaces.

## 2.6 Trust

### 2.6.1 Definition and Types of Trust

Trust is a fundamental element of a strong organizational culture, and, alongside autonomy, they play a crucial role in facilitating successful hybrid and remote work (Gohoungodji, N'Dri, & Matos, 2023; Graevenstein, J., 2023). Mayer et al. (1995), as cited by Sarker et al. (2011), describes trust as the "willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party, based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party".

In accordance with Bulińska-Stangrecka, & Bagieńska (2019) there are three types of trust in an organization: the first is interorganizational trust, which refers to trust between two organizations. The second is intra-organizational trust, which explains the trust between employees and their organizations. Finally, the third is interpersonal trust, which characterizes the relationships between employees, and employees with managers of an organization.

However, in this new complex environment with so much reliance on communication technologies another type of trust occurs, which is called 'System' trust. This refers to trust that employees place in virtual communication tools and platforms. (Cheng et al., 2016). Cheng et al. (2016) highlight that trust in technology is essential for effective collaboration, particularly in environments where digital interactions replace traditional face-to-face engagement.

### 2.6.2 Building and Maintaining Trust

In hybrid and remote work settings, trust development is complex. Stavrova et al. (2023) examined intra-organizational and interpersonal trust (towards co-workers and supervisors) in remote settings. They found that working more hours from home tends to strengthen trust in the organization, but not in managers and colleagues. Prior interactions and relationships, shared experiences, and past collaborations between colleagues, termed as imported trust, can significantly impact the level of trust in team-

based assignment. Trust is also a determinant of creating bonds among team members, facilitating efficient team management (Bulińska-Stangrecka, & Bagieńska, 2019).

In remote and hybrid environments, trust is closely linked to communication and autonomy. By promoting transparency and openness but also enabling employees to be accountable about their own work, agile leaders promote and contribute to a culture of trust, which, in turn, attracts and retains talent (Graevenstein, J., 2023). Trust evolves through the continuous information flow through communication channels, whether via face-to-face meetings (formal and informal) or technology that could lead to effectiveness and performance (Bond-Barnard et al., 2018; Meluso et al., 2022; Bulińska-Stangrecka, & Bagieńska, 2019). Furthermore, trust is earned in a team project, when everyone is conducting their work properly as promised. When trust exists in a team, its members are more likely to take risks, communicate openly, and seek help, ultimately reducing stress (Bond-Barnard et al., 2018).

However, hybrid team composition introduces challenges that may hinder trust development. Communication barriers in virtual settings can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties in relationship-building (Grobelny, 2023). This is particularly challenging due to the nature of communication through technology. Although, leaders could mediate this by maintaining regular and meaningful communication, fostering an environment characterized by social interactions that could bridge the physical distance between the team members (Schaubroeck, & Yu, 2017). Effective managerial support can further enhance trust and communication, ultimately improving remote work's success (Gohoungodji, N'Dri, & Matos, 2023).

The absence of shared physical space can also challenge trust-building in hybrid and remote teams. Managers must actively foster relationships, team bonding, and informal social interactions to compensate for reduced physical presence (Graevenstein, 2023). Moreover, physical presence and interpersonal trust are interrelated and that is why hybrid teams, which occasionally share physical space, may benefit from stronger trust compared to fully remote teams (Cheng et al., 2016).

### 2.6.3 Linking Trust with Collaboration and Performance

Trust within a team plays a crucial role in overcoming crises and uncertainty, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. High levels of trust between employees and managers are instrumental in maintaining team performance and job satisfaction

(Colquitt et al., 2007; Franken et al., 2021; Schaubroeck & Yu, 2017). Bond-Barnard et al. (2018) underpin that working relationships among employees could foster team collaboration, especially when they are trust-driven.

Previous studies established a clear link between trust and collaboration. For example, Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska (2019) highlight that HR practices can strengthen interpersonal trust, ultimately driving effective collaboration and innovation. One such practice is interdependent task assignment, which not only fosters relationships and collaboration but also enhances trust by ensuring workload is shared equitably. Similarly, Bond-Barnard et al. (2018) predict that teams with high levels of trust and collaboration are more likely to achieve project success.

## 2.7 Collaboration

Modern workplaces have evolved into team-based, relationship-oriented, and highly collaborative environments (Chan et al., 2007; Schaubroeck & Yu, 2017; Bentley et al., 2016). However, the shift to remote and hybrid work presents significant challenges and complexities to collaboration (Ozkaya, 2021; Rahmatullah et al., 2024). According to Bond-Barnard et al. (2018) collaboration can be defined as collective work with colleagues, either co-located or remote to reach a common goal.

Nevertheless, this thesis adopts the concept of hybrid collaboration, which is classified as a computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) and defined as 1) frequent shifts between in-person and remote collaboration, as well as between real-time and asynchronous interactions, 2) various methods of working together, known as "coupling styles," which can exist simultaneously within a team and 3) team members in order to collaborate, they are utilizing multiple software applications and hardware devices simultaneously rather than depending on a single tool.

This can be depicted to some degree by a framework called Hugin, which refers to mixed-presence context (hybrid workplace) and works as a coordinating toolkit to support hybrid collaboration by utilizing a space-time collaboration matrix (Kim et al., 2010). This matrix encompasses four different combinations of time and space. The first is when individuals collaborate at the same time in the same place, which is called synchronous co-located collaboration. The second is when colleagues collaborate at the same time but from a different place, which is referred to as synchronous distributed collaboration. The third is asynchronous co-located, where team members collaborate

at a different time, but they share the same space. Last but not least, is the asynchronous distributed, where individuals collaborate at different times and spaces. It is crucial to note that to achieve those types of collaboration the use of technology is necessary. Importantly, Neumayr et al. (2022) emphasize that modern ICT systems allow collaboration to move fluidly across different quadrants of this matrix.

Since hybrid work incorporates elements of remoteness, collaboration technologies are essential for ensuring effective communication, interactions and collaboration within hybrid teams. These elements together form team dynamics, which require trust and mutual respect to be optimized (Rahmatullah et al., 2024). By learning how to successfully utilize team dynamics, organizations and managers can build a collaborative culture. To ensure this in a hybrid workplace, organizations must emphasize the use of ICT tools. However, simply implementing technology is not enough. Remote and on-site employees, as well as managers, must possess the necessary digital skills to navigate this complex work environment effectively and avoid possible misalignments (Eng et al., 2024). Additionally, successful hybrid collaboration depends on the design of flexible strategies and workplace practices to bridge gaps between employees across different work settings (Meluso et al., 2022).

While ICT enables hybrid collaboration, they pose challenges, especially through the reduction of social interactions and social presence (Marques et al., 2024; Eng et al., 2024). Short et al. (1976) term social presence as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships...” (p. 65). Higher levels of social presence are associated with improved collaboration and stronger team cohesion, which is a key determinant of collaboration (Marques et al., 2024; Bond-Barnard et al., 2018). Interactions and relationships are fundamental to successful collaboration. According to Wu et al. (2023) by understanding how they function in a hybrid model will give insights to organize work and evolve collaboration strategies and technologies.

# 3. Theory

## 3.1 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

According to Ahmad et al. (2023) the social exchange theory is a broad theoretical concept that dates back to 1920s and is spread across many fields like psychology, sociology and anthropology. There are many contributors to this theory, but some of the key theorists were Homans (1958) and Blau (1964), who laid the groundwork for understanding social behavior as a series of reciprocal exchanges.

SET is fundamentally based on the idea that social exchanges are interdepended interactions that are dependent on the actions or behaviors of another actor (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The definition adopted for this study is from Cropanzano et al. (2017): (1) The initial behavior or action by an actor toward a target person, (2) the person's mutual responses, that may be both attitudes and actions, to that behavior, and (3) the development of their relationship.

In the initial behavior or act of an actor there can be positive and negative actions such as helping or displaying disrespectful behavior to a colleague. Then there is the reciprocating response from the other actor. These can be both positive and negative actions and attitudes that may lead to economic exchange relationships or social exchange relationships among the participants (Colquitt et al., 2007). The economic ones are fair exchanges that contain less emotional involvement, greater control, and limited trust, while the social exchanges are marked by openness, trust, long-term commitment, mutual respect and flexibility in their relationships (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

However, economic exchanges may evolve into social exchanges through repeated, positive, and beneficial interactions over time. In general, there are countless combinations and results on the social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Besides social and economic exchanges and transactions, there are also psychological ones which are continuous, inactive and are difficult to trace (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Another critical component of SET is the recipient's perception of the relationship, that may result in various scenarios. The first is how they perceive their relationship with the actor that initially behaved to the target good or bad and the second is the way they finally behave to this actor with intentions to harm or help (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

All those exchanges and transactions could lead to relationships of trust, commitment and loyalty, but also to bad reciprocating responses like organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). For instance, if a person perceives a manager's behavior as trustworthy and supportive, they may reciprocate with commitment and collaboration, but if not, they might withhold effort or even engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

According to Cropanzano et al. (2017), SET is closely related to trust and needs to be examined across various referents of trust like those mentioned above (interpersonal, interorganizational and intra-organizational). In this way SET can expect that a positive initiating action would increase trust and this will lead to positive responses. Similarly, support and justice are recurring themes within SET literature (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). One referent is organizational support which argues that when employees perceive they are supported and rewarded fairly by the organization, they are more likely to reciprocate with loyalty and higher performance. This referent splits into two parts the supportive organization and the supportive teammates, while another referent occurred, which involves managers, that is called supportive managers. For instance, providing social support, which can be a positive action, to a colleague is beneficial because it can lead to building better interpersonal relationships (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska (2019) extend SET by showing how trust-based exchanges, particularly when facilitated by supportive HR practices, can promote collaboration and innovation. Trust is a fundamental element of SET because without it the development of effective social exchange relationships seems difficult (Colquitt et al., 2007). More recently, Torro et al. (2022) linked SET with media synchronicity theory to examine how synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies influence trust among coworkers. Their findings emphasize that the type of ICT used can either support or hinder the development of trust.

Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2023) applied SET in the context of hybrid work prior to the pandemic, comparing two public agencies that differed in how they approached flexibility. The one treated flexibility as a privilege and the other as a formalized norm. Through qualitative interviews with 20 flexible employees and managers, the researchers examined whether the flexibility granted to employees was perceived as

something that required reciprocation. The findings revealed that all interviewees viewed flexibility as a privilege, and they felt that they needed to give something in return. They also studied leaders' role in shaping these exchanges. This thesis differs from their study by applying SET in the post-pandemic era, with a focus on whether additional flexibility, beyond formal organizational policies, contributes to higher quality relationships and trust between colleagues and managers

## 3.2 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

Social Exchange Theory is not a single theory but encompasses a series of related constructs and models like Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). LMX focuses on the quality of relationships between leaders (e.g., managers) and their team members and is adopted in this thesis to better capture these interpersonal relationships (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018) Originally developed by Graen in the 1970s, LMX can be analyzed at the individual, team, and organizational levels, and it can be assessed from both managerial and employee perspectives (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

Like SET, LMX is grounded in exchanges and reciprocity (Schyns & Day, 2010). High quality LMX is based on social exchanges and as a result relationships are marked by trust, frequent interaction, and mutual influence, fostering cooperative dynamics (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). In contrast, low-quality LMX is often characterized by formal, transactional relationships where employees contribute only what is formally required (Brower et al., 2000). Relationships' quality often evolve over time, especially in cases where employees have never worked in a common project before. Additionally, perceptions of LMX quality may differ between the leader and the team member, underlining the subjective and evolving nature of LMX (Schyns & Day, 2010).

