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Peripheral by Design? Exploring Belonging and Social Disconnection in Hybrid Work Models

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid work has reshaped the architecture of collaboration, autonomy, and flexibility in organizations—but it has also surfaced hidden inequalities in visibility, participation, and belonging [1,2]. While existing research has explored the productivity and coordination benefits of hybrid work, less attention has been paid to its psychosocial consequences, particularly the experience of exclusion and peripheral status among employees who are less physically present. This conceptual paper introduces the construct of Belonging Friction: a multidimensional form of psychological and relational strain experienced by hybrid workers who struggle to maintain connection, legitimacy, and informal influence within their teams and organizations. Grounded in social identity theory, organizational inclusion frameworks, and emerging research on proximity bias and spatial inequity, the paper develops a three-part model of belonging friction encompassing spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions. Each captures a distinct way hybrid work can undermine access to the social fabric of organizational life—from missing informal rituals and ad hoc conversations to misaligned time zones and attenuated peer recognition. The paper articulates key antecedents (e.g., remote intensity, team norms), moderators (e.g., leadership inclusion behaviors, technology use), and outcomes (e.g., disengagement, turnover intentions), while offering directions for empirical validation. By naming this latent dynamic, the paper contributes to management theory by shifting focus from binary debates on location to a relationally embedded view of inclusion, equity, and organizational cohesion. It also offers practical insights for designing hybrid systems that go beyond flexibility to foster meaningful belonging in distributed teams.

Keywords: Social Disconnection, Exploring Belonging, Hybrid Work Models

Introduction

Hybrid work has rapidly shifted from a crisis response to a mainstream model for knowledge workers (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). This new work paradigm blends remote and in-office experiences, offering flexibility but also raising pressing questions about employee connection and sense of belonging. Social belonging – the feeling of being an accepted, valued member of a group – is a fundamental human need and pivotal for organizational success (Deloitte Insights, 2020). Research shows that high workplace belonging can boost job performance by over 50% and cut turnover risk in half (Deloitte Insights, 2020). Conversely, about 40% of people report feeling isolated at work, which erodes commitment and engagement (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). In hybrid contexts, there is growing concern that flexible arrangements may inadvertently weaken cohesion, exacerbate social isolation, or splinter workplace culture (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). For instance, evidence suggests poorly managed hybrid setups can hurt collaboration and intensify feelings of disconnection (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2024). Recent surveys highlight the risk of hybrid models creating "two classes" of employees – those physically co-located enjoying visibility and informal access, and those remote feeling peripheral or "second-class" (Officely, n.d.).

This conceptual article addresses the research problem of belonging and social disconnection in hybrid work models, with a focus on understanding who may feel excluded or marginalized in hybrid arrangements and why. We introduce "belonging friction" as a theoretical construct capturing the psychological and relational strain that can arise in hybrid work. Belonging

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friction refers to the subtle impediments to belonging – such as reduced visibility, informal exclusion, and spatial inequities – that employees may encounter when some team members work remotely and others in-person. By defining and modeling belonging friction, we aim to illuminate how hybrid work changes employees perceived belonging and work identity, and what factors mitigate or aggravate these effects. The paper's contributions are threefold: (1) integrating diverse literatures (belongingness, inclusion, social identity, remote work) to ground a new framework for belonging in hybrid contexts; (2) proposing a conceptual model of belonging friction – including its dimensions (spatial, temporal, relational), antecedents, moderators, and outcomes; and (3) outlining implications for management theory and practice, such as how organizations can design inclusive hybrid cultures and how our model extends existing theory (e.g. social identity and inclusion theories) into the hybrid era. Ultimately, we shed light on how hybrid work models can be configured to maximize flexibility without "friction" on employee belonging.

To deepen theoretical insight into the relational and psychological dynamics of hybrid work, this paper introduces the construct of Belonging Friction, the latent tension that arises when individuals in hybrid settings encounter obstacles to feeling fully included, connected, and valued within organizational life. Unlike existing constructs such as remote work satisfaction or engagement, belonging friction foregrounds the interpersonal and spatial inequities that subtly accumulate in hybrid environments, leading to perceived exclusion, invisibility, or informal marginalization.

Drawing from Social Identity Theory organizational inclusion literature, and proximity bias research), the model conceptualizes belonging friction as a multidimensional experience shaped by one's physical and temporal location in relation to dominant work rhythms, access to informal networks, and visibility in organizational rituals [3,4,5]. This section outlines the structure of the model and its three interrelated dimensions— spatial, temporal, and relational friction—and identifies key antecedents, outcomes, and moderators that can inform future empirical testing and practical application.

