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Remote and Hybrid Work After the Pandemic: A Narrative Review of HR Policy Design and Employee Outcomes

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ABSTRACT: The mass adoption of remote and hybrid work following the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a large and fragmented body of research spanning human resource management, organisational psychology, and labour economics. This narrative review synthesises the published evidence on how remote work policy design shapes employee productivity, engagement, wellbeing, and retention. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2024, the review organises the literature around four policy dimensions: scheduling flexibility, performance management approach, communication structure, and wellbeing safeguards. Across studies, the evidence indicates that outcomes depend less on the presence of remote work than on how it is governed: autonomy-supportive scheduling and outcome-based evaluation are consistently associated with positive outcomes, whereas surveillance-heavy monitoring and unstructured communication are associated with distrust, burnout, and turnover intention. The review identifies persistent gaps — including a shortage of longitudinal designs, limited evidence from small and medium enterprises, and under-representation of non-Western contexts — and proposes an agenda for future research alongside evidence-based recommendations for HR practitioners designing durable hybrid work frameworks.

KEYWORDS: remote work, hybrid work, human resource management, narrative review, employee wellbeing, performance management, flexible working

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic produced the largest unplanned experiment in flexible working in history. Within weeks in early 2020, organisations that had resisted remote work for decades transitioned entire workforces to home-based arrangements, and much of that change has persisted: hybrid arrangements are now an established feature of professional labour markets in most advanced economies (Barrero et al., 2021). This transformation has been accompanied by an explosion of research. Studies of remote work that once appeared at a modest and steady rate now number in the thousands, spread across human resource management, applied psychology, information systems, and economics journals.

The volume and dispersion of this literature create a problem for both scholars and practitioners: findings are fragmented across disciplines, measures are inconsistent, and headline conclusions frequently appear contradictory. Some widely cited studies report substantial productivity gains from remote work (Bloom et al., 2015), while others document productivity losses, collaboration deficits, and innovation costs (Yang et al., 2022). Practitioners seeking evidence-based guidance encounter a literature that seems to point in every direction at once.

This review argues that much of the apparent contradiction dissolves when the literature is organised around policy design rather than the binary question of whether employees work remotely. The central claim emerging from the synthesis is that remote work is neither inherently productive nor inherently harmful; rather, its outcomes are contingent on the specific human resource policies through which it is implemented and governed. The review therefore addresses the question: what does the published evidence indicate about how remote work policy design shapes employee productivity, engagement, wellbeing, and retention?

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the review method and inclusion criteria. Section 3 synthesises the evidence across four policy dimensions. Section 4 discusses cross-cutting themes and boundary conditions. Section 5 identifies gaps and directions for future research, and Section 6 concludes with implications for HR practice.

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2. REVIEW METHOD

This paper takes the form of a narrative review with systematic search elements. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using combinations of the terms remote work, telework, telecommuting, hybrid work, work from home, flexible working, and human resource management, together with outcome terms including productivity, performance, engagement, wellbeing, burnout, and turnover. The search covered publications from January 2015 to December 2024, a window that captures both the pre-pandemic evidence base and the large post-2020 wave of studies.

Inclusion was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles and widely cited working papers from established research institutions, published in English, that reported empirical findings or systematic syntheses relating remote or hybrid working arrangements to at least one employee or organisational outcome. Purely technological studies (for example, on collaboration software performance) and studies of fully distributed gig work were excluded, as the focus of this review is on employed workforces within organisational HR frameworks. Following screening of titles and abstracts, full texts were reviewed and organised thematically using the four policy dimensions described below. As a narrative rather than fully systematic review, the synthesis prioritises conceptual integration over exhaustive coverage, and no meta-analytic pooling of effect sizes is attempted.

3. SYNTHESIS OF THE EVIDENCE

3.1 Scheduling Flexibility and Autonomy

The most consistent finding across the reviewed literature concerns autonomy. Studies grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) repeatedly find that arrangements affording employees genuine control over when and where they work are associated with higher intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and self-reported performance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). The seminal meta-analysis by Gajendran and Harrison, covering 46 studies, found small but reliable positive associations between telecommuting and perceived autonomy, and between autonomy and performance — a mediation pattern reproduced in numerous post-pandemic studies.