According to Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018), the rise of remote and hybrid work, enabled by advancements in technology, has significantly altered traditional leader-employee relationships. They claim that due to reduced physical presence and interaction such relationships have evolved and challenged, suggesting the need to adapt SET's traditional principles to the hybrid context. Greimel, Kanbach, and Chelaru (2023) examine the connection between LMX and job satisfaction in remote contexts, noting the managerial influence on trust and interpersonal relationships, which is challenged by the absence of physical presence and interactions. They also refer to

collaboration tools, their utilization and informal collaboration like virtual coffee chats that enable team members to get to know each other better and build connection.

SET and LMX are the primary theories of this thesis. These theories will be used to analyze how interactions have evolved due to the hybrid work model and the relationships that emerge as a result. Previous studies, as mentioned above, have established a connection between interactions, relationships, trust, and collaboration using these theories. However, they primarily focus on on-site and remote work, leaving a research gap in the context of hybrid workplaces. Given the unique dynamics of hybrid work, the findings may differ significantly from other work arrangements.

## 3.3 Theoretical Framework

This thesis builds on the concepts of interactions, relationships, trust, and collaboration, and it applies SET and LMX to understand how these elements function in hybrid work. These theories combined with insights from previous research will provide the theoretical framework. SET is used to examine whether workplace interactions or exchanges like productivity lead to trust-based relationships in hybrid teams. It provides insight into how social interactions (formal and informal) shape trust, meaning face-to-face and virtual interactions between hybrid workers and how they shape levels of trust, relationships and eventually collaboration. LMX theory is applied to analyze employee-leader relationships and explore what employees expect in return for their trust in leadership, but also what they need from their leaders to gain their trust. This will help determine whether high-quality leader-member exchanges foster better collaboration and stronger team cohesion.

Moreover, the type of trust that is used is interpersonal, which refers to trust between colleagues, but also employees with their managers. The framework also incorporates System Trust to investigate whether employees place greater reliance on technology (ICT) or leadership to facilitate trust, relationships and collaboration. This will help determine whether trust in digital systems enhances or hinders team dynamics. By examining these elements together, this study aims to assess how trust (interpersonal and system), interactions, relationships and leadership impact collaboration in hybrid teams. The combination of previous research and theoretical framework aims to answer the research questions and will provide the foundation for analyzing the findings and drawing conclusions on the effectiveness of hybrid work.

# 4. Method

## 4.1 Research design

The aim of this research is to examine the impact of the partial or complete absence of physical interactions on relationships, trust and collaboration between employees, their colleagues and their managers in a hybrid workplace. To fulfill the aim of this thesis, the research is designed based on qualitative methods that will be adopted for in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences and perspectives. By capturing participants' views and experiences, this approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. To achieve this objective, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide specifically designed to address the research questions outlined earlier. Further details regarding the data collection process will be provided in the corresponding section.

## 4.2 Sampling strategy

The identification of suitable interviewees and organizations for this study was based on the purpose and research questions. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to enable the proper selection of participants (Flick, 2014). Initially, the focus was on finding managers working in hybrid roles within the IT sector. However, it was later determined that exploring the perspectives of hybrid employees in multinational corporations (MNCs) would provide more valuable insights. Employees in hybrid workplaces are particularly well-suited for this research as they can offer insights into team dynamics and interactions from a distinct point of view compared to managers, due to their daily socialization and collaboration with colleagues and leaders both physically and via technology.

The choice to focus on MNCs is significant, as these organizations present distinctive working conditions. Employees not only interact with colleagues who share the office space on certain days but also collaborate with global teams they have never met in person, relying solely on CMC. This contrast provides a valuable opportunity to compare hybrid collaboration with fully remote collaboration. Additionally, MNCs are typically large in size, often featuring established hybrid work policies. The dynamic nature of these organizations, where employees may simultaneously take on managerial roles in various projects, further enriches the data collected for this study.

The participant recruitment process began by creating a list of potential candidates based on acquaintances who met the aforementioned criteria. Initial contact was made through social media, followed by an interview invitation, which was written based on a guiding script that the university provides. The invitation included details about the study's purpose, how the data will be utilized and will be secured, some ethical considerations like anonymity and confidentiality, and finally instructions on how participants could contact the researcher.

To expand the participant pool, a snowball sampling technique was employed. This method involved asking initial participants to recommend colleagues or contacts within their network who also met the study's criteria (Noy, 2008). Thus, the acquaintances further transferred the invitation to colleagues or others from their inner circle that were fulfilling the criteria. Then, interviews were scheduled either through the acquaintances or with direct communication with the participants.

## 4.3 Data collection

### 4.3.1 Interviews

The primary data for this thesis was gathered through a series of 10 interviews. Nine of these interviews were conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams, while one was conducted in person (P1). The first five interviews took place in March, and the remaining five were conducted during April. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 60 minutes. All interviews conducted in English except the one of participant 6 that was in Greek. The participants were between the ages of 29-38 and were working in six different companies. The companies while MNCs they were located two in Sweden, one Germany and four in Greece.

With participants' permission, all interviews were recorded and transcribed using the app of MS Teams, even the one that is held in person, because the application can offer automatic transcription of the recorded interviews. Following the interviews, the transcription files were carefully reviewed to identify and correct any errors, missing content, or misheard words to ensure accuracy. To maintain participant confidentiality, all identifying information related to the interviewees and their respective companies was anonymized during the transcription review process.

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured, featuring open-ended questions to encourage participants to share detailed insights. This flexible approach also allowed for the inclusion of follow-up questions that were not originally part of the interview guide, enhancing the depth and quality of the collected data (Charmaz, 2014). This method proved particularly valuable, as it enabled a deeper exploration of concepts, challenges, and patterns that had not been initially identified during the secondary data collection but emerged naturally through the interviews and the additional questions.

*Table 1. Participants table*

| Participants | Age | Level of remoteness | Team | Date | Length | Company | Country |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | 32 | 1 day home/ 4 days office | Local and global | 2025-03-08 | 44 min. | Company A | Sweden |
| P2 | 31 | 2-3 days home/ 2-3 days office | Local and global | 2025-03-11 | 48 min. | Company B | Germany |
| P3 | 34 | 3-4 days home/ 1-2 days office | Local and global | 2025-03-14 | 60 min. | Company B | Germany |
| P4 | 31 | 2-3 days home/ 2-3 days office | Local and global | 2025-03-19 | 48 min. | Company B | Germany |
| P5 | 38 | 2-3 days home/ 2-3 days office | Local and global | 2025-04-02 | 50 min. | Company C | Greece |
| P6 | 29 | 2 days home/ 3 days office | Local | 2025-04-09 | 52 min. | Company D | Greece |
| P7 | 33 | 1 day home/ 4 days office | Local | 2025-04-10 | 42 min. | Company E | Sweden |
| P8 | 32 | 4 days home/ 1 day office | Local and global | 2025-04-11 | 34 min. | Company F | Greece |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P9 | 35 | 2-3 days home/ 2-3 days office | Local and global | 2025-04-23 | 48 min. | Company C | Greece |
| P10 | 31 | 1 day home/ 4 days office | Local and global | 2025-04-24 | 44 min. | Company C | Greece |

### 4.3.2 Interview guide

Before conducting the interviews, an interview guide was created to provide structure and ensure consistency throughout the interview process. The guide was developed based on insights from previous research and the study's research questions. The interview begins with an introductory section designed to gather background information about the participants. This includes questions about their professional background, the organization they work for, their roles and responsibilities, and any career challenges they have faced.

The second theme focuses on hybrid work arrangements. Participants are asked about their level of remoteness, the flexibility of their work arrangements, and whether these arrangements apply uniformly across the organization or vary based on roles and responsibilities. Additional questions address whether hybrid arrangements are policy-driven, about employees' team compositions, and collaborations on projects with departments in other countries. This section not only helps the interviewer understand and map the participants' work environments but also determines if follow-up questions in subsequent sections should be adjusted or added. Participants are also asked about the challenges and benefits of hybrid work, as well as their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and fully remote work. These insights enable comparisons based on varying degrees of remoteness and the flexibility offered by different organizations.

The following three sections aim to explore how hybrid work has influenced employees' interactions, relationships, trust, and collaboration with their colleagues and managers. These questions are designed to uncover potential challenges and provide insights that address the study's first and second research questions. Subsequent themes focus on the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Participants are asked about any challenges they face with the tools they use, whether improvements are needed, and

how effectively managers utilize them. These insights are intended to answer the third research question.

The final section includes concluding questions that invite participants to reflect on what they consider important in a hybrid workplace concerning the key themes of this thesis. Participants are also asked what managers should do to support these elements. To ensure participants had an opportunity to voice additional thoughts, they were asked if there was anything else they would like to add. Finally, they were thanked for their time and valuable insights. The full interview guide can be found in the appendix chapter.

## 4.4 Data analysis

This thesis adopts an abductive approach as its analytical strategy. This involves the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary data, sourced from previous research, theories, and interviews, before systematically studying, coding, and interpreting the information. The analysis and discussion part required the continuous movement between the research question, previous research, theoretical framework and findings. This iterative process enabled the refinement, addition or removal of information to create conceptual connection between the various chapters of the thesis (Charmaz, 2014).

The analytical method employed is grounded theory coding, which begins with the collection of interview data, followed by recording, transcription, and translation (if conducted in Greek), carried out simultaneously with the analysis process (Charmaz, 2014). As previously mentioned, the interviews were recorded and transcribed through Teams and were carefully reviewed by replaying the recordings and rereading the transcripts. This step was undertaken to reduce mistakes on the transcription and ensure their authenticity. For the interview that initially conducted in Greek, the transcript was first transcribed in Greek and then carefully translated into English using Microsoft's Word translation. The translated text was reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the original meaning. During this process, certain phrases or words were adjusted to align with the terminology used throughout the thesis, enhancing consistency and coherence.

Following the refinement of transcripts and familiarization with them, the first stage of their analysis was initial coding that involved a detailed examination of every line of

the transcriptions to identify key words, phrases, and patterns. This was followed by focused coding, where similarities and differences across transcripts were acknowledged, enabling the organization and categorization of data (Saldaña, 2009). Additionally, relevant data were connected and compared with theoretical framework and previous research, leading to the emergence of the study's final findings (Charmaz, 2014). The presentation of the results contained both initial and focus codes, while the analysis and discussion were based only on the initial codes. Finally, according to Charmaz (2014) the main advantage of the grounded theory coding is the flexibility that provides to gather data and simultaneously analyze them, to use comparative methods and theoretical sampling, but also possible gaps may be identified in current theories and new theories may emerge.