While hybrid work is often framed as a tool for autonomy and flexibility, recent research reveals that it can reinforce status asymmetries between on-site and remote workers, particularly around access to informal power structures, mentorship, and visibility in performance evaluation [6,7]. Employees who work remotely more frequently may be inadvertently excluded from ad hoc meetings, hallway conversations, or decision-making loops—leading to a reduction in social capital and psychological connection to the team. The very practices designed to enhance work–life balance may unintentionally contribute to a sense of peripheral participation and symbolic detachment, especially among new hires, underrepresented groups, or part-time staff [8,9].

From a management theory standpoint, belonging friction opens new terrain for understanding how space, time, and social embeddedness function as organizational resources that are unequally distributed in hybrid contexts. It also challenges dominant paradigms in digital work design that prioritize productivity and coordination over social cohesion and identity reinforcement. By naming and structuring this friction, the model provides a conceptual lens through which leaders and scholars can better grasp the unintended consequences of hybrid systems, thereby prompting a shift from binary debates on remote vs. in-office work toward more relationally nuanced understanding of inclusion and experience.

Literature Review

Belonging and Inclusion at Work: Belonging refers to an individual's sense of being an accepted, respected member of a group. In organizational contexts, belonging is associated with supportive relationships, feeling valued, and having a voice in one's team (Stewart, 2023). Workplace inclusion research emphasizes that true inclusion satisfies employees' needs for both belongingness and uniqueness (Stewart, 2023). In a classic definition, Shore et al. describe inclusion as the degree to which an employee perceives they are an esteemed insider in the work group while also being allowed to express uniqueness (Stewart, 2023) [5]. When employees feel they belong, the outcomes are overwhelmingly positive: higher engagement, identification with the organization, better well-being, and lower turnover intentions (Deloitte, 2020). By contrast, lacking belonging can be detrimental – even a single instance of "micro-exclusion" (e.g. being left out of a meeting or conversation) has been shown to cause an immediate drop in an employee's performance on team tasks (Deloitte, 2020). Demographic diversity can complicate belonging; employees who feel like "outsiders" due to gender, race, or background often report lower organizational attachment (Stewart, 2023). Belonging thus underpins key organizational outcomes, and ensuring all employees feel included is a central challenge – one now heightened by hybrid work arrangements that alter how inclusion is experienced.

Impacts of Remote/Hybrid Work on Belonging: Prior research on remote and hybrid work indicates mixed effects on employees' sense of inclusion. On one hand, remote work offers autonomy and work-life benefits, but on the other, it can limit spontaneous interaction and "face time", potentially diminishing social connection [6]. Early telework studies warned of professional isolation – telecommuters often felt "out of sight, out of mind," missing out on informal learning and networking opportunities (Golden et al., 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees experienced increased isolation and loneliness when working from home full-time [6]. Without hallway chats or cafeteria meetups, communication became more static and siloed, leading some workers to report a diminished sense of belonging to their organizations [6]. Neuroscience research supports these observations: only in-person interactions tend to trigger the full range of physiological responses (eye contact, mirroring, touch) that build trust, whereas video meetings and emails provide a more "impoverished" social experience, potentially weakening interpersonal bonds [6]. Indeed, fully virtual collaboration has been linked to narrower networks and reduced trust over time [6]. Notably, a Harvard study found that remote employees often suffer from more static networks and feel less connected, even as they appreciate flexibility [6]. In hybrid arrangements, employees commonly report that days in the office bring psychological benefits – one study showed that in-person interactions with colleagues on hybrid schedules significantly reduced feelings of loneliness and improved job satisfaction compared to days working from home [6]. In short,

physical co-presence still matters for belonging being together facilitates richer communication and reminds individuals they are part of a team, whereas being remote can lead to a sense of detachment if not managed well.

Who Feels Excluded or Peripheral in Hybrid Settings? Hybrid work does not affect all employees equally. Recent empirical evidence suggests that certain groups are more prone to feeling disconnected or marginalized under hybrid arrangements. A large 2024 survey by Dalessandro and Lovell found no overall difference in sense of belonging between employees working remotely, hybrid, or on-site, on average [9]. However, important subgroup differences emerged: older workers, hourly workers, and those identifying as a minority were significantly less likely to report feeling a sense of belonging at work [9]. Newcomers to an organization are another vulnerable group – those hired during pandemic remote operations often struggle to integrate socially. A study of a tech company's hybrid workforce found that employees who joined during the pandemic reported higher workplace loneliness than those with longer tenure [6]. Lacking prior in-person bonds, these newcomers felt more peripheral. Encouragingly, the same study noted that frequent informal communication with supervisors and colleagues and strong social support drastically lowered loneliness, especially for new hires [9]. This highlights how access to informal interaction is critical for newcomers' belonging in hybrid setups.

