

# Hybrid working may change our workplace social networks. What does it mean for inclusion?

*The workplace is quickly changing shape, and hybrid working, split between home and the office, is likely to be the future. These changes affect organisations' internal social networks. Opportunities for informal contact are reduced, Zoom fatigue sets in, and communication can become more difficult. **Paris Will** looks at what social network analysis reveals about these changes' potential for affecting inclusion in the workplace, and finds that there may be positive impacts, such as stronger ties and greater involvement in workplace processes, along with the risks of reduced social information sharing.*

As employees around the world have shifted to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the future of the workplace is looking entirely different. Rather than return to the pre-pandemic business norm of predominantly office work, a recent survey indicates that organisations expect 40% of employees to continue working remotely long into the future ([BCG, 2020](#)). A new working landscape is being determined, and it is looking like a hybrid working model, where work is split remotely and in office, is likely to be the future.

## Benefits and risks of hybrid working

One of the benefits of this hybrid model is that it will likely give workers more flexibility in when and where they work. An increase in flexible working can provide benefits such as increasing job satisfaction ([McNall, Masuda & Nicklin, 2009](#)) and reducing job-induced stress ([Hayman, 2010](#)). In turn, flexible working can provide benefits for an organisation by lowering turnover intention of employees ([McNall, Masuda & Nicklin, 2009](#)) and improving work quality ([Kauffeld, Jonas, Frey, 2004](#)). In this way, it seems like a win-win situation for both employees and the organisations as a whole.

On the other hand, with such a disruptive workplace change, there are potential risks to consider that may occur in hybrid working. For those working remotely, the reduced opportunities for informal contact can make communication more difficult ([Kiesler and Cummings 2002](#)). Rather than running into your coworkers in the office, communication must be planned and deliberate. Furthermore, it may be more difficult to develop personal relationships online as "Zoom fatigue" ([Nadler, 2020](#)) has been a recent phenomenon, which states that people become more exhausted from online communication, meaning we may not have the same attentional capacity to interact with people online as much as we do in person. What these examples have in common is that they derive from the changing social landscape of the workplace. How we communicate and socialise with coworkers has drastically shifted in the last year due to both the physical separation and the new medium of online communication.

## Social network analysis and workplace inclusion

Our workplace social communication can be measured through a social network analysis (SNA), which investigates the structure of a social group and tells us how well connected each person is to others in the network, and how the network is as a whole ([Scott, 1988](#)). This method is commonly studied by asking employees who they interact with on a daily basis, go to for advice, or communicate with in some other way ([Treglown & Furnham, 2020](#)). From this, a network is computed which shows employees as different nodes and the various social connections between them.

This form of analysis can be used to illuminate levels of inclusion within a workplace. Inclusion is the extent to which diverse members of an organisation are involved in various workplace processes ([Roberson, 2006](#)). Previously, SNA has been used to measure the involvement of individuals in a process ([Ingold, 2014](#)) or the diversity of social connections one has ([Shi et al., 2011](#)). This suggests inclusion can be studied through SNA at a macro organisational level or a micro individual one. At the organisational level, the connectivity of the network can be assessed to see how many people are involved in different workplace processes, and at the individual level it can show how included one is by the amount of social connections they have.

## Social network structure in hybrid working

Since social communication has changed with remote working, it is worth exploring what impacts this will have on an organisation. Will this change in social communication alter an organisation's social network structure and levels of inclusion?

Social networks, typically thought to be stable structures once formed, have been shown to be capable of changing as a result of adding new online communication platforms ([Wu, 2012](#)). Thus, it is possible that the rise of Zoom and other online platforms, which have been utilised since the start of working from home, may cause similar changes. Research regarding social networks in online versus in-person communication platforms can bring attention to some possible outcomes.

One of the fears of shifting to remote working is that it will be difficult to maintain and form social relationships. However, research actually shows it is possible to strengthen existing workplace relationships by connecting through online platforms ([Huang & Liu, 2017](#); [Wu, 2012](#); [Kavanaugh, 1999](#)), and that this increase in social capital can result in additional positive workplace outcomes including job performance and job satisfaction ([Huang & Liu, 2017](#)). Further to this, moving an in-person group to an online platform can change an individual's position within a network. Specifically, individuals who previously occupied peripheral or outer positions in a network were more likely to occupy a more central position in the online group ([Cho et al., 2007](#)). These findings suggest that remote working can be positive for organisational inclusion, by strengthening ties and amount of involvement in workplace processes.

Additionally, communication via an organisational online social platform was shown to increase information diversity ([Wu, 2012](#)) and exchanges of information ([Kavanaugh, 1999](#)). While this in theory should also serve to strengthen social ties, it is important to distinguish where this information comes from. In an experiment that assessed how people seek information in online social networks, it was found that people are less likely to seek information from other people and rather obtain information through non-human information sources ([Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007](#)), such as Google. This would describe a social network where individuals are highly connected with an external source, but not with each other. Although there are knowledge benefits of increased information flow, the social inclusion benefits would not exist.

It is also important to note that social network structure will vary widely across organisations. While the context of in person or online will influence this, there are many types of social structures that can form in online groups ([Goggins, 2009](#)), and much of this will be subject to the organisational culture, management practices, and individual differences in employees.

## Conclusions

In sum, evidence suggests that some aspects of remote working can improve workplace inclusion, and others may inhibit it. The current research reviewed looks at online and in-person networks separately, and these mixed effects will likely differ when hybrid working is studied. The future of hybrid working will likely have a complex and dynamic interplay of online and in-person social networks, so, future literature should assess how these dual modes of communication interact and influence inclusion.

Change is inevitable with the drastic change in the working landscape. Particularly, social networks in the workplace will be subject to change with a rise in hybrid work, and this can impact inclusion in different ways. Now is a good opportunity for organisations to monitor and assess the structural social components underlying inclusion within their workplace, as this can be a first step in building more inclusive workplaces.



## Notes:

- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured [image](#) by [geralt](#), under a [Pixabay](#) licence*
- *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#)*

