

HR STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND REDUCING WORK-RELATED STRESS IN HYBRID WORK MODELS

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Abstract

In today's rapidly changing work environment, hybrid work models have become a common practice for many organizations. While these models offer flexibility and improved work-life balance, they also bring new challenges related to employee engagement and work-related stress. This study focuses on the role of Human Resource (HR) strategies in enhancing employee engagement and reducing stress in hybrid work settings. It highlights the importance of effective communication, supportive leadership, flexible work policies, mental health initiatives, and digital collaboration tools in maintaining employee motivation and well-being. The research also explores how regular feedback, virtual team-building activities, recognition programs, and work-life balance practices can create a positive work culture even in remote or partially remote environments. The study emphasizes the need for HR professionals to design personalized engagement approaches and stress management programs that address the diverse needs of employees. By adopting proactive and people-centered HR strategies, organizations can improve employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention while reducing burnout and psychological pressure. This study provides practical insights for organizations to build a healthy, engaged, and resilient workforce in hybrid work models. It contributes to the growing literature on modern HR practices and offers recommendations for creating sustainable and employee-friendly workplaces in the future.

Keywords: Human Resource (HR), Hybrid Work Models, Work-Life Balance, Employee Engagement.

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1. Conceptual Framework

1.1 Hybrid Work Model

Definition and Types of Hybrid Work Models

The hybrid work model refers to a flexible work arrangement in which employees divide their time between working remotely and working from a physical office. This model has gained prominence, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, as organizations began to realize that productivity and collaboration can be maintained even outside traditional office settings. Hybrid work aims to combine the advantages of remote work, such as flexibility and autonomy, with the benefits of in-person collaboration, such as teamwork and organizational culture. It is considered a people-centric approach that focuses on employee well-being, work-life balance, and improved performance. Organizations adopt hybrid work to attract and retain talent, reduce operational costs, and respond to changing employee expectations in the digital era.

There are several types of hybrid work arrangements. In a remote-first model, employees primarily work from home or other remote locations, and the office is used only when necessary for meetings or collaboration. This approach is commonly adopted by technology and digital organizations. A split-week model requires employees to work certain days in the office and the remaining days remotely, ensuring structured collaboration while maintaining flexibility. Another type is the flexible hybrid model, where employees have the freedom to choose when and where they work based on job requirements and personal preferences. This model promotes trust, autonomy, and accountability. The selection of a hybrid model depends on organizational culture, job roles, technological readiness, and employee needs.

Benefits and Challenges of the Hybrid Work Model

The hybrid work model offers several advantages for both employees and organizations. For employees, it improves work-life balance by reducing commuting time and allowing greater control over schedules. This flexibility contributes to higher job satisfaction, reduced stress, and better mental well-being. It also supports diversity and inclusion by enabling participation from individuals who may face mobility, geographic, or family-related constraints. For organizations, hybrid work enhances productivity, reduces infrastructure and operational costs, and broadens access to global talent pools. It also promotes sustainability by lowering travel-related carbon emissions. Hybrid work can lead to increased employee engagement and innovation as employees feel more empowered and trusted.

Despite its benefits, the hybrid work model presents several challenges. One major concern is maintaining effective communication and collaboration across remote and in-office teams. Employees working remotely may feel isolated, which can reduce team cohesion and organizational commitment. Performance monitoring and evaluation may also become complex, requiring new digital tools and leadership approaches. Organizations face challenges related to cybersecurity, data privacy, and technological infrastructure. Managers must also ensure fairness and equal opportunities for remote and in-office employees to avoid bias and workplace inequality. Successful implementation of hybrid work requires strong leadership, digital readiness, clear policies, and continuous employee support.

1.2 Work-Related Stress

- **Definition and Types of Work-Related Stress**

Work-related stress refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological reactions that occur when job demands exceed an individual's ability to cope. It arises when employees feel pressure due to workload, deadlines, role expectations, or lack of control over their work. In modern organizations, especially in flexible and hybrid work settings, stress has become an important concern because it directly influences employee performance, engagement, and health. Work-related stress is not always negative; a moderate level of stress can motivate employees to perform better. Prolonged or excessive stress can lead to burnout, fatigue, and decreased job satisfaction.