Interestingly, hybrid and remote work can increase belonging for some individuals. Global survey data from 2021 revealed that remote/hybrid employees scored higher on belonging and relationships than those fully in-office [10]. These gains were most pronounced among historically underrepresented groups: in the U.S., Black and Hispanic knowledge workers' sense of belonging at work jumped by 24–32% after moving to flexible arrangements (compared to a 5% increase for white workers) [10]. Minority employees also reported feeling more fairly treated in the remote/hybrid context [10]. This aligns with Dalessandro and Lovell's finding that minority employees who had the option to work remotely even before 2020 experienced higher belonging than if they had been fully on-site [6]. One interpretation is that remote work can mitigate some workplace biases or "onlyness" – e.g. reducing daily exposure to microaggressions or bridging social distance by putting everyone in the same virtual room. Flexible work might level the playing field in certain respects, giving employees from marginalized groups more control and psychological safety, thereby enhancing inclusion [10]. However, these benefits are not universal and depend on implementation. Without conscious efforts by organizations, hybrid models can just as easily reinforce disparities (for instance, if people of color choose remote at higher rates and then suffer proximity bias, as discussed below [10]. In summary, employees most at risk of feeling excluded or peripheral in hybrid settings include those with weaker existing social ties (new hires, remote members of partially co-located teams), those less visible due to roll or schedule (e.g. part-timers, international colleagues in off-hours), and potentially members of minority or out-group demographics – unless hybrid work is structured to be inclusive. Understanding why these patterns occur requires examining theoretical mechanisms like social identity dynamics, bias in visibility, and communication barriers, which we turn to next.

Theoretical Frameworks

Social Identity and Belonging: Our framework builds firstly on Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that individuals derive self-concept and esteem from group memberships [4]. People have an inherent drive to belong to groups that provide a sense of identity and acceptance. In a workplace, teams and organizations function as important social identities – employees feel "part of a collective" which fulfills belonging needs and shapes their behavior [11]. When working arrangements change, as in hybrid work, the salience and strength of these identities may shift. Social identity theory predicts potential in-group/out-group divides: for example, co-located employees who see each other daily might form a primary in-group, while remote colleagues become a perceived out-group. This can undermine the remote employees' identification with the team. Research on virtual teams confirms that physical isolation can threaten organizational identification unless counteracted by inclusive practices (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). A study of virtual employees found that being out-of-sight (physically isolated) was associated with lower organizational identification unless the employees felt respected and included by their co-workers (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). Thus, social identity processes suggest that hybrid contexts, by physically separating team members, risk weakening the shared group identity and belonging of those who spend more time remotely. Employees in hybrid setups may experience identity strain if they feel less seen as part of the group. Moreover, stereotypes can emerge remote workers might be stereotyped as less committed "free agents," while in-office workers are seen as the core insiders – a dynamic that threatens the unity of identity across the hybrid team.

Proximity Bias and "Out of Sight" Dynamics: A second key theoretical lens is the concept of proximity bias, rooted in cognitive bias research and organizational psychology. Proximity bias is the tendency for managers and colleagues to favor and give undue credit to those physically present in the workplace, under the (often unconscious) assumption that those who are seen in-person are working harder or are more "committed" [10]. In hybrid environments, proximity bias can lead to inequities between remote and in-office employees, as leaders may (even unintentionally) provide more opportunities, information, and positive evaluations to the people they see regularly [10]. This bias has deep roots: research by Elsbach and Cable demonstrated that merely being passively observed at work ("face time") strongly influences how employees are perceived – those with more office face time are viewed as more dependable and promotable [6]. Consequently, remote workers who lack face time often face a career penalty: they receive lower performance ratings, smaller raises, and fewer promotions even when their output is equal to peers in the office [6]. Such findings underscore how visibility ties into belonging; if remote employees sense they are overlooked or less valued, their sense of belonging will erode. The "out of sight, out of mind" adage becomes a structural challenge – remote staff may feel they exist on the periphery of the organization. In extreme cases, corporate leaders have openly disparaged remote workers as less productive or less committed. Elon Musk, for example, infamously suggested that people who prefer remote work "should pretend to work somewhere else," implying they are not truly dedicated (Mohiuddin, 2023). This stigma – the

notion that remote workers are "pretending" or slacking – can be internalized and poses a direct threat to remote employees' work identity and belonging (Mohiuddin, 2023). According to identity threat theory, such negative stereotypes force remote individuals into coping behaviors (e.g. overcompensating to prove their worth or "performing" commitment) which can be psychologically draining (Mohiuddin, 2023). In sum, proximity bias and associated stigmas provide a theoretical explanation for why hybrid arrangements might create "belonging friction": those at a distance must overcome biased perceptions to be seen as full members of the group.