*Table 2: Summary of initial and focus codes*

| **Initial codes** | **Focus codes** |
|---|---|
| • Organizational policy and hybrid work flexibility<br>• Benefits of Hybrid Work<br>• Challenges | Hybrid work |
| • Physical vs Remote interactions<br>• Informal interactions | Interactions |
| • Building Connection and Relationships in Hybrid Environments<br>• Challenges and Differences in Remote and In-Person Relationships | Relationships |
| • Criteria for building interpersonal trust<br>• Managers gaining employees' trust<br>• Barriers to trust<br>• System Trust | Trust in Hybrid Work Environments |
| • Hybrid Collaboration | Collaboration in Hybrid and Global Teams |

## 4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental to this research project, ensuring that participants' rights and well-being are respected throughout the process. Key principles include confidentiality, transparency, anonymity, and data protection, as outlined by Flick (2014). Participants were fully informed about these principles before their involvement, including details on how their data would be used, stored, and protected. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. During the interviews, participants had the option to decline answering any question or to stop the interview altogether. As the researcher, I committed to respecting participants' privacy. Therefore, participants were assured that their interviews would be accessible only to me, and that the transcripts would be anonymized and shared solely with authorized individuals. Given that trust can be a sensitive topic, special care was taken to design the interview guide in a way that minimizes the risk of misunderstandings. Additionally, AI was used in accordance with University's guidelines and was strictly limited to improving grammar and refining the composition of pre-written text.

# 5. Results

## 5.1 Hybrid work

The first focus code that emerged from the grounded theory analysis is *Hybrid Work*, which encompasses the flexible work arrangements experienced by participants. This overarching theme was constructed from several initial codes identified during the coding process that will be described in the sections below.

### 5.1.1 Organizational policy and hybrid work flexibility

This initial code explores companies' policies that determine the division of time between remote and on-site work, as well as how flexible these policies are in practice. While most participants indicated the existence of formal hybrid work policies, there was variation in how strictly these were enforced. The respondents indicated that their companies have established formal policies, but not all employees experience these policies in the same way. One participant highlighted that there was no specific policy, and the level of remoteness varied depending on the roles and contracts employees held with the company:

> *"We have people that have fixed contracts. So, they only work on site and the more senior people mostly work hybrid and most of their time from home."* (P7)

Another participant mentioned that employees officially had the right to work one day from home, but the company also provided additional options for flexibility such as flexible hours that allowed employees to arrive and leave earlier. However, when asked about the formal policy, the participant described it as highly flexible, and dependent on the level of trust between managers and employees, as well as the criticality of the period:

> *"There is no specific policy, but it depends on the employees that are working within the team… if there is a high trust between the department or the group manager and the team that is working with, they give them more flexibility to work hybrid… if it's a critical period, this policy change, that means you need to be on site five days a week.."* (P1)

Participants noted that while their companies adhered to formal policies, exceptions were made in specific cases such as health issues or childcare needs or technical

problems at home. Even within the same company, hybrid work policies were not always applied uniformly. One participant described that although the company officially enforced 60% office and 40% remote work policy, some departments deviated from this standard and created their own rules:

> *"Yeah, yeah, everybody's hybrid. There are some guys who are more in the Home Office because, for example, they have no driver's license… They make their own 80/20 rule, for example."* (P3)

Another participant explained that while there was a formal policy requiring two and a half days in the office from day one, there were variations across roles. For example, her manager worked fully remote, and her department was not strictly following the official policy:

> *"My role required our presence at the Office for the first six months… after the completion of the first year at the company we can have like 2 1/2 days like two or three days per week remote."* (P10)

A recurring pattern was the role of trust between employees and managers. Participants explained how trust in their ability to deliver work often granted them additional flexibility, including extended periods of remote work or even working from abroad:

> *"… in the past the manager saw that I'm always on time from within my delivery and… told me I don't really care if you want to be in the office or not, if I want to take a vacation or work from abroad for three weeks straight, which I did last year, actually."* (P1)

However, trust also worked in the opposite direction, especially in organizations that viewed flexibility as a privilege rather than a formal policy. One participant mentioned that if employees failed to meet expectations or were less productive when working remotely, they risked losing their flexibility of remote work, because they also lost their manager's trust:

> *"For us… working in a hybrid model is like a reward or a benefit which others don't have… So, it's a big challenge to gain this privilege and maintain it also because if you don't prove yourself as productive as you would be on site, then there were cases where people couldn't work remotely, anymore because they couldn't meet their deadlines."* (P7)

Respondents from companies with stricter policies noted that gaining additional flexibility was possible but on a smaller scale. For example, employees might be allowed to gain some kind of flexibility like working from home on different days or taking occasional time off if they had earned the trust of their manager. One participant noted that this was generally easier in smaller companies than in larger ones:

> *"It depends on the company… For us, no, it doesn't apply to that because it's very strict procedures and policies and it's a company that works on a global level with the same procedure. So, it's not very easy to deviate... Now, yeah, I tell you that it depends on the company because I know that it's possible in a smaller company to do that."* (P8)

Overall, it is evident that each company interprets and implements hybrid work policies differently. Some organizations enforce strict policies, minimizing variability across roles and limiting managerial discretion. Conversely, others maintain looser policies, giving managers the autonomy to grant additional flexibility, often based on trust and relationship quality with employees, which may override formal policies.

### 5.1.2 Benefits of Hybrid Work

This initial code highlights the perceived advantages of hybrid work as experienced by participants in their daily routines. A significant benefit mentioned by almost all participants was the reduction in commuting time and costs. For many, daily travel consumed one to two hours, which translated into lost time, energy, and money especially related to fuel and transport expenses:

> *"The biggest benefit for me especially is financial and time. These are the two benefits… I have to leave my house earlier than 7:00 in order to not, you know, not to make one hour to go to the office… the biggest benefit is the time that you save and the financial due to the fuel."* (P9)

Beyond saving money, participants emphasized that less commuting reduced stress, allowing them to start and finish their workdays more efficiently. They reported having more time for personal tasks, rest, and hobbies, but also some felt more focused and productive when working from home. One participant described how remote work allowed greater flexibility in balancing personal life with professional obligations:

> *"So, one of the biggest benefits… is the work life balance that this arrangement gives to an employee… It leaves me time to focus on what's important for me… This leaves me the whole evening to do whatever I want to do. If I was going to the office, this free time would start an hour later… So, you can already see that this whole hybrid environment has made time for us… you also don't spend energy on dead time standing waiting in the car, in the subway, on the bus… Which, you know, it drains you."* (P5)

The work-life balance provided by hybrid work was particularly appreciated by participants with families, especially those with young children. It enabled them better scheduling and greater flexibility in handling childcare responsibilities or personal emergencies without disrupting their work:

> *"If you have family, for example, I have two small kids, and I'm more flexible with the school… You know if you are at home, you can go immediately, take care of her and continue your work. This would not be possible to happen if I was in the Office..."* (P9)

While the benefits of remote work were emphasized, several participants noted the importance of maintaining social contact with colleagues. Office presence was appreciated not just for professional collaboration but for informal conversations and building relationships:

> *"… but I really like also that we are here at the office because you can go for a coffee and then you can chat with someone and that would be beneficial for your personality, let's say or your personal interests, not so role oriented."* (P10)

Given these benefits, participants expressed a strong preference for the hybrid work model. They viewed it as an ideal balance that combines the flexibility and comfort of working from home with the social interaction and collaboration that the office provides. They also expressed concerns about companies returning to full in-office work, noting that hybrid arrangements can foster motivation, productivity, and overall well-being:

> *"I hope that companies understood that remote work or hybrid work is a very good way and it keeps people motivated, productive when at the same time they*

*do not feel burned out and they don't feel underappreciated, because I've heard recently that some companies have started bringing people back in the office 5 days per week, which is, you know, it's a bit concerning. I hope we're not going to go there."* (P5)

All things considered, participants viewed hybrid arrangements as beneficial both personally and professionally. The time saved, increased flexibility and occasional in-person socializing with colleagues made hybrid arrangements not just desirable but essential to their preferred work-life balance.

### 5.1.3 Challenges

This initial code highlights the difficulties interviewees have encountered while working in a hybrid model. A recurring challenge identified by many participants was a gap in understanding between fully remote employees and those physically present in the office. For example, one participant noted that colleagues working remotely may lack full context, which can lead to poor decision-making:

> *"... there are cases where our communication is not the best when it comes through Teams or through emails, especially for things or issues we have on site. Somebody maybe is not fully aware of the situation but still has to take decisions and maybe this person can assess wrong if he is working from distance."* (P7)

Another key issue was the weakening of team cohesion and communication over long periods of remote work. One participant described how extended physical separation can lead to a loss of connection within the team:

> *"The challenge that I find is the connection with the team and the communication, because they're interdependent…especially when you are for a big duration of time like for two or three months fully remotely without customer project. It can be very challenging, because you lose the touch with the team and in my opinion, you need to do something about that."* (P8)

Differences across generations also appeared as a challenge. One participant observed that older colleagues in the company tend to distrust remote workers and expect physical presence in the office:

> *"But in general, what I see in my company is that most of the older people like to come to the office and I think it's also an old thinking from them that you need to come to the office… it's bad to work from home and yeah."* (P4)

Another major challenge stated by participants was the increased number of meetings in the hybrid work model, many of which are seen as unnecessary or irrelevant to their responsibilities. Participants expressed frustration over how easily virtual meetings could be scheduled, leading to excessive invitations and poor time management. Employees are frequently included in meetings not directly related to their tasks, resulting in lost productivity and time. This is a challenge that employees need to learn to manage:

> *"I would like less meetings, because… Today it's very easy for you to invite a person to your meeting, so you end up instead of inviting one person, you invite 10 people and nine of them that are not related to the topic... This means you are distracting people and people are wasting time in meetings more than delivery… A lot of people don't know how to prioritize and that's an issue and technology is making it harder also for them..."* (P1)

Respondents also noticed that constant rescheduling of tasks due to meetings disrupted their workflow. In large virtual meetings, active participation was often minimal, prompting a preference for smaller, more focused gatherings. Technical limitations like poor audio were also recognized as an issue in virtual meetings. However, hybrid meetings are presented as a real challenge. Participants shared that remote employees often felt excluded or missed out on important visual or verbal cues. To address this, some participants preferred holding meetings in a single mode, either fully virtual or fully in-person:

> *"Hybrid meetings are the worst because… one in Home Office is left behind… maybe the audio is not so good or like the video quality is bad or he cannot see if somebody is writing something on a wall… either we make a totally teams meeting or we meet in person…"* (P3)

In summary, most challenges related to the lack of physical presence and interactions, which led to misunderstandings, weakened communication and team cohesion and in some cases distrust, particularly from older employees toward hybrid or remote

colleagues. Meetings were also seen as challenging due to their overload, mismanagement and lack of structure, leading to non-productivity and waste of time.