Work-related stress can be broadly classified into acute stress and chronic stress. Acute stress is short-term and occurs due to immediate challenges such as tight deadlines, urgent meetings, or sudden workload increases. This type of stress is usually temporary and disappears once the situation is resolved. In some cases, it can enhance alertness and productivity. On the other hand, chronic stress is long-term and develops when employees continuously face pressure without adequate support or recovery time. Chronic stress may result from ongoing workload, job insecurity, work-life imbalance, or unclear expectations. It can lead to serious consequences such as anxiety, depression, and reduced organizational commitment. Understanding these types helps organizations design effective stress management strategies.

- **Causes of Stress in Hybrid Work Environments**

The hybrid work model has introduced new stressors along with traditional workplace pressures. One major cause of stress is the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. When employees work from home, it becomes difficult to separate professional and personal responsibilities, leading to longer working hours and mental fatigue. Another important factor is technological pressure, often referred to as “technostress.” Employees may feel overwhelmed by continuous virtual meetings, digital communication tools, and the expectation of being constantly available.

Lack of effective communication and social interaction is also a significant source of stress in hybrid environments. Remote employees may feel isolated or disconnected from their teams, which reduces collaboration and emotional support. Unclear roles, inconsistent expectations, and lack of managerial guidance can increase uncertainty and anxiety. Hybrid work can also create perceived inequality between remote and office-based employees, leading to stress related to career growth and performance evaluation. Distractions at home, family responsibilities, and inadequate workspaces further contribute to stress levels. Organizations need to focus on supportive leadership, clear communication, and flexible policies to reduce stress in hybrid settings.

- **Impact on Productivity and Well-Being**

Work-related stress has a significant impact on both employee productivity and overall well-being. High stress levels can reduce concentration, creativity, and decision-making ability, which directly affects job performance. Employees experiencing chronic stress are more likely to make errors, miss deadlines, and show lower engagement. This can result in absenteeism, presenteeism, and high turnover rates, ultimately affecting organizational performance. In hybrid work settings, stress may also influence collaboration, as stressed employees may withdraw from teamwork and communication.

From a well-being perspective, excessive work stress can lead to physical and mental health problems such as fatigue, sleep disorders, anxiety, and burnout. It also affects emotional stability and job satisfaction. On the positive side, organizations that effectively manage stress through flexible work arrangements, mental health programs, and supportive culture can improve employee resilience and satisfaction. Hybrid work, when properly managed, can reduce stress by providing autonomy and flexibility. Balancing job demands with employee resources is essential to enhance both productivity and well-being in the modern workplace.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

- **Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model**

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model explains employee stress, motivation, and performance by focusing on two main aspects of a job: job demands and job resources. Job demands are the physical, psychological, or emotional requirements of work, such as heavy workload, time pressure, and role ambiguity. In hybrid work, employees often face additional demands like digital overload, blurred work–life boundaries, and constant availability, which can increase stress and lead to burnout if not managed properly.

Job resources are the factors that help employees handle demands, improve performance, and support growth. These include managerial support, flexibility, autonomy, technological tools, and learning opportunities. In hybrid settings, flexible schedules, virtual collaboration platforms, and emotional support play an important role in reducing stress and improving engagement. The JD-R

model highlights that a proper balance between job demands and resources leads to higher motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity.

- **Social Exchange Theory**

Social Exchange Theory explains the employee–organization relationship as a process of mutual trust, fairness, and reciprocity. When employees feel that the organization treats them fairly, provides support, and recognizes their efforts, they are more likely to show commitment, loyalty, and better performance. In hybrid work settings, this relationship becomes more important because employees are physically distant, making regular communication, transparency, and trust essential. In hybrid environments, support such as flexible work policies, mental health programs, and technological assistance shows that the organization values employee well-being. This encourages employees to stay motivated and engaged. However, if employees feel a lack of support, unfair treatment, or fewer career opportunities in remote work, it may lead to dissatisfaction and stress. Therefore, Social Exchange Theory highlights the role of fairness, recognition, and supportive leadership in maintaining engagement and reducing stress in hybrid work.

- **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory focuses on motivation and psychological well-being. It states that employees perform better when three basic needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy means having freedom and control over work decisions, competence refers to the ability to perform tasks effectively and develop skills, and relatedness involves feeling connected and valued by others. Hybrid work often increases autonomy by giving employees flexibility in work location and schedule, which can improve motivation, satisfaction, and performance.