Organizational Inclusion and Equity Theories: Our framework also draws on inclusion and diversity theories that highlight structural and cultural factors in belonging. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991) suggests individuals strive to balance belonging with uniqueness – inclusive environments satisfy both needs. In hybrid settings, achieving this balance may be tricky: remote employees might have "unique" work routines or needs, but if these are not valued by the group, they feel excluded. Shore et al.'s inclusion model holds that leaders play a crucial role in fostering belonging (through signals of valuing each member) while also appreciating differences (Shore & Chung, 2022). When applied to hybrid work, this means leaders must intentionally include remote participants in discussions, recognize their contributions, and ensure fairness in access to resources. Otherwise, hybrid models could reinforce existing inequities – for example, if women or employees of color opt to work from home at higher rates (as surveys indicate but then are sidelined due to proximity bias, the outcome is a setback for diversity efforts [10]. Structural inequality theories (Kanter, 1977; Stoltz, 2022) would predict that without intervention, those who are geographically distant or less centrally located in the workplace network become "tokens" or second-class members. Indeed, leaders in many organizations are now acutely aware that hybrid work could entrench a divide: one recent survey showed 41% of executives cite inequities between remote and in-office staff as their top concern with flexible work [10]. This has led to a push for practices to "level the playing field" – for instance, having all team members join meetings via videoconference even if some are in office (to equalize presence), rotating which days different subgroups come in, and revising evaluation criteria to focus on outcomes rather than visibility (Advanced Workplace Associates, 2023). Organizational support theory is relevant here as well: studies show that when teleworkers feel their organization provides support and tailored resources for remote working, feelings of isolation decrease and job satisfaction increases (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). In other words, an inclusive organizational climate – one that extends to virtual spaces – can buffer the negative effects of physical distance.

Communication and Media Theories: Finally, our framework considers principles from communication theory, particularly media richness and social presence theory. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) posits that different communication channels vary in their capacity to convey social and emotional cues. Face-to-face interaction is richest, supporting instant feedback, tone, and body language, whereas email or texting are "lean" media that can easily cause misunderstandings. In hybrid work, communication with remote colleagues happens via leaner media (email, chat, even video is less rich than in-person). This can contribute to what we term relational friction – small lags or misreads in communication that over time strain relationships. Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) similarly suggests that the psychological presence of others is diminished through mediated communication; one "feels" others less in a phone call than sitting across a table. Applied to hybrid teams, remote members may inadvertently get left out of informal knowledge sharing or spontaneous decision-making simply because communication channels with them are less immediate or prone to friction. For example, an in-office pair of colleagues might quickly resolve an issue with a two-minute hallway chat – the remote teammate is not even aware such a conversation took place, potentially leaving them out of the loop on a decision. Over time, these micro-exclusions add up, creating a sense of relational strain for remote workers ("I never hear about changes until later") and eroding trust. Consistent with this, a recent study found that feelings of workplace isolation among remote employees were associated with lower trust in the team, unless frequent high-quality communication was maintained (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). Frequent, transparent communication can substitute for physical co-presence to an extent, but it requires effort and intentionality. In summary, theories of mediated communication help explain why being distant can translate into feeling disconnected: reduced social cues and fewer organic interactions can make it harder to maintain strong relationships and shared understanding in hybrid teams.

Together, these theoretical foundations – social identity dynamics, proximity bias, inclusion frameworks, and communication theory – converge on a critical insight: Hybrid work introduces new friction into the social fabric of organizations. Employees must navigate not only their work tasks but also the psychological and relational hurdles posed by differences in location and medium. We now build on these ideas to propose the construct of "belonging friction" and elaborate a conceptual model of how it operates.

Conceptual Model: The "Belonging Friction" Construct

To deepen theoretical insight into the relational and psychological dynamics of hybrid work, this paper introduces the construct of Belonging Friction - the latent tension that arises when individuals in hybrid settings encounter obstacles to feeling fully included, connected, and valued within organizational life. Unlike existing constructs such as remote work satisfaction or engagement, belonging friction foregrounds the interpersonal and spatial inequities that subtly accumulate in hybrid environments, leading to perceived exclusion, invisibility, or informal marginalization [6,9].

Drawing from Social Identity Theory, organizational inclusion literature and proximity bias research, the model conceptualizes belonging friction as a multidimensional experience shaped by one's physical and temporal location in relation to dominant work rhythms, access to informal networks, and visibility in organizational rituals [3-6]. This section outlines the structure of the model and its three interrelated dimensions— spatial, temporal, and relational friction—and identifies key antecedents, outcomes, and moderators that can inform future empirical testing and practical application.