## 5.2 Interactions

This focus code presents the differences between remote and physical interactions in a hybrid environment, as well as the effects these interactions have among hybrid employees.

### 5.2.1 Physical vs Remote interactions

This initial code explains the differences that interviewees observed between physical and remote interactions through their daily communication with remote and in-office colleagues. Participants emphasized that non-verbal cues like body language, facial expressions and tone of voice separate physical from remote interactions. These elements were seen as crucial for expressing oneself and understanding others:

> *"Yeah, it's totally different… because in Teams… if you're chatting or if you're speaking in a meeting without your camera turned on, no one can see your reactions, your facial expressions, your gestures, all this which are very important when you talk with someone face to face like it is in the office. So many things can be left out of the conversation."* (P5)

Participants felt that physical interactions offer greater emotional expression, mutual understanding and support between colleagues and managers, contributing to stronger team connection. This is happening because when communicating remotely something is getting lost or not expressed:

> *"Look, if it was in the office face to face, it would be better because you have the physical presence… you can more easily express your emotions or the manager is more able to understand what you want to say… You lose something, yeah."* (P9)

When working with global teams, remote interactions were sometimes perceived as a challenge and less effective. Nevertheless, participants noted that even a single in-person meeting could significantly improve future remote communication:

> *"We also have the company now in America… a colleague and I have been there in July last year and my feeling is that this also makes the Teams chats and*

*Teams calls that came afterwards easier because you already have known how they act in person."* (P3)

Spontaneity was another factor frequently mentioned. Participants found spontaneous conversations harder to initiate remotely. In the office, visual cues indicate availability, while online status indicators often are not sufficient to understand availability. This may be why participants reported a decrease in the frequency of remote interactions:

*"Spontaneity is probably more often if you're in the office. So, you see the person is currently available… If you're from home, you just see the Teams status, if it's like green or red, or if it's even online. So, I think it's easier to communicate if you're in office."* (P4)

Remote interactions were also described as being more focused or task-oriented, with less room for informal or spontaneous interactions.

*"Virtual interactions are more specific. They have a specific purpose."* (P6)

When it came to building relationships, trust and collaboration, participants reflected that it is easier to be developed in person due to non-verbal cues that physical interactions present. Unlike remote communication, in-person interactions reveal emotional and behavioral cues that cannot be hidden like behind a screen:

*"In person conversations are more important in building trust, because in the office you can't filter some things no matter how hard you try, some reactions, some events."* (P6)

While participants acknowledged the value of digital tools, they collectively emphasized the irreplaceable nature of face-to-face communication for understanding, connection, and team cohesion. There were also concerns that fully replacing physical interactions with virtual alternatives, like VR coffee breaks, could not separate humans from robots:

*"I cannot imagine that like VR coffee chat is the same as a real person coffee chat… the small breaks at work is what makes a workplace special… if they go away, everybody will work as robots at the home and yeah, it's sad, it makes it more like this depressive way of looking into work."* (P3)

Participants advocated for occasional physical meetings to maintain strong team dynamics and build more resilient relationships. However, they observed that we are already at this stage of replacing them by having fully remote models:

> *"I think that we are in this era. I mean, look at the totally remote workers which they work from their home… I think that you know from time to time you need to meet with your team. It builds this kind of relationships between people that are a bit harder to break."* (P5)

Overall, non-verbal cues are what primarily distinguish in-person from remote interactions. Because of this, physical interactions are seen as more advantageous for fostering trust, relationships and collaboration. In contrast, remote interactions tend to be more deliberate, structured and work-focused. Due to the visibility of physical presence, interactions seem to be more spontaneous, effective and frequent, leading to emotional expression, support and team cohesion. Although participants valued digital tools, many expressed concerns about the replacement of physical interactions by them and preferred to maintain at least occasional face-to-face meetings.

### 5.2.2 Informal interactions

An initial code that emerged from the interviews was the role and nature of informal interactions in hybrid work settings, such as chatting over coffee or non-work-related chats among colleagues. These moments were widely viewed as essential for building strong relationships and enhancing team cohesion:

> *"In order to build a good relationship with your colleagues, you cannot talk only about work all the time… even though we're talking professionally, life is not only about work."* (P1)

Another participant emphasized that in-person informal interactions like sharing meals or joking together, were key to establishing stronger team dynamics that would be difficult to replicate remotely:

> *"… we have a very good dynamic in our team, and I doubt it that this would be that good if we just work on remote… we eat together, we make jokes together… this time is essential to have this good team dynamic."* (P4)

Participants claimed that remote informal conversations tend to be less frequent and spontaneous, often requiring deliberate scheduling. Nevertheless, they noted that such interactions are still possible, particularly with colleagues that are close to:

*"... with some good colleagues, yes you can say, hey, come on Christos let's drink our coffee together... 5-10 minutes, half an hour depends."* (P9)

Those who work with fully remote or global teams still try to create space for informal interactions by scheduling virtual social meetings. Yet, they mentioned that face-to-face interactions remain more effective because in such remote meetings something might not be spoken. One respondent that has informal virtual meetings described them as "fake":

> *"We even tried to have virtual fikas... I find them very fake to be honest, I don't like them."* (P7)

This code also explores how participants use ICT to foster such interactions beyond formal work tasks in hybrid environments. While platforms like Microsoft Teams and Outlook are central to professional collaboration, most participants reported using personal messaging apps, such as WhatsApp or Instagram, to maintain informal connections, especially with closer colleagues. This is partly due to concerns that using professional tools for casual conversation might blur boundaries or reduce their professional utility:

> *"... some people that I'm close... we can discuss other things as well, so it is a social, kind of a social platform as well, but I think that it should not be abused in that way, so making teams and outlook a social platform mainly mean that it defeats the purpose."* (P5)

Using these platforms for casual interactions was seen as enhancing team bonding and creating an enjoyable team environment. Thus, one company has created an internal social platform that enables employees to connect and socialize with colleagues around the world and build this bonding before they even need to collaborate in a common project:

> *"We have that random coffee chat with colleagues all over the world... You can also be in a form or chat in a group where you can find someone that text*

*something that you find interesting so you can, I feel free to send a message."* (P10)

Overall, while informal interactions occur more naturally in physical workplaces due to visibility and spontaneity, they still remain possible in remote context, particularly with closer colleagues. However, virtual interactions need to be scheduled and may be perceived as "fake" and employees tend to rely on external platforms to maintain informal social ties. These interactions are essential for fostering team cohesion and a positive work environment, prompting some companies to establish an internal social platform to support these interactions.

## 5.3 Relationships

This focus code explores how relationships are built and maintained within hybrid work environments, highlighting both the challenges and the enablers of connection in hybrid and global teams.

### 5.3.1 Building Connection and Relationships in hybrid environments

According to the participants, facilitating connection within a hybrid environment, whether their team is global or not, they offered valuable information on what is important for them to achieve that. A foundational element mentioned was respect for colleagues' roles and time to fostering strong connections. Participants noted that hybrid models can create imbalances, especially when remote workers, unintentionally or not, load on-site colleagues with extra work:

> *"I think the person working with this hybrid model also needs to respect the people working on site... I have felt a lot of times that I'm asked to work more because somebody else is not on site."* (P7)

Trust was another central pattern for building team connection and strong relationships. Participants described it as being built not only through work but also through shared experiences, such as corporate events, team projects, and in-person meetings, which were highly valued by them:

> *"Trust… is very important… this trust is being built also by some kind of corporate events… face-to-face meetings… an annual meeting in a place where the whole group can be, all these foster trusts and build relationships between*

*people... you can build trust in common projects… people can collaborate, share thoughts, exchange views and cultural backgrounds…"* (P5)

Many participants linked connection to informal and face-to-face interactions with colleagues, describing them as essential for collaboration and team spirit:

*"I think the best part of going to the company is… to see your friends, your colleagues, to hang out with them and you can also work better if you have fun at work… provide a better solution in the end."* (P4)

Respondents emphasized the importance of having regular team meetings, especially for ensuring remote employees feel included and involved. Managers were described as pivotal to ensure that by being closer to the team, showing interest and organizing team days, supporting in-person meetings, and promoting inclusivity across work modes:

*"It depends on the manager and how the manager wants to make the team to be more like a team and the other factor is also the distance… the manager to arrange to meet his or her team once per year or if we are all here in Greece… you can even set up a specific day for the team to come together in the office. So, I think everything starts with the manager and if the distance is not an issue you can do easily more things"* (P9)

In addition to these strategies, emerging technologies like AR/VR were also proposed as tools to improve connection in hybrid and global teams by creating shared digital experiences:

*"I would use more AR or VR tools that technology can… help people to be like avatars and work in a space… Something more like storytelling…that can help us interact more with colleagues in a different way to build more personal connections."* (P10)

In conclusion, building strong connections in hybrid environments depends on mutual respect between remote and on-site colleagues, as imbalances may weaken trust and relationships. Team connection and collaboration are reinforced through trust, in-person informal interactions and shared team experiences. Managers play a critical role in fostering connection through regular meetings, inclusive practices and relationship-building activities. While face-to-face interactions remain irreplaceable, emerging

digital tools like AR/VR offer promising alternatives to enhance connectivity between hybrid and global teams.

### 5.3.2 Challenges and Differences in Remote and In-Person Relationships

According to the interviews, participants shared that building relationships remotely poses significant challenges compared to in-person settings. The lack of physical presence, spontaneous encounters, and non-verbal cues were commonly cited as key barriers, leading to misunderstandings, especially when colleagues work remotely and are unfamiliar each other:

> *"The challenge is misunderstanding… you don't have physical interaction with the person. You sometimes don't understand their personality and how they can understand what you have informed."* (P1)

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted that remote relationships can still be cultivated through shared time, tasks and joint training sessions. However, they reported that it always depends on the person and the importance of personal attitude, openness and willingness to engage beyond just work-related conversations:

> *"So, if you have the attitude to be open and of course communicate with other people, you will find the way."* (P10)

The hybrid setup was described as a way to balance the benefits of remote flexibility and in-person meetings to foster relationships. Participants suggested that purposeful use of in-office time, such as lunches or appointed meeting days, can help strengthen team bonding and engagement:

> *"… when you're in a hybrid model you can have the benefits of both models… use the time of the office more specifically for interactions… The team meeting can be on Monday or Tuesday when all the team will be there… we can go for lunch and build this relationships again. This can make the employee feel more engaged about the team and the company."* (P8)

In contrast, scheduling in-person meetings was described as a challenge. One participant stated that coordinating availability and encouraging people to sacrifice their flexibility in order to build relationships and connection is not always easy:

*"Well, to make everyone to be available on the same day… the biggest challenge is everyone to be available and it has to do with the willingness of a colleague to want to be flexible, to be agile."* (P9)

In summary, remote relationship building lacks key elements of physical interactions such as non-verbal cues and spontaneity, often leading to misunderstandings. While shared tasks and time can help foster remote relationships, success depends on people themselves and individual openness and effort. In hybrid environments, deliberate use of office time can enhance relationship-building, but this is dependent on employees' willingness to coordinate their schedules and sacrifice some flexibility. Managers play a key role in fostering these relationships by creating opportunities for purposeful in-person interactions.