Hybrid work may reduce relatedness if employees feel isolated or disconnected from colleagues. Therefore, organizations should encourage collaboration, regular communication, and team bonding. Continuous learning and feedback also help employees build competence in digital work environments. Self-Determination Theory shows that hybrid work can improve well-being when organizations support autonomy, skill development, and social connections.

2.2 Employee Engagement in Hybrid Work

- **Communication and collaboration challenges**

Employee engagement in hybrid work environments depends greatly on effective communication and collaboration. In traditional offices, face-to-face interaction, informal discussions, and quick problem-solving help employees stay connected and involved. However, in hybrid work, communication mainly occurs through digital platforms, which may reduce clarity and personal connection. Misunderstandings, delayed responses, and the absence of non-verbal cues can lower employee involvement and make them feel less connected to their teams and organizational goals. Maintaining collaboration between remote and in-office employees is another major challenge. Physical distance may create information gaps, reduce knowledge sharing, and lead to unequal participation in decisions. Remote employees may feel excluded, which can decrease motivation and engagement. To address this, organizations should use structured communication practices such as regular virtual meetings, clear information-sharing, and collaborative digital tools. Creating an open and inclusive work culture is essential to keep all employees engaged, regardless of their work location

- **Role of leadership and managerial support**

Leadership and managerial support are essential for improving employee engagement in hybrid work settings. Managers need to move from traditional supervision to trust-based and outcome-oriented leadership. Supportive leaders make employees feel valued and motivated by providing

regular feedback, emotional support, and recognition. They also communicate clear expectations, offer guidance, and ensure fairness in work distribution and performance evaluation.

In hybrid environments, employees may feel uncertain or isolated, which makes strong managerial support even more important. Leaders who show empathy, flexibility, and transparency can reduce stress and build trust. Promoting work–life balance, psychological safety, and inclusion helps create a positive work culture that enhances engagement and productivity.

- **Technology and digital fatigue**

Technology enables hybrid work, but excessive use of digital tools can cause fatigue and lower engagement. Long virtual meetings, constant emails, and multiple platforms can lead to mental exhaustion, reduced focus, and burnout. Technical issues, connectivity problems, and lack of digital skills may also reduce confidence and increase stress. Organizations should provide user-friendly tools, digital training, and clear communication guidelines. Encouraging regular breaks, limiting unnecessary meetings, and using technology strategically can reduce digital fatigue and improve collaboration and performance in hybrid work environments.

2.3 Work-Related Stress in Hybrid Settings

- **Work–life boundary blurring**

One of the major sources of stress in hybrid work is the lack of clear separation between work and personal life. Unlike traditional office settings, employees often manage both responsibilities in the same space, which makes it difficult to disconnect from work. Constant digital connectivity and expectations of availability can lead to longer working hours and mental exhaustion. This may result in burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and conflicts between work and family roles. Organizations should promote flexible schedules, clear work expectations, and encourage employees to disconnect after working hours. Training on time management and work–life balance can also help employees manage these challenges.

- **Isolation and reduced social interaction**

Hybrid work can reduce face-to-face interaction, informal communication, and social bonding, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection. Employees, especially new hires, may struggle to build relationships and feel a sense of belonging. This can increase stress, anxiety, and loneliness while negatively affecting collaboration, trust, and knowledge sharing. Organizations can address this issue by encouraging virtual team-building, regular communication, mentoring, and social engagement activities to create a supportive and inclusive work culture.

- **Increased monitoring and performance pressure**

Many organizations use digital tools to monitor productivity in hybrid work. However, excessive tracking can create stress, reduce autonomy, and increase anxiety. Employees may feel pressured to prove their productivity by working longer hours and responding instantly, which can lead to burnout. To reduce stress, organizations should focus on outcome-based performance management, build trust, and provide autonomy. A balanced and supportive approach to evaluation can improve employee well-being, engagement, and productivity.