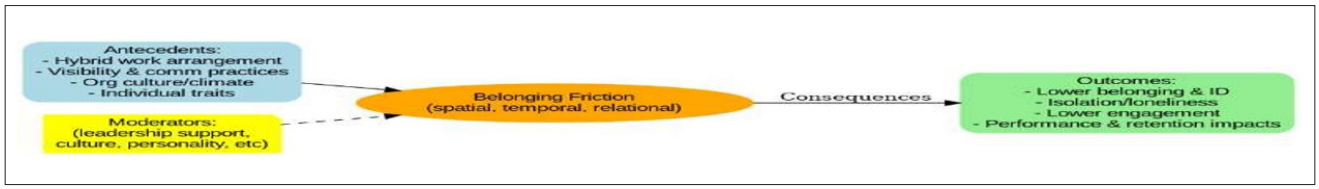

Figure 1: Conceptual model of belonging friction in hybrid work. Belonging friction refers to the subtle but accumulating psychological strain and relationship wear-and-tear that can occur in hybrid work

Environments due to asymmetries in visibility, informal access, and spatial distribution. We conceptualize belonging friction as a multi- dimensional construct with at least three interrelated dimensions: spatial, temporal, and relational friction. Belonging friction is strongly shaped by spatial dynamics—namely, the physical distance between employees and the formal or informal centers of organizational life. Employees working remotely more frequently may be excluded from informal check-ins, spontaneous team interactions, or impromptu decision-making moments that solidify bonds and reinforce social capital [12,10]. These spatial asymmetries can lead to a persistent sense of peripheral participation, even when employees are formally included in workflows or communication channels.

These dimensions reflect different facets of how hybrid arrangements can impede an employee's sense of inclusion.

- **Spatial Friction:** This dimension stems from physical distance and location inequities. When some team members work off- site (e.g. from home or a satellite office) while others co-locate at headquarters, spatial friction arises from the uneven distribution of presence. Remote individuals often struggle with reduced visibility – they miss the passive "face time" that in- office colleagues enjoy [3]. As noted earlier, being unseen can translate into being underrated or forgotten when opportunities arise [3]. Spatial friction is evident in scenarios such as a remote team member dialing into a meeting where most people are in a conference room: side conversations and body language in the room may exclude the remote person, leaving them feeling like an observer rather than a full participant. Spatial friction also encompasses spatial inequity in resource access – for example, if on-site staff can simply walk into a manager's office for quick feedback whereas remote staff must schedule a call, the effort to connect is higher for the remote person. Over time, these frictions can foster a sense of "us vs. them" divided by location. Indeed, hybrid workplaces can inadvertently create "insiders" (those at the main office hub) and "outsiders" (those remote or in smaller offices) (Jarche, 2021). Research on multi-site organizations has long found that employees at distant sites often feel less identification with the company and more distrust toward HQ, unless deliberate integrative measures are taken. Thus, spatial belonging friction captures how physical separation and location disparities make it harder to sustain an equal sense of belonging for all team members.
- **Temporal Friction:** Refers to the disconnection caused by asynchronous work patterns, time zone mismatches, and scheduling misalignments. Workers operating across time zones or on asynchronous schedules often experience delays in feedback loops and coordination, which can drain time and focus [7]. Hybrid models often introduce greater asynchrony – people might work different hours or days (e.g. some are in-office Monday/Wednesday, others Tuesday/Thursday, or distributed across time zones). This can lead to temporal exclusion, where not everyone is available at the same time for impromptu discussions or social rituals. For instance, if a manager casually gathers whoever is present at 4:30 PM for drinks or a quick debrief, those not in the office or offline at that moment are left out. Even with scheduled meetings, time zone differences may force some remote members to routinely join at inconvenient hours (early morning or late night), making them less likely to speak up or feeling like an afterthought. Temporal friction also arises from coordination lags – when communication isn't instantaneous, remote workers might experience delayed responses or decision-making that happened while they were offline. Such lags can fuel feelings of peripheral awareness: "things move on without me." Over months, this erodes one's sense of belonging to a synchronized team. New hybrid scheduling norms can further accentuate differences – e.g. senior executives returning to office more frequently than juniors, or certain departments mandated in-office while others fully flexible [10]. These inconsistent practices might breed a subtext that some roles or people are more "central" and others more "dispensable." Temporal belonging friction thus captures how misaligned schedules and asynchronous collaboration in hybrid work can cause some employees to feel out-of-sync and left out of the heartbeat of the organization.
- **Relational Friction:** encompasses the emotional and interpersonal gaps that develop when face-to-face interaction is reduced or missing. In remote-heavy contexts, employees may also feel professionally invisible, particularly if organizational recognition is based on physical presence or ad hoc encounters [3]. The relational dimension represents the strain on interpersonal relationships and social networks in a hybrid context. It is the emotional distance and misunderstanding that can grow when interactions are mediated by technology and less frequent in person. Without watercooler chats, chance encounters, and shared lunches, it is harder to build trust and camaraderie. Team cohesion can suffer as remote colleagues become socially isolated – lacking those informal moments where personal connections deepen. One study aptly noted, "You don't meet anybody when walking from the living room to the kitchen", highlighting the loss of serendipitous interaction during remote work (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). Relational friction also includes the effort required to connect – video calls can be more mentally fatiguing (so-called "Zoom fatigue"), and people may skip optional social

calls, depriving them of relationship maintenance. Over digital channels, communications can skew transactional (focused purely on tasks), whereas face-to-face allows more relational communication (small talk, reading moods, offering empathy). Remote workers often report feeling less "known" by their colleagues – their hobbies, stressors, or even achievements may go unnoticed, reducing the personal recognition that fosters belonging. Additionally, conflict or tensions can be harder to resolve remotely, potentially leading to misunderstandings that linger and weaken relationships. Relational belonging friction thus summarizes the cumulative interpersonal strain that can develop when colleagues lack rich interaction, leading to weaker social bonds and a sense of emotional disconnection from the team.