## 5.4 Trust in Hybrid Work Environments

A focus code that resulted from the interviews is trust. This code highlights the importance of trust in a hybrid model, the most common criteria for trust, how interpersonal trust can be built, what hinders trust and if the participants have more trust in the technology that they use or the people that are using it. Trust emerged as one of the most prominent themes from the interviews, with all participants identifying it as a core element of successful hybrid work:

*"I think trust is the most important attribute which supervisors can have for each and every office employee. Without it there cannot be like the commitment to have like a hybrid solution."* (P3)

### 5.4.1 Criteria for building interpersonal trust

This initial code explores the elements participants considered as essential for building interpersonal trust in hybrid work environments. Performance and individual reliability emerged as key indicators of trust that can affect if the other person is trustworthy or not resulting in support and flexibility. Participants often valued them more than physical presence in building trust. They also mentioned that working hybrid or remote does not affect trust on a big scale and that delivering on responsibilities fosters trust, regardless of whether one works remotely or on-site:

*"So, trust is always there as long you're working with an honest and reliable employee…. I don't see it connected to the hybrid working environment and does*

*not have an impact on if the person is reliable on and can deliver then this person can deliver either working off from office or from home."* (P1)

On the other hand, some respondents felt that physical presence could enhance trust, especially when relationships and familiarity have been fostered through face-to-face interactions:

*"I will trust the person that I know more if I work with him in person, I would trust him more and I think this is normal for the people because we are humans that need this interaction, and you build trust upon it."* (P8)

Participants noted that trust depends more on the person and the connection that someone has with them than being physically present in the office. Trust can develop across distance when there is a sense of support and helpfulness:

*"Depending on the person… There are people I'm trusting a lot where are here in Germany… For UK there's one colleague I know that I can trust. So, if I need something I know she will help me… So, there is a lot of trust, even though I just saw her last year for the first time, so."* (P2)

In addition to that effective communication was cited as essential to building trust, particularly in remote settings where non-verbal signals are limited. Participants noted that detailed communication like emojis could fill some gaps regarding non-verbal cues:

*"It depends on the person. I have people in the office that I'm not so sure to ask them about something and… my person in my study that is always there, always very descriptive, even the emojis that they use in our chatting help us to create a frame in our communication."* (P10)

Overall, although being physically present can help foster interpersonal trust through face-to-face interactions, in hybrid settings, the most significant indicators of trust are performance, reliability and effective communication. Trust can be established from a distance, as long as employees are supportive, helpful and consistent with their work and communication. Still, many participants prefer to trust colleagues they frequently meet face-to-face, highlighting the human need for connection via physical interaction.

### 5.4.2 Managers gaining employees' trust

This initial code explores how managers can gain their employees' trust in hybrid settings, and the specific behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that participants identified as critical to this process. Participants emphasized the pivotal role managers play in shaping trust within hybrid teams. In-person engagements and managerial openness were cited as essential elements in fostering trust:

> *"I think the manager is playing the most important role, because they are responsible to set up that framework for the team, this hybrid work model to make the best use of the in-person meetings… that time that you are in the office, you do things with the team, you discuss with them, you build these feelings… After that the employee should be open and willing to discuss to open themselves to share some problems that they have."* (P8)

Participants highlighted that managerial flexibility and trust in their teams are central to building a safe environment. When managers show understanding and allow flexibility employees feel more comfortable being open and authentic:

> *"… managers should always trust the teams that they are working with as long as the manager is flexible, understanding the reasoning behind the need of having working from home. Then this will build a trust and will build a great place for the person, feel independent, free to express his feelings and… the flexibility of the managers is very important to the employees in order to show their real personality and not to hide their fears or blockers."* (P1)

Beyond trust and flexibility, participants also emphasized the importance of active involvement, fairness and shared responsibilities. Managers who apply policies equally, show interest in their teams and maintain regular check-ins are seen as trustworthy. However, the most important requirement for building trust was autonomy, supported by manager availability and the ability to inspire:

> *"… to build a very good trusting relationship is for them to give me autonomy, to do what I'm supposed to do… available in case I have any questions or there is something that I don't know… the next one is inspiration because if I see for example how my manager behaves in a meeting and it ends up going well … I will try to add this in my skills."* (P5)

Another key ability mentioned was the managers' capacity to recognize if someone is truly working, especially in remote settings. Experience, collaboration and measurable outputs mentioned as assessment criteria:

> *"… when you are an experienced manager you know, no matter if you have a hybrid or face to face team… you can see from his or her work, how she works, how you collaborate… But the problem is when… you don't have the experience to realize and to see some signs."* (P9)

All things considered, in hybrid environments managers can gain employees' trust by demonstrating openness, fairness, flexibility and attentiveness. Trust grows when managers use in-person meetings effectively, support autonomy and remain available for possible questions. Showing understanding and allowing flexibility seems critical not only to foster trust, but also to building an environment of openness where employees can express themselves. Equally important is ensuring fair treatment through consistent policies and active engagement with the team. Finally, managers' ability and experience to evaluate remote performance through collaboration and measurable results are crucial for maintaining trust.

### 5.4.3 Barriers to trust

This initial code explores the key factors that hinder trust in hybrid work environments. Through the interviews, participants identified micromanagement, unequal policies and lack of physical presence as critical obstacles to building and maintaining interpersonal trust. Micromanagement emerged as the most challenging barrier. Participants noted that excessive oversight often stems from a lack of trust and can negatively impact both employee morale and project outcomes:

> *"She was on top of their team all the time… micromanagement, which resulted from lack of trust. So, she was having back-to-back calls every one hour… this backfired to the sales project… the team felt this lack of trust and you cannot grow your team if they feel like that. And the second is the deliverable itself, the quality… is not the same when you do this micromanagement."* (P8)

Another concern that occurred was unequal treatment in policy implementation, especially when managers had different standards from their employees. A related issue possibly stemming from perceived favoritism, involved inequality and unfairness in

remote work privileges among employees that lead to gossiping and disruption of the workplace environment:

> *"This can also develop pretty bad about like the team atmosphere… it will always be like a topic in the office, he's again not here and this stuff, and this can react to a snowball… this office communication can also lead to distrust issues if the rules are not balanced anymore."* (P4)

Participants also emphasized the issue of reduced visibility in hybrid models that could foster distrust and doubt among managers that cannot physically observe their teams. One participant stated that the hybrid model itself is the primary barrier to maintaining trust, particularly in the absence of face-to-face interaction:

> *"The biggest challenge is exactly the fact that you are hybrid… because if you don't interact face to face, you will not be 100% sure about the other person."* (P9)

Moreover, participants expressed concern that some employees exploit remote work flexibility, which can further diminish interpersonal trust and encourage micromanagement from managers:

> *"At my company there are people that are not really working at home. So, I wouldn't trust them personally."* (P2)

Overall, micromanagement was perceived as the main barrier of trust. It often reveals lack of confidence and trust in the team and subsequently undermines employee trust in their managers and leads to poor project outcomes. Micromanagement may be an outcome of another challenge that hinders trust, which is the fact that some employees do not actually work when being in home office. This in turn is worsened by the limited visibility inherent in hybrid work, which can cause distrust on both colleagues and managers. Finally, unfair and unequal implementation of policies and privileges among colleagues and managers could decrease trust.

### 5.4.4 System Trust

This initial code investigates participants' perspectives on the role of communication and collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams and Outlook in enabling hybrid work. Participants reported continuously using and relying on these platforms and expressed overall satisfaction with their functionality and the way they support remote and hybrid

models. Nevertheless, participants consistently emphasized that the success of these tools depends on how they are used by people, especially by managers and team members:

> *"It's not technology, it's about the people who will trust. Technology is enabler to ease our life. So, it's helping us, of course, to reach out to whom affected by our development, but of course the key is the person."* (P1)

Even when CMC are available, they work as support mechanisms and they cannot provide solutions on their own, especially without their organization and proper usage. Therefore, participants emphasized that the effectiveness of any CMC tool lies in intentional and purposeful use, as well as manager's initiatives and perceptions of how to utilize them effectively:

> *"They are interconnected, but I would say more to the managers' side that it has to do with communication, even if the tool exists, if there is no good organization and flow then there is a problem."* (P6)

> *"They use the same tools, but in a different way, so I would say that it depends on the manager or how they want to set up the framework of working with the team."* (P8)

Some participants also described tool overload as a new challenge. With so many available platforms, communication can become fragmented, making it harder to track issues and collaborate effectively:

> *"A problem nowadays I think is that for example in our company… there are four channels on which problems are communicated… technology is the enabler, but it's very important to create good channels… a good supervisor needs to create a single working environment for his team where they can collaborate."* (P3)

In conclusion, Microsoft Teams and Outlook were viewed as effective enablers of hybrid and remote work. However, their success depends not on the tools themselves, but on how they are organized, implemented and used, especially by managers. Finally, tool overload was identified as a concern, suggesting that companies and managers need to moderate by creating guidelines on which platforms should be used for specific purposes to maintain cohesive communication.

## 5.5 Collaboration in Hybrid and Global Teams

### 5.5.1 Hybrid Collaboration

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was how collaboration is influenced by the difference in time and physical presence. Participants shared mixed experiences, especially when working in hybrid teams where not all colleagues are co-located or working synchronously. Participants that collaborate with local teams mentioned that they face challenges in daily communication and task coordination with colleagues that work mostly remotely. This physical disconnect often compromised trust and team inclusion, especially when remote employees were excluded from informal workplace interactions:

> *"I think the people that mostly work remotely are excluded from the group especially from my personal experience… we do some activities after work. So, the people working remotely are excluded from all those by nature, and that sometimes affects also our interaction with them at work."* (P7)

Despite these challenges, participants perceived their hybrid collaboration as effective, especially when teams coordinate their in-office days. However, inconsistencies in work arrangements created mixed results. One participant, who was required to go in the office every day in their first few months while the others had some days remotely, shared that that physical presence does not always mean better collaboration:

> *"… we were told that it would be easier for us to collaborate with the team, ask stuff, but when they had their remote days, they weren't at the office… it's not necessary to be at the office to have a good collaboration… especially the first six months in a new role."* (P10)

Moving to respondents that work in global teams, some referred role misalignment and poor information flow across different continent offices:

> *"The difficulties were understanding each other role… some information are not distributed correctly… the responsible in China does not know who's handling what… there is no good collaboration between the department that we have here in Sweden and China."* (P1)

The most common challenge that participants mentioned was the time zone differences in global teams. Yet, a few participants recognized that time zone difference can also be an opportunity for global operations, offering the possibility for continuous workflow:

> *"The main challenge is the time difference… this challenge is also the biggest advantage… we need to provide support and solutions 24/7 across the world… being in three separate time zones and three separate continents is that this support can be ongoing."* (P5)

In sum, problems in daily communication and task coordination in hybrid teams can result in weakened trust and inclusion to team members that are primarily working remotely. Coordinated in-office days were seen as beneficial, though physical presence alone did not always guarantee effective collaboration. Challenges in information sharing and unclear role distribution were common in the collaboration of global teams. However, while time difference perceived as a challenge, at the same time it was one of the biggest benefits, allowing for continuous global support and productivity.