3. Role of HR in Balancing Engagement and Stress

- **Strategic HRM in Hybrid Environments**

The role of Human Resource Management (HRM) has become more strategic in hybrid work settings. HR must balance employee engagement and stress by aligning HR practices with organizational goals and employee well-being. This includes designing flexible work policies, digital work guidelines, and fair performance management systems for both remote and in-office employees. HR also focuses on training employees to adapt to new technologies and

communication methods. Workforce planning, talent retention, and employee development are key priorities. Using HR analytics helps identify stress levels and engagement trends, enabling organizations to create sustainable and productive hybrid work models.

- **Building Psychological Safety**

Psychological safety means employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, concerns, and mistakes without fear. In hybrid work, this is essential because employees may feel isolated. HR can promote psychological safety through open communication, inclusive policies, and supportive leadership. Regular feedback, employee surveys, and manager training in empathy and communication help create trust. When employees feel safe, they collaborate better, stay engaged, and manage stress more effectively.

- **Promoting Inclusive Communication**

Inclusive communication ensures that all employees, regardless of location, have equal access to information and opportunities. In hybrid settings, remote employees may feel excluded from important discussions. HR should create structured communication channels, regular updates, and use digital collaboration tools. Virtual meetings, knowledge-sharing sessions, and transparent information flow improve trust and engagement. This approach also supports diversity, equity, and fairness in the workplace.

- **Designing Supportive Organizational Culture**

HR plays a key role in building a supportive and flexible work culture that promotes trust, recognition, and empathy. Initiatives such as employee recognition, wellness programs, and mental health support improve engagement and reduce stress. HR must ensure fairness and consistency in hybrid policies and encourage leaders to model supportive behavior. Creating opportunities for teamwork, learning, and social interaction helps employees feel valued and connected, leading to higher productivity and resilience.

4. Research Gaps Identified in Literature

- **Limited Long-Term Hybrid Work Studies**

Most studies on hybrid work focus on short-term outcomes such as productivity, engagement, and stress during the transition period after COVID-19. However, there is limited research on the long-term impact of hybrid work on employee well-being, career growth, organizational culture, and performance. The sustainability of hybrid models and their influence on motivation, innovation, and commitment are still unclear. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand whether the benefits of flexibility and autonomy remain stable over time or decline. Future research should track employees and organizations over longer periods to gain deeper insights.

- **Lack of Sector-Specific Comparative Studies**

Existing research mainly focuses on technology and knowledge-based industries where remote work is easier. There is a lack of studies in sectors such as healthcare, education, manufacturing, banking, and public services, where hybrid work challenges differ. Comparative research across industries, organizational sizes, and cultural contexts is also limited. In emerging economies like India, hybrid work may present unique challenges due to infrastructure, digital skills, and work culture. Sector-specific and comparative studies are necessary to design customized HR strategies and improve practical relevance.

- **Gaps in Measuring Stress in Digital Environments**

Traditional tools for measuring work-related stress may not fully capture new digital stressors such as technostress, digital fatigue, virtual overload, and constant connectivity. Many studies rely on self-reported surveys, which may lead to bias. There is a need to develop advanced and reliable

measurement methods that include psychological, behavioral, and technological indicators. Future research should use digital analytics, wearable technology, real-time monitoring, and mixed-method approaches to better understand stress in hybrid work and support effective organizational interventions.

5. Discussions

• Synthesis of Literature Findings

The review of literature shows that hybrid work has become an important transformation in modern organizations, affecting employee engagement, productivity, and work-related stress. Research highlights that hybrid work offers flexibility, autonomy, and better work–life balance, which improve satisfaction and motivation. However, challenges such as communication gaps, digital fatigue, isolation, and blurred work–life boundaries increase stress. Employee engagement in hybrid settings is strongly influenced by leadership support, inclusive communication, technological readiness, and a positive organizational culture. Theoretical frameworks such as the JD-R Model, Social Exchange Theory, and Self-Determination Theory explain that increased job demands without sufficient resources lead to stress and lower engagement. In contrast, when organizations provide flexibility, autonomy, and support, employees show higher motivation and performance. Overall, hybrid work outcomes depend on how effectively organizations manage these factors.

• Relationship Between HR Strategies, Engagement, and Stress

The literature indicates a strong link between HR strategies, employee engagement, and work-related stress in hybrid environments. Strategic HR practices such as flexible policies, digital skill training, wellness programs, and fair performance management help balance job demands and resources. When HR promotes psychological safety, trust, and inclusive communication, employees feel more engaged and less stressed. Supportive and empathetic leadership further strengthens motivation and commitment. Weak HR support, unclear policies, excessive monitoring, and poor communication can increase stress and reduce engagement. Research also shows that engagement acts as a mediator between HR practices and organizational outcomes. Engaged employees are more adaptable, resilient, and productive even in challenging hybrid settings.