These three dimensions – spatial, temporal, relational – are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing. Together, they form the overarching construct of belonging friction: the incremental frictions that hinder the smooth experience of belonging in a hybrid work model. We posit that belonging friction is negatively related to an employee's overall sense of belonging and identification with their team/organization; as friction increases, it becomes progressively harder for the employee to feel like an equal, valued insider.

- **Antecedents of Belonging Friction:** Our model identifies several antecedent conditions that can generate or exacerbate belonging friction. At the organizational level, a major antecedent is hybrid work design and policies – e.g., the proportion of remote vs. in-office days, and whether there are intentional practices to include remote employees. Hybrid arrangements that are unstructured or biased (such as always having leadership present in person with others remote) can heighten spatial and temporal frictions. Another antecedent is the presence (or absence) of inclusive communication norms and tools. Organizations that invest in robust collaboration technology, foster "virtual open door" norms, and encourage inclusive meeting practices (like round-robin sharing to ensure remote voices are heard) likely reduce friction. Conversely, if conference room audio is poor or information is not disseminated equally, remote staff will experience more exclusion events. Organizational culture and leadership behavior are also critical antecedents: a culture that values transparency, trust, and outcomes over face time can counteract proximity bias, whereas a culture that glorifies long office hours will implicitly marginalize flexible workers. Leaders who demonstrate inclusive leadership (e.g. actively checking in with remote members, rotating office presence, modeling flexible work themselves) set a tone that mitigates belonging friction [10]. On the other hand, a manager who only rewards those physically present will amplify friction for remote reports.

At the individual level, personal and role factors serve as antecedents. Employees working predominantly remotely (e.g. 90% WFH) are at more risk of friction than those in office most of the time, simply due to exposure. Similarly, employees in roles that are less integrated with the core business or who belong to minority groups might start with a baseline belonging deficit that hybrid conditions can worsen. For example: a junior employee who is also new to the firm and works remotely from another city faces multiple antecedents for friction – they lack established relationships (new hire), are lower in hierarchy (junior), and are physically distant (remote), all of which heighten the likelihood of feeling peripheral. Research confirms that being new in a hybrid workplace correlates with higher loneliness, especially without ample onboarding support (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). Team dynamics are another antecedent: if a team has a mix of co-located cliques and remote singletons, those lone remote members experience more friction than if the whole team is uniformly hybrid or dispersed (where everyone is in the same boat). In essence, any factor that leads to unequal participation or asymmetrical information flows in a team can be seen as an antecedent to belonging friction.

Moderators

We propose that several factors moderate the relationship between hybrid work conditions and belonging friction – in other words, these factors can strengthen or weaken the degree of friction experienced. Inclusive leadership, as touched on above, is a key moderator: when leaders are proactive in leveling the field (for instance, by praising remote members' contributions publicly, or ensuring decisions aren't made only at impromptu office huddles), they can buffer their team from friction. In contrast, a leader who unconsciously exhibits favoritism toward those in the office will intensify friction for remote folks. Organizational support and training moderate friction too – companies that train managers on hybrid inclusion and invest in team building across distances likely see less friction. The technological infrastructure can moderate spatial and relational friction: high-quality video conferencing, persistent chat channels that include everyone, and deliberate use of digital whiteboards for brainstorming can somewhat replicate co-presence and reduce friction. On the individual side, personality traits and skills moderate how one copes with hybrid challenges. For example, employees high in proactivity or extraversion might take initiative to stay visible and connected (scheduling one-on-ones, speaking up in meetings) thereby mitigating their own belonging friction. Indeed, studies have observed remote workers using various "face time tactics" – sending frequent updates, quickly responding to emails, and making their accomplishments known – to compensate for being away from the office [5]. Such behaviors, often driven by individual motivation, can reduce the negative impact of physical distance. Meanwhile, someone who is conflict-averse or less communicative may find that distance amplifies misunderstandings, increasing relational friction. Another potential moderator is team norms: if a team has an ethos that "we're all equal regardless of location" and perhaps rotates meeting facilitators or alternates which members are remote vs. in-office, this norm can ease friction by distributing the burden. Finally, social support networks can play a moderating role – a remote employee who has a close work buddy or mentor to loop them in will fare better (experience less friction) than one who is isolated. Empirical evidence backs this: remote workers who receive high social support report significantly less isolation and strain (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). In summary, moderators that can dampen belonging friction include strong inclusive leadership, supportive and equitable culture, effective use of technology, and individual or team strategies for connection. Moderators that worsen friction would be the opposites – e.g., a distrustful culture ("if I don't see you, I assume you're

slacking"), poor communication etiquette, or individuals lacking self- management skills to navigate hybrid work.