# 6. Analysis and Discussion

### 6.1.1 Organizational policy and hybrid work flexibility

This theme explores employees' experiences and how formal policies in multinational companies are implemented in practice. While most participants noted that their companies had formal policies that dictate the balance between remote and office work, participants 1,6 and 7 reported that, to their knowledge, no such policies were formally established in their organizations. Their flexibility was determined more based on the contract, critical business periods and the need of someone to stay at home. This is aligned with Halford (2005), who predicted that hybrid models will provide flexibility based on the needs of someone. Interestingly, these employees did not perceive hybrid flexibility as a privilege requiring reciprocal effort. Instead, it was enough to demonstrate consistent performance to maintain this flexibility. This contradicts with the study of Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2023), who argued that, prior to the pandemic, all employees felt a stronger need to reciprocate for the flexibility they received.

However, a pattern that observed through the results was that flexibility is often shaped by managerial discretion and the trust between managers and employees. This indicates the informal dynamics that can override formal policies. There were cases where employees gained more flexibility because of the interpersonal relationships and trust they had with their managers. While other employees who lost their managers' trust cost them their flexibility of working from home. Drawing on LMX theory these variations suggest that employees with higher quality relationships with their managers are more likely to receive better benefits like flexibility. Moreover, the employees that are reliable and meet expectations can earn more flexibility from their managers, for instance working abroad for a long period. According to SET, this is a form of reciprocal reward from their managers for their efforts (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Nonetheless, this pattern depends on the company, if it is a large MNC with strict policies then it is not so easy to decline from them as stated by participants.

On the other hand, overcoming policies or favoring someone more than others or having different flexibility among employees and managers may restrain the development of social exchanges and instead create economic ones that lead to a low trust environment or low quality LMX. At the same time, this flexibility, when managed well, can be empowering. Therefore, organizations should be aware that inconsistent policy

application, while sometimes practical, can lead to perceptions of unfairness that undermine trust and collaboration, particularly in hybrid contexts where physical interactions are limited.

### 6.1.2 Benefits of hybrid work

Although this theme is not directly linked to the primary research questions or the theoretical framework (SET and LMX), it provides valuable insights into the benefits of hybrid work based on employees lived experiences and offers direction for future research.

Most participants emphasized that hybrid work significantly reduced commuting time and related expenses, while simultaneously creating more personal time. These findings support the work of Eng, Tjernberg, and Champoux-Larsson (2024). Moreover, participants with families reported that they could better schedule and manage responsibilities such as childcare and emergencies, an observation consistent with Bollestad et al. (2022). Higher productivity, lower stress due to commuting and work life balance that mentioned by the participants confirm Bula et al. (2024).

While the benefits of hybrid work were acknowledged, participants also expressed appreciation for in-person office presence, especially for maintaining social connections and building interpersonal relationships. This aligns with Eng et al. (2024), who argue that hybrid work combines the advantages of remote and in-office work. Furthermore, a strong preference for the hybrid model was evident among almost all participants and some of them raised concerns about the initiatives that many organizations took to bring employees back to full in-office attendance. Several participants associated hybrid work with greater productivity, motivation and a reduced risk of burnout. This suggests that hybrid work is not just a temporary solution but a valued working arrangement that employees hope will persist in the long term. This is a great topic for future research that needs to be examined.

### 6.1.3 Challenges

This code captures the main challenges experienced by employees within hybrid work settings, offering essential insights into how limited physical presence can negatively influence team dynamics and communication. A common challenge observed by participants was the difficulty in communication and understanding, especially with colleagues who worked fully remotely. Participants noted that remote employees often

lacked full contextual awareness of what was happening on-site, which sometimes led to poor decision-making. This issue was particularly emphasized by participants who spent more time in the office, such as Participants 1 and 7, who worked four days per week on-site. This suggests that the level of remoteness plays a significant role in shaping employees' perceptions of communication and collaboration. While other participants also reported similar issues, the degree of concern seems to vary depending on how often participants were physically present.

In contrast, Participant 8, who worked four days from home, highlighted different concerns like team disconnection and weakened cohesion. This reinforces the idea that fewer days in the office may lead to a greater sense of disconnection, supporting the argument of Bond-Barnard et al. (2018) that physical proximity fosters stronger team cohesion that may lead in high quality collaboration. These patterns underline how hybrid work arrangements can create variety of perceptions in experiences, where those with different levels of remoteness may perceive communication, connection, and collaboration differently.

A particularly insightful point raised by participants was generational differences in attitudes and reflections toward hybrid work. Older employees admitted that they prefer office presence and were more skeptical about the productivity of colleagues that were working remotely. These generational tensions suggest a valuable area for future research.

Another significant challenge was the overuse and inefficiency of virtual meetings. Participants reported frequent invitations to meetings that were often irrelevant to their roles. This often led to reduced productivity, poor time management, and task prioritization issues. The regular use of virtual meetings could cause “Zoom fatigue” as mentioned by Meluso, Johnson and Bagrow (2022). Moreover, a technological paradox is observed through the findings: while Teams enables connectivity among colleagues, its extensive use may result in exhaustion, confusion and overload. These issues underscore the need for managers and HR to implement clearer guidelines for meeting inclusion and scheduling without distracting employees from their main responsibilities. Neglecting meeting inefficiencies may result in employees perceiving that their time and effort are not being fairly reciprocated, a key concern within Social Exchange Theory (SET) that over time could diminish trust.

Participants highlighted that hybrid meetings (with both remote and in-office employees) presented many problems that lead to preferences for either fully virtual or fully in-person meetings. Remote employees often felt left out due to poor audio, missed visual cues, or unequal participation dynamics. These findings are highly relevant to research questions 1 and 3.

### 6.1.4 Physical vs remote interactions

This theme explores the differences between physical and remote interactions as experienced by employees in hybrid environments. A common distinction that was recognized by participants was the absence of non-verbal cues in remote interactions, which can cause communication gaps and misunderstandings. Elements widely used in face-to-face interactions such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions were described as essential for mutual understanding and emotional expression. While Schaubroeck and Yu (2017) addressed most of these factors, the emotional dimension of those interactions was not mentioned in their study. From a SET and LMX perspective, the lack of non-verbal cues in remote work may reduce the quality of interactions and levels of trust between colleagues and managers, potentially weakening the value of social exchanges.

When working with global or fully remote teams, participants perceived interactions as challenging and, in some cases, less effective. However, many participants suggested that even one face-to-face meeting could strengthen virtual communication and interactions, helping colleagues better understand each other's communication style. This offers a useful proposition to global team management, where MNCs can organize occasional in person meetings that can lead to long term enhancement of virtual collaboration.

Another key insight was spontaneity and availability. Participants observed that physical offices allow more spontaneous interactions, as availability is visually observable. This supports findings by Bleakley et al. (2022) who explored interactions in remote settings and observed that they lack spontaneity. In contrast, remote settings rely on Teams' status indicators which were perceived as inaccurate most of the time, limiting spontaneous interactions. Several participants also noted a general decline in interaction frequency when working from home. Moreover, virtual interactions were characterized by respondents as task oriented and more particularly with a "specific

purpose" as participant 6 described. On the other hand, the mutual understanding and emotional expression that face-to-face interactions enable, seem more supportive than virtual ones and are more advantageous to achieve stronger team cohesion according to participant 8. These are among the main factors that are altered in hybrid team interactions due to the absence of physical presence, directly addressing research question 1.

Finally, according to participants, relationships, trust and collaboration can be facilitated in a more natural and easy way through face-to-face interactions. This reinforces the argument by Fayard, Weeks and Khan (2021) that physical interactions are difficult to be replaced. These factors are directly connected to SET, where repeated, high-quality interactions could lead to social exchanges. When such interactions are reduced or transactional, as they often do in remote settings, the nature of the exchanges may shift from social to economic.

Following the above-mentioned statement of Fayard, Weeks and Khan (2021), all participants claimed that despite their respect for ICT, technology will never be able to replace face-to-face interactions. Some even raised concerns that if VR solutions used to fully replace human interaction, that will eventually turn humans into robots. This comes in contradiction with the study of McVeigh-Schultz and Isbister (2022), who claimed that VR can simulate someone's social presence. However, several participants stated that the shift to fully remote work environments has already started replacing physical interaction.

### 6.1.5 Informal interactions

This theme explains the role of informal interactions in hybrid work environments. Informal moments like chatting over coffee or discussing personal matters were described by participants as essential for building strong relationships and team dynamics. As participant 1 highlighted "you cannot talk only about work all the time". This supports Fayard and Weeks (2007) argument that informal exchanges and personal discussions with colleagues are vital for relationship development and cultivating a sense of community. From the SET perspective, informal interactions can be perceived as high value social exchanges that contribute to building relationships of trust and mutual commitment. Similarly, Fay and Kline (2011) mentioned that informal communication can result in relationships and commitment.

Several participants highlighted that informal interactions occur more naturally and frequently in physical workplaces, where physical presence allows for spontaneous interactions. This aligns with previous findings (Fay & Kline, 2011), showing that remote workers often struggle with their informal conversations and relationships. On the contrary, remote informal interactions described by respondents as forced or scheduled, potentially limiting relational growth due to the lack of spontaneity.

Despite these challenges some participants acknowledged that there can still be spontaneous interactions while working remotely, particularly when colleagues have pre-existing relationships. This indicates that quality and history of relationships play a significant role in the effectiveness and spontaneity of remote informal interactions. The same could be applied to SET as well, where if someone perceives the relationship with an actor as good then expects positive reciprocity, where exchanges are open and beneficial, regardless of the communication medium.

Participants working with global or fully remote teams revealed that they try to force these informal interactions by scheduling virtual coffee chats. This comes in line with the study of Bleakley et al. (2021), who recommend the use of CMC to initiate informal interactions in remote settings in order to foster relationships and cohesion. However, these efforts were not universally accepted by some participants who characterized them as “fake”, noting that important aspects of informal exchanges are being left out of the conversation. These concerns emphasize the thin line that managers should balance when managing and scheduling these remote informal meetings. If overused or poorly executed may lead to exhaustion and waste of time, potentially weakening LMX quality. Conversely, when implemented successfully they may improve relationships and team cohesion.

This theme also examines how participants use ICT to facilitate social interaction beyond work tasks in hybrid environments. Many participants stated that while corporate tools such as MS Teams are being used for collaboration, additional applications like WhatsApp are utilized for social interaction with colleagues, especially those with whom they already have a strong relationship. Moreover, participants perceived these personal messaging apps as pivotal in strengthening team bonding and maintaining a positive work environment, even in remote settings. This is consistent with SET, where pre-existing social relationships are more likely to continue

through these external apps, facilitating additional exchanges outside of formal frameworks.