• Implications for Organizations

The discussion suggests that organizations adopting hybrid work must design flexible, fair, and inclusive work policies. Clear communication and transparency are essential to build trust and reduce uncertainty. Leadership development and managerial training are also necessary to manage hybrid teams effectively, with a focus on digital skills, emotional intelligence, and remote leadership. Organizations should invest in strong technological infrastructure and collaboration tools while minimizing digital fatigue. Regular feedback, mental health support, and engagement initiatives can enhance productivity and well-being. A long-term and strategic approach to hybrid work, with continuous monitoring and adaptation of HR practices, will help create sustainable and resilient work environments that support both employee and organizational success.

8. Recommendations

6. Recommendations

• Policy Recommendations for HR Managers

HR managers play an important role in creating effective hybrid workplaces. They should design clear and transparent policies about working hours, communication, availability, and performance

so that employees do not feel confused or overburdened. These policies must also be flexible and inclusive, allowing employees to choose work options based on their job role and personal needs. Ensuring fairness between remote and office employees is essential by providing equal access to training, promotions, and evaluations. HR should regularly collect employee feedback and use data to improve decisions. In addition, organizations need to focus on employee well-being by offering wellness programs, mental health support, and employee assistance services. A people-focused approach can help maintain both productivity and employee satisfaction.

- **Practical Engagement Strategies**

To improve engagement in hybrid work, organizations should focus on regular and meaningful communication. Structured virtual meetings, team discussions, and collaborative tools can keep employees connected and informed. Informal interactions and social activities should also be encouraged to maintain relationships and team spirit. Recognition and rewards are important to motivate employees, along with constructive feedback and appreciation of achievements. Providing learning opportunities, digital skill training, and career growth programs can increase commitment. Involving employees in decision-making builds trust and ownership. Flexible work schedules and autonomy further improve engagement by supporting work–life balance and motivation.

- **Stress-Reduction Frameworks for Hybrid Teams**

Organizations should create simple and practical systems to reduce stress in hybrid teams. Promoting work–life balance through flexible work, clear boundaries, and regular breaks can prevent burnout. Managers should be trained to identify stress and support employees at the right time. Counseling, mindfulness sessions, and wellness programs can help employees manage pressure. Work should be redesigned to reduce unnecessary meetings, balance workloads, and set realistic expectations. Technology must be used to make work easier, not more stressful. Encouraging digital detox and limiting after-work communication can improve recovery. A supportive, inclusive, and psychologically safe work culture will help employees stay healthy, productive, and engaged.

7. Conclusion: Summary of Key Findings, Implications, and Scope for Future Research

This study examined the relationship between hybrid work, employee engagement, and work-related stress, highlighting the strategic role of Human Resource (HR) practices. The review shows that hybrid work has become a flexible and sustainable model that improves work–life balance, autonomy, and employee satisfaction, leading to higher engagement and productivity. However, challenges such as communication gaps, digital fatigue, isolation, and blurred work–life boundaries can increase stress and reduce well-being if not managed effectively.

The findings emphasize that HR strategies are crucial in balancing engagement and stress in hybrid environments. Supportive leadership, flexible policies, inclusive communication, and employee well-being initiatives help enhance motivation and reduce stress. The integration of theoretical frameworks such as the JD-R Model, Social Exchange Theory, and Self-Determination Theory explains how job demands, organizational support, and psychological needs influence employee outcomes. Practically, organizations should adopt trust-based management, strengthen digital capabilities, provide mental health support, and ensure continuous feedback. These practices are especially relevant in emerging economies like India, where hybrid work is rapidly growing.

Despite growing research, there are important areas for future study. Long-term and sector-specific research is needed to assess the sustainability of hybrid work. There is also a need to develop advanced tools to measure stress and engagement in digital environments. Future research should

explore the impact of technology, leadership styles, and cultural factors on hybrid work. Addressing these gaps will help organizations build resilient, inclusive, and employee-focused work models.

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