Outcomes of Belonging Friction

Belonging friction is posited to have important consequences for both individuals and organizations. At the individual level, high belonging friction directly undermines an employee's psychological well-being and engagement. When someone constantly feels on the periphery – missing information, lacking camaraderie – their job satisfaction and morale are likely to drop. They may become less engaged in their work, as engagement is partly fueled by a sense of meaningful connection to colleagues and the organization. A diminished sense of belonging is strongly correlated with lower engagement and commitment (Schwartz et al., 2019). Over time, chronic belonging friction can contribute to burnout or emotional exhaustion, as the employee expends extra effort to overcome these barriers (e.g. always trying to "prove" they are working or coping with loneliness). Another outcome is elevated work stress and anxiety – studies have found that feeling isolated at work increases stress and even physical health complaints [10]. In contrast, belonging tends to bolster resilience; thus, its absence (due to friction) leaves employees more vulnerable to stress. Perhaps the most salient individual outcome is withdrawal, both behavioral and psychological. Employees experiencing low belonging might reduce their organizational citizenship behaviors, participate less in meetings (furthering a vicious cycle of exclusion), or even start withdrawing attendance (e.g. opting not to come into optional office days because they feel it makes no difference). Ultimately, if unresolved, belonging friction can drive turnover intentions. People are far more likely to quit when they feel they do not belong – one large study noted that those who feel included are much less likely to leave, and fostering belonging is critical for retention (Deloitte, 2020). An employee who feels socially disconnected in a hybrid role may seek another job where they expect more community or simply fewer hurdles to inclusion. In short, lower belonging and higher loneliness due to friction reduce an employee's loyalty and desire to stay.

At the team and organization level, the aggregate of these individual outcomes can significantly impact performance and culture. Teams plagued by belonging frictions will suffer coordination inefficiencies, communication breakdowns, and potentially more conflict (as misunderstandings fester). Trust and knowledge sharing decline, impairing team performance on complex tasks. Organizationally, if certain groups (e.g. remote workers, or specific demographics) consistently experience more friction, this can create a cultural divide that undermines a one-company culture. Silos may deepen – e.g., an "in-office clique" vs. a disengaged remote cohort – harming collaboration across the organization. Innovation can also suffer belonging fosters an environment where individuals contribute ideas freely, whereas a lack of belonging leads people to hold back or feel unsafe speaking up. Moreover, the talent implications are notable. In today's tight labor market, many employees value flexible work, but they also want to feel part of something meaningful. If a company's hybrid model yields widespread belonging friction, it could paradoxically fuel attrition (people leaving due to isolation or perceived inequity) even as it tries to retain talent by offering flexibility. This is why leading organizations now view belonging as a driver of organizational performance – 93% of respondents in a Deloitte survey agreed that a strong sense of belonging improves performance. Loss of belonging, therefore, is not just a "feelings" issue but a productivity and effectiveness issue. For example, in one calculation, Better Up estimated that a lack of belonging could cost a large company millions due to lost productivity from disengagement and increased sick days (Deloitte, 2020). Our model suggests that belonging friction, if unmitigated, can erode key outcomes such as employee engagement, quality of work (through lower discretionary effort and coordination), and ultimately organizational retention and inclusivity goals.

In summary, the conceptual model (Figure 1) posits that hybrid work features (distribution of workspace and time) can lead to belonging friction – a multi-dimensional strain on employees' sense of belonging – which in turn negatively affects individual and organizational outcomes. The impact of hybrid work on belonging is not deterministic; it is contingent on various moderating factors like leadership and culture. In the next section, we discuss the implications of this framework for management theory and practice, outlining how recognizing belonging friction can advance our theoretical understanding and what organizations can do to address it.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Implications: This model of belonging friction offers several contributions to management theory. First, it extends social identity theory into the context of modern, flexible work arrangements. Prior work on social identity in organizations largely assumed co-located groups; our framework suggests that physical distance can serve as a new basis for in-group/out-group categorization, thus enriching social identity theory with a spatial dimension. It highlights how multiple identities may form in one team (remote vs. in-office identities) and introduces the notion of identity-based frictions in partially distributed groups. Second, we contribute to the organizational inclusion literature by specifying belonging friction as a novel obstacle to inclusion in the post-pandemic workplace. Classic inclusion models emphasize demographic diversity; we add that spatial diversity (differences in where work is done) can also create inclusion challenges. This builds on and updates Shore et al.'s inclusion framework by incorporating location and modality as factors affecting belongingness [5]. Our construct of belonging friction also complements emerging theories on virtual work and employee well- being. Scholars such as Kniffin et al. (2021) called for understanding how remote work impacts organizational behavior; belonging friction offers a conceptual handle for the social and psychological drawbacks that hybrid work can entail, beyond obvious factors like technology. Importantly, our model integrates insights from disparate theories – communication, identity, diversity – into a coherent framework specific to hybrid work. This integrative approach can guide future theory-building. For example, it suggests new mediator and moderator variables (like informal communication frequency as a mediator between remote status and belonging, or leader inclusiveness as a moderator) that theories of remote work engagement can test (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). Additionally, we introduce spatial-temporal-relational friction as a way to theorize about context – these dimensions might generalize to other forms of distributed work (global virtual teams, gig work platforms) where belonging is also relevant. By

naming and defining belonging friction, we provide a theoretical construct that can be operationalized and measured in future research, thus contributing to the development of mid-range theory on hybrid work and inclusion.

Our model also has implications for leadership theory and organizational culture. It implicitly supports the value of inclusive leadership (e.g. relational leadership theory) in new settings – suggesting that leadership behaviors promoting belonging (such as empathy, empowerment, openness) are even more critical when teams are hybrid. It further extends proximity bias from a management concern to a theoretical concept that can be systematically studied in organizational behavior. While proximity bias has been discussed in practitioner literature, our model situates it as an explanatory mechanism feeding belonging friction, thus inviting scholarly investigation of bias reduction interventions as part of inclusion theory [10]. Another theoretical contribution is highlighting the importance of informal interactions (what Mintzberg called "lateral communications" or what network theory calls "weak ties") for identity and belonging. By theorizing how their absence (in remote work) causes friction, we underscore an often-undervalued element in organizational theories: the unstructured, spontaneous social fabric that technology-mediated work struggles to replicate. In doing so, our work aligns with and adds nuance to evolving theories of organizational communication in the digital age – echoing media richness theory but taking it into the domain of identity and inclusion outcomes.

Finally, our conceptual model offers a new perspective to inform future empirical research (discussed more below). It suggests specific propositions (for instance, "Employees with higher belonging friction will report lower organizational identification and higher intention to quit than those with lower friction, controlling for job level", or "The negative effect of remote work on belonging is moderated by leader inclusiveness") that can be derived and tested. By doing so, we respond to calls in management theory for more research on the "social and psychological implications" of hybrid work (e.g., Kramer & Kramer, 2020) with a concrete framework. In summary, the belonging friction model advances theory by identifying new constructs and relationships unique to contemporary work models, integrating multiple theoretical lenses to explain those relationships, and setting an agenda for conceptualizing inclusion in an era where "workplace" is no longer a single physical space. Practical Implications for Management: Understanding belonging friction is equally critical for practitioners navigating the hybrid transition. Our model provides diagnostic lens for managers and organizations: it helps pinpoint why and where employees might feel disconnected, enabling targeted interventions. Some key practical implications include:

- **Design Hybrid Work Deliberately to Reduce Friction:** Organizations should not leave hybrid arrangements to chance. Instead, intentional design of hybrid schedules and norms is needed to minimize spatial and temporal frictions. For example, companies can adopt policies like "One remote, all remote" for meetings – meaning if any participant is videoconferencing, every participant joins via their laptop, even if some are in the office. This ensures everyone has equal presence (mitigating spatial inequity in meetings). Leaders at Slack (which studies hybrid work) note that hybrid can be inclusive "only if leaders establish guardrails to ensure equal access to opportunity on a level playing field" [10]. Rotational in-office schedules (where everyone spends some time remote and sometime in-person on a rotating basis) can also help foster empathy and shared experiences, so no subset becomes "the always-remote crowd." Additionally, aligning core collaboration hours across time zones and ensuring overlap can reduce temporal friction. If a team is globally distributed, managers might set a rule that team calls alternate between time slots to share the inconvenient burden, signaling respect for all regions. The overarching implication is that equity must be a design principle: without it, hybrid risks privileging one group over another.
- **Train Leaders and Teams on Inclusive Hybrid Practices:** Many managers are simply not equipped to manage hybrid teams inclusively and may default to rewarding visibility. Organizations should invest in training managers to recognize and overcome proximity bias. This includes establishing objective performance metrics, so evaluations rely on results, not perception of effort via face time (Advanced Workplace Associates, 2023). Leaders should practice inclusive behaviors such as soliciting input from remote members first in meetings (so in-office voices don't dominate) and scheduling informal check-ins with remote employees to mimic the rapport-building that happens in person. Importantly, managers need to be made aware of the "belonging signals" they send. Something as simple as ensuring remote employees' images are on the office wall or celebrating their successes in public can affirm that they are equally part of the team. Organizations like HubSpot have created hybrid work playbooks emphasizing over- communication and equal recognition to combat any second- class feelings (Officely, n.d.). Our model suggests that leadership support and communication are decisive in moderating friction, so practical steps might include incorporating inclusion goals into manager KPIs or