Participants reflected on the disadvantages of using formal workplace platforms for social interactions. They were raising concerns that using Teams for social purposes could undermine their formal aim, potentially affecting professional tone and tool effectiveness. However, an MNC addressed this gap by establishing an internal social platform that allows employees to socialize through virtual coffee chats across global locations. This strategy indicates a proactive approach to fostering relationships across various cultural departments, even before formal collaboration begins. From a management perspective this offers an opportunity to build team cohesion without adding more burden to collaboration tools. In SET terms, providing additional and more structured options for informal exchanges can encourage voluntary, high-quality interactions that could result in interpersonal trust and long-term collaboration. Overall, these findings offer key insights into most aspects of research questions, highlighting the importance of informal interactions in hybrid work.

### 6.1.6 Building connections in hybrid environments

This theme reflects participants' experiences in building and maintaining connections and relationships in hybrid and global workplaces. Meeting deadlines and respecting colleagues' work were identified as essential factors in building connection. However, some participants noted that these can be hindered in hybrid environments. For instance, participant 7 described that had to carry a remote colleague's responsibilities, creating imbalance due to various levels of remoteness. When certain roles require employees to be in the office more often, while other colleagues do not follow the same rules, inequities in the workload may emerge. Therefore, managers need to be cautious about those imbalances, as unresolved issues may result in lower-quality LMX relationships. From a SET perspective, such experiences may shift the nature of exchanges from social to economic, diminishing trust between colleagues.

Corporate events and in-person meetings were highlighted as enjoyable and effective ways to foster relationships and connection between hybrid and global teams. Common projects were also mentioned as important, aligning with Yakubovich and Burg (2019), who found that interdependent tasks help the facilitation of relationships and successful collaboration, even among unfamiliar colleagues. Several participants noted that

trusting your colleagues, while having frequent informal and face-to-face meetings with them, may result in maintaining connection and relationships, when at the same time strengthening collaboration. These findings expand upon existing literature (e.g. Cropanzano et al., 2017) by offering specific practices to build and maintain relationship quality in hybrid environments.

Given the challenges of regular meetings, some participants suggested that even a weekly meeting could sustain team cohesion, but the person responsible for the meeting needs to be inclusive and encourages active participation, especially in hybrid meetings. Additionally, many emphasized the critical role of managers in maintaining connection by being present, supportive and inclusive. These are in line with previous studies (Bula et al., 2024; Graevenstein, 2023), which reported managerial responsibility in fostering and maintaining connection and relationships. In both SET and LMX terms, incorporating such practices can promote high-quality exchanges and relationships between employees and managers, as well as among colleagues.

Lastly, one participant proposed using VR to enhance connection with remote colleagues by organizing team-building activities, echoing the findings of McVeigh-Schultz and Isbister (2022). This offers a practical recommendation for organizations aiming to strengthen bonds in remote and hybrid contexts. Overall, these findings can directly address research question 3.

### 6.1.7 Challenges and Differences in Remote and In-Person Relationships

This theme explores participants' perspectives on how the development and maintenance of workplace relationships differ between in-person and remote settings. Elements such as physical presence, non-verbal cues and informal interactions were identified as key contributors to relationship-building in the office. Their absence in remote environments was seen as a major challenge, often leading to misunderstandings and weaker interpersonal relationships. These findings support Bollestad et al. (2023), who claim that the lack of spontaneous, in-person interactions in remote work makes it more difficult to form and maintain workplace relationships. This also explains why many participants emphasized the importance of initial face-to-face meetings and corporate events, especially when teams have not met before.

Nonetheless, several participants observed that engaging in shared projects or activities like training can facilitate relationships, even in fully remote contexts. This expands the

findings of Yakubovich and Burg (2019), who examined only physical workplaces, by indicating that interdependent tasks can promote relationships in remote work. In SET context, while physical presence can develop relationships of trust easier, meaningful relationships can still emerge in remote settings, but with more effort and risk of misunderstanding. In such cases, social exchanges may shift toward more transactional or economic interactions.

Ultimately, many participants agreed that the quality of relationships depends more on the person and their characteristics and less on the work modality. Such characteristics were openness, willingness to engage and initiation of informal conversations. However, working hybrid have an advantage over remote work, due to the possibility of occasional in-person meetings. This comes in line with Sailer et al. (2023), who described that physical workplaces are designed in such a way that enables social interactions and relationships formulation. This is why hybrid model is called the "new normal" as Ozkaya (2021) described it in the article.

For hybrid arrangements to work effectively, managers have to make strategic use of office days by coordinating team presence to build relationships and cohesion. Yet, the flexibility of hybrid work can present barriers, because some employees may not want to adjust their personal routines or sacrifice their comfort of working from home. These challenges may create difficulties for managers, who may face resistance that could harm LMX relationship quality if employees feel that they are forced to change their schedule. This theme is answering research questions 2 and 3.

### 6.1.8 Criteria for building interpersonal trust

This theme examines how interpersonal trust is built among employees in hybrid workplaces. While participants perceived interpersonal trust as fundamental in hybrid work (Gohoungodji, N'Dri, & Matos, 2023), many emphasized that hybrid arrangements themselves have limited influence on trust formation. Trust depends more on the individual you are working with, rather than the hybrid itself. For instance, if a colleague repeatedly delivers work on time, is responsive, helpful and promotes team cohesion, trust is likely to develop, regardless of whether they work remotely or on-site. This contradicts with the argument of Graevenstein (2023), who explains that the absence of physical workplaces is affecting interpersonal trust.

Participants identified communication and job performance as key enables of trust in hybrid and remote settings. The way someone communicates, including frequent interactions or even the use of emojis to communicate tone or emotion, was seen as an indicator of trust. Similarly, high performance can foster trust, without exceptions regarding location (Bond-Barnard et al., 2018; Bulińska-Stangrecka, & Bagieńska, 2019). From a SET perspective, when remote colleagues reciprocate support, meet expectations and engage with team members, this fosters social exchanges and enhance relational trust.

Despite this, many respondents reported that they trust on-site colleagues more than the remote ones in mixed teams, which aligns with the argument by Cheng et al. (2016), who argued that physical presence and interpersonal trust are interconnected. This may stem from pre-existing relationships or the benefit of informal physical interactions, confirming imported trust by Bond-Barnard et al. (2018), which is the trust that formulated from prior interactions or relationships. While initially claiming that remote work has little impact on trust, several participants later acknowledged that physical presence facilitates trust. This nuanced finding underscores that while hybrid environments can support trust-building, physical interaction remains an effective catalyst. These findings are directly relevant to the research question 2.

### 6.1.9 Managers gaining employees' trust

This theme explores the strategies, practices and skills that managers need to build trust with employees in hybrid workplaces. Participants highlighted managers' central role in shaping trust within this context (Gohoungodji et al., 2023). One key strategy that mentioned was organizing occasional in-person meetings, which takes advantage of hybrid's model flexibility and helps maintain a sense of connection. This supports the notion of Bollestad et al. (2023) that employees being physically present to the office for some days may reduce the impact of physical absence that remote work introduces. In addition to leveraging face-to-face interactions, participants stated the importance of managerial behaviors such as trusting employees, demonstrating understanding and allowing flexibility. These actions not only help managers earn employees' trust but also foster a safe environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their concerns and emotions. Such conditions contribute to a healthy workplace (Eng et al., 2024) and a culture of inclusivity (Rahmatullah et al., 2024). From an LMX perspective,

when managers offer these relational resources, employees are likely to reciprocate with trust and engagement, leading to high-quality manager-employee relationships.

Several personal qualities were considered as vital for managers to gain, build and promote interpersonal trust with employees: inspiration, autonomy, availability, engagement and authentic care. These qualities strengthen the importance of human-centered leadership. This extends Stavrova et al.'s (2023) argument that flexibility and autonomy will lead to intra-organizational trust and not interpersonal between employees and managers. Therefore, these exchanges are crucial for gaining employees' trust, resulting in high-quality LMX relationships, consisting of trust and frequent interactions. However, trust is reciprocal. Participants noted that for managers to extend trust and flexibility, employees have to demonstrate trustworthiness, by performing well and being transparent.

Finally, fairness and consistency in how hybrid policies are applied were seen as fundamental. Participants shared concerns about policy inequities, especially if managers themselves did not follow the same rules or if they failed to manage unstable performance in remote settings. Disrupting equality and fairness between managers and employees may lead to poor-quality LMX relationships and diminished trust. There were also concerns that some employees use remote workdays for rest than productivity. Participants suggested that managers should be able to identify such behaviors to ensure fairness, especially now that everything can be measured. By recognizing these employees, managers can reinforce and uphold a sense of fairness, however, this situation is reciprocal as they will develop high-quality relationships with those who actually work from home and low-quality with those who do not. Therefore, management ought to thoughtfully create guidelines concerning rewards or consequences related to remote work and ensure clarity on these matters while still maintaining fairness and their rapport with employees. These findings directly support research question 3.

### 6.1.10 Barriers to Trust

This theme analyzes the behaviors and factors that hinder trust in hybrid work arrangements. A central concern raised by participants was the perception of unfairness in how flexibility and policies are applied. Trust fades away when managers do not follow the same rules as employees or when certain employees receive preferential

treatment due to personal relationships. From the LMX perspective, managers often offer additional flexibility, that usually overcomes formal policies, to employees with whom they share high-quality relationships. However, this selective reciprocity can create a culture of procedural injustice, where others feel excluded and reciprocate with distrust, both toward the manager and favored colleagues. This aligns with Cropanzano & Mitchell's (2005) argument that fairness in social exchange relationships is essential for maintaining trust.

Another critical barrier identified was micromanagement. Participants experienced this behavior as a sign that managers do not trust their teams, which sometimes results in decreased trust and morale in return. From an LMX lens, when managers distrust the team, they exert more control, which causes a reciprocal distrust from team members, eventually leading to low-quality LMX relationships. To avoid this, managers should proactively communicate the causes behind their concerns and work collaboratively with employees to rebuild trust before relationships derail.

A third challenge was the lack of visibility that hybrid work naturally introduces. Without face-to-face observations and interactions, both employees and managers may become suspicious of whether their colleagues are actually working. Unlike the office, where productivity is more observable, remote work can create ambiguity, resulting in doubt and rumors. From both SET and LMX perspective, this lack of visibility may provoke behaviors that diminish trust, including micromanagement. As a result, managers need to implement strategies and practices that mitigate the negative effects of remote invisibility. These findings are directly addressing research question 3.

### 6.1.11 System Trust

This theme explores the participants' perspectives on whether they place greater trust in CMC and collaboration tools themselves or in managers' and colleagues' competencies to use them effectively. While all participants reported reliance in Microsoft Team and Outlook for communication and collaboration, they emphasized that the tools alone do not ensure effective collaboration and trust-building. Instead, they viewed these platforms as enablers whose value depends on how they are organized, implemented and utilized by employees and especially by managers. Everyone is using them, but what makes them special or more effective than others, is how they are used. This indicates that trust in the system (e.g. CMC tool) is subordinate

to trust in the individuals that are using it. These findings align with Bula et al. (2024), who argue that while CMC provide essential value as support mechanisms to remote and hybrid arrangements, interpersonal trust remains the success factor of them. This also refines Cheng et al.s' (2016) notion of system trust by showing that employees may perceive these tools as reliable, but not sufficient on their own.