Importantly, the evidence distinguishes between flexibility that is genuinely employeecontrolled and flexibility that is nominal. Where remote schedules are imposed, monitored minute-by-minute, or subject to unpredictable recall to the office, the autonomy benefits documented in the literature largely disappear (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). This distinction helps reconcile studies reporting positive and null effects of ostensibly similar hybrid policies.

3.2 Performance Management and Monitoring

A second robust theme concerns how performance is evaluated. Studies of results-only and outcome-based work environments report improved satisfaction and reduced turnover relative to time-based management (Moen et al., 2011). Conversely, the rapid post-2020 growth of electronic monitoring — keystroke logging, screenshot capture, activity scoring — has generated a parallel literature documenting its costs: perceived surveillance is associated with reduced trust, increased stress, and counterproductive work behaviour (Ravid et al., 2020). The reviewed evidence suggests a clear asymmetry: monitoring intensity correlates negatively with the very outcomes it is intended to protect, while outcome-clarity correlates positively with them.

3.3 Communication Structure and Collaboration

Research on distributed collaboration documents genuine costs of remoteness that policy can mitigate but not eliminate. Large-scale analyses of digital collaboration networks found that firm-wide remote work made collaboration networks more static and siloed, with fewer bridging ties across groups (Yang et al., 2022) — a structural effect with implications for knowledge transfer and innovation. At the team level, studies consistently find that structured communication norms — agreed response-time expectations, scheduled synchronous windows, and deliberate documentation practices — are associated with lower coordination friction and lower reported stress than ad hoc, always-on messaging cultures (Gibbs et al., 2013).

3.4 Wellbeing Safeguards and Work Intensification

The fourth dimension concerns the boundary between work and non-work life. A recurring finding is the autonomy paradox: flexible arrangements can intensify work, extending hours into evenings and weekends through the erosion of temporal boundaries (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Studies of right-to-disconnect policies and boundary-management interventions report reduced emotional exhaustion where afterhours communication expectations are explicitly limited (Derks et al., 2014). The evidence base here is younger and thinner than for the other dimensions, but points consistently toward the value of explicit boundary-setting policy rather than reliance on individual self-regulation.

4. DISCUSSION

Read together, the four streams support a policy-contingency view of remote work. The question that dominated early debate — is remote work good or bad for productivity? — is poorly posed. The reviewed evidence indicates that similar levels of remoteness produce divergent outcomes depending on whether policy affords real autonomy, evaluates outcomes rather than activity, structures communication deliberately, and protects non-work time. This view also explains the heterogeneity of headline findings: studies sampling organisations with mature flexible-work governance report benefits, while studies sampling forced, unsupported, or surveillance-heavy remote work report costs.

Several boundary conditions recur across the literature. Task interdependence moderates most effects: highly interdependent, tacit-knowledge work suffers more from remoteness than independent, codifiable work. Career stage matters: early-career employees report weaker network formation and mentoring under high remoteness. And organisational context matters: small and medium enterprises, which lack dedicated HR functions, are markedly under-represented in the evidence base despite employing most of the workforce — a gap with direct practical consequences, since SME adopters cannot assume that findings from large-firm samples transfer to their settings.

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5. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Four gaps stand out. First, longitudinal evidence remains scarce: most studies are crosssectional, leaving the durability of both benefits and costs uncertain. Second, the SME evidence gap noted above. Third, geographic concentration: the literature is dominated by North American and Western European samples, limiting generalisability to labour markets with different regulatory, cultural, and infrastructural conditions. Fourth, measurement: self-reported productivity remains the dominant outcome measure, and studies pairing subjective and objective indicators frequently find divergence between them. Future research addressing these gaps — longitudinal designs, SME and nonWestern samples, and multi-source outcome measurement — would substantially strengthen the evidence base on which HR policy is built.

6. CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This review has synthesised a decade of research on remote and hybrid work through the lens of HR policy design. The consistent message is that governance, not geography, drives outcomes. For practitioners, four evidence-based recommendations follow: provide genuine scheduling autonomy within clear outcome expectations; evaluate results rather than activity, and be cautious with electronic monitoring, whose documented costs to trust generally exceed its benefits; establish explicit communication norms rather than defaulting to always-on availability; and codify boundary protections, including limits on after-hours contact. Organisations that treat hybrid work as a strategic design problem — rather than a concession or a cost-saving measure — are, on the balance of the reviewed evidence, those most likely to secure its benefits while avoiding its well-documented failure modes.

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