In LMX terms, when managers possess strong digital skills and effectively use CMC tools to facilitate interactions, relationships and collaboration, high-quality relationships are more likely to emerge. Similarly, SET suggests that employees who efficiently leverage these tools and remain available while working remotely are more likely to engage in social exchanges and high-quality relationships marked by trust. This reflects the findings of Eng et al. (2024), who highlight that digital skill development among managers and employees is essential because CMC by themselves are just tools.

Additionally, a challenge raised by participants was tool overload, where excessive or poorly coordinated use of multiple platforms led to confusion and weakened collaboration. This not only diminished trust in the system but also in the managers who failed to manage digital communication flows effectively. Such mismanagement can hinder LMX relationships, especially if employees perceive the communication system as disorganized. These findings address research question 3.

### 6.1.12 Hybrid Collaboration

This theme explores how various hybrid collaboration structures impact communication, inclusion and team cohesion. Participants shared mixed experiences. Daily communication and task coordination were seen as a challenge in hybrid teams, especially with colleagues that primarily work remotely. This supports Ozkaya's (2021) argument that hybrid collaboration introduces new layers of difficulty due to fragmented team presence. Participants emphasized that collaboration does not automatically improve simply because one team member is physically present. Instead, effective collaboration requires synchronous presence from the whole team and not just a few individuals.

These experiences align with the space-time matrix (p.13) introduced by Kim et al. (2010), which explains how collaboration works across time and space with the help of CMC. Participants highlighted that trust and cohesion were stronger during

synchronous co-located moments, more specifically when every team member was physically present in the office. That is the reason why they suggested in-person meetings, for better collaboration. However, this was difficult to achieve because not everyone was available due to flexibility, but more importantly because those working primarily remotely were frequently excluded from informal exchanges and felt disconnected from the team. This confirms Graevenstein (2023), who claims that those who are physically present and work together in the office create stronger team cohesion and dynamics between them and leave remote employees behind.

Collaborating with global teams introduced different challenges. Participants working across time zones reported role misalignment and poor information flow, driven largely by lack of physical presence and interactions (Grobelny, 2023). Yet, participants saw the potential benefit of asynchronous distributed collaboration, where by being active across various time zones, global teams could serve international clients continuously, turning what is often seen as a barrier into a strategic advantage. While modern ICT tools allow teams to shift between different collaboration modes, they do not guarantee effective collaboration. Therefore, in order to establish successful hybrid collaboration and team cohesion, managers must implement deliberate strategies to maintain inclusion and mutual visibility. These findings answer the research question 3.

# 7. Conclusion

This thesis investigates the post pandemic experiences and perspectives of employees among the ages of 29-38 who work in hybrid arrangements in multinational companies in Sweden, Germany and Greece. Findings reveal that employees favor hybrid work over fully remote or fully on-site models due to benefits such as flexibility, work-life balance and opportunities for in-person interactions. However, the use of flexibility must be balanced with formal organizational policies. The employees in this study noticed that trust and strong relationships with managers often resulted in greater informal flexibility that sometimes overrides formal policies. While this may benefit some employees, it risks creating perceptions of unfairness and loss of trust among colleagues and managers. Therefore, managers should carefully design policies and guidelines to avoid tension around flexible work privileges.

Communication and mutual understanding in hybrid teams were reported as major challenges, largely due to limited physical presence, visible availability and a lack of spontaneous, frequent and non-verbal interactions. These limitations hinder emotional expression and critical information, particularly for remote workers. To address this in hybrid settings, managers should regularly organize in-person team meetings with all team members to enhance team cohesion. For global teams, occasional face-to-face meetings like corporate events or interdependent tasks like shared projects can improve connection, communication, collaboration and foster relationships among distributed teams. While in-person meetings help counterbalance some of hybrid's work disadvantages, excessive or poor use of meetings, especially those including irrelevant employees, were identified as challenges leading to loss of productivity and time. Employees expressed preference for fully in-person or fully remote meetings because in hybrid meetings remote employees were not participating or missing important information. Thus, managers need to mitigate meetings' negative effects by organizing and scheduling them better.

Informal interactions were viewed as essential to build and maintain relationships and team cohesion in every mode, especially in the office due to spontaneity. In remote settings, social interactions require planning, which can be perceived by employees as "fake" and waste of time. Such interactions were more likely to occur with colleagues and often relied on external platforms like WhatsApp.

Relationships were considered easier to build in-person but still possible remotely, depending more on the personal characteristics and initiatives than work arrangements. The same applies for interpersonal trust, which was seen as the most important element of hybrid work. Trust among colleagues was built through consistent communication and reliable performance. Flexibility, autonomy, availability and engagement were theorized by employees as the most critical factors that a manager should do to gain their trust. Fairness and consistency with organizational policies and flexibility were central to maintaining trust. Conversely, lack of visibility, unfairness and micromanagement undermines trust. Ultimately, employees placed more trust in how colleagues and managers used communication technologies than in the tools themselves.

In conclusion, this study highlights that hybrid work is most effective when organizations foster a culture of trust, ensure fairness in flexibility and enable meaningful communication and interactions, both formal and informal, to create relationships and improve cohesion. Managers play a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics, while their initiatives and strategies can facilitate a healthy hybrid workplace of openness and trust.

## 7.1 Practical implications

This study provides practical insights into how employees interact and communicate with colleagues and managers in hybrid work environments. It highlights how spontaneity, frequency and purpose of interactions shaped in hybrid workplaces and sheds light on the factors that hinder or foster trust and relationships. Furthermore, the findings offer practical guidance to managers and HR professionals by identifying challenges in hybrid settings and proposing strategies or practices to address them. This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of workplace dynamics in hybrid environments and can support organizations in optimizing collaboration and trust within their hybrid teams.

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands the application of SET and LMX to hybrid work contexts, particularly in the post pandemic era. It contributes valuable insights, such as the reciprocal link between employee productivity and managerial trust, which in turn can result in informal flexibility beyond organizational policies.

Finally, this thesis contributes to the understanding of interpersonal and system trust in hybrid workplaces and enriches literature on hybrid collaboration.

## 7.2 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research adopts a qualitative approach with a relatively small sample size, which may limit the scope of the findings. Future studies could employ quantitative or longitudinal methods to provide richer data for statistical analysis. Second, the study does not focus on a single geographic region, sector or organization. While participants were drawn from multinational companies across Sweden, Germany and Greece, the absence of cross-country or cross-sectoral comparisons may have limited the ability to identify contextual differences. Future research could explore comparative analyses between industries, sectors and countries to deepen the understanding of hybrid work. Third, this thesis is limited to multinational companies. Given their unique resources, formal policies and global practices, the findings may not fully apply to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Future studies could examine how hybrid work is experienced in SMEs. Finally, this study focused exclusively on employees aged 29-38, which excludes potentially various perspectives from younger or older age groups, but also from managerial and HR roles.

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# 9. Appendix

## Appendix 1

**Questions**

**Backround questions about the interviewee and the organization that works in:**

Would you like to share with me a bit about you, your educational and professional background?

Could you describe the organization that you are currently working?
Could you share with me some information regarding your current role and responsibilities?
Have you encountered any challenge in your professional career?

**Hybrid work**

Are you currently working in a hybrid model (both on-site and remote), or do you primarily work in one mode? How flexible is your working arrangement?

Does the organization have a formal policy that dictates the number of days or specific times you can work remotely? If so, how is it implemented in practice?

Do your colleagues and managers follow the same hybrid work policy, or are there variations across different roles and levels?

What is the composition of your team in terms of remote and on-site workers?

How does this distribution impact daily collaboration and communication?

What have been the biggest benefits and challenges of working in a hybrid environment for you personally? Can you provide examples?

Have you worked remotely during COVID-19 and in-office before? How would you compare those experiences to your current hybrid model?

**Interactions and relationships**

When you work remotely, how do you interact with colleagues and managers? Can you describe the frequency and nature of these interactions?

How do interactions differ between remote and in-office work in terms of depth, spontaneity, and effectiveness?

Do you have informal interactions with colleagues while working remotely? (If not), what factors prevent them?

How do managers facilitate informal interactions between remote and on-site employees? Are there specific initiatives or strategies they use?

How do you think scheduled interactions can replace informal interactions effectively?

How do you think that remote interactions meaningfully foster relationships?

Which factors contribute to building strong connections in a hybrid setting?

How do you think hybrid teams can develop relationships comparable to fully in-person teams? If not, what elements of face-to-face interaction are missing?

What are the biggest challenges in forming or maintaining relationships in a hybrid workplace? Can you share a specific example where this was difficult?

How do interaction and relationship challenges impact team dynamics and team building?

**Trust**

How important do you think trust is in a hybrid work environment? Can you share any specific examples where trust (or lack of it) influenced collaboration or performance?

In what ways do interactions and relationships impact trust in a hybrid setting? Do you feel that virtual interactions are as effective as in-person ones for building trust? Why or why not?

How would you describe the different trust levels between on-site and remote workers?

How would you describe trust levels between employees and managers in hybrid settings? What role do managers play in building or hindering trust?

What are the biggest challenges in building and maintaining trust with colleagues and managers in a hybrid workplace?

What specific actions, behaviors, or strategies should a manager do in order to gain your trust in a hybrid environment? For instance, support or autonomy or something different?

**Collaboration in a Hybrid Environment**

How would you describe collaboration in your hybrid team? What works well, and what are the biggest challenges?

Have you encountered any difficulties when collaborating with remote colleagues? (Can you share a specific example?)

Can you recall a situation where trust, interactions, or relationships significantly influenced collaboration in your hybrid team? (What was the outcome?)

**The Role of Managers & Collaboration Strategies**

What strategies or practices do managers use to foster collaboration in a hybrid team? Do they primarily rely on collaboration technologies, in-person meetings, or a mix of both?

**Technology & Communication Tools**

What collaboration tools and communication technologies does your team rely on most? Do they fully support hybrid work, or are there limitations?

Do you believe technology is the main enabler of trust and collaboration, or does its success depend more on how managers and employees use it?

When it comes to effective interactions and collaboration in a hybrid team, do you rely more on communication technologies or on your managers' strategies? Why?

Do you feel that hybrid teams use technology mainly for work-related discussions, or is it also used for social interactions?

If you could improve any aspect of collaboration technology, what features or innovations would make hybrid work more effective?

Do you think advancements in technology will eventually make face-to-face interactions unnecessary? Why or why not?

**Concluding questions:**

As a hybrid worker, what specific factors do you find most important for building and maintaining trust, fostering relationships, and enabling effective collaboration?

In a hybrid workplace, what actions or behaviors do you believe managers should prioritize to support trust, relationships, and collaboration?

Do you want to add anything else that we haven't already mentioned or to discuss further about?

Thank you for the interview and the useful information that you provided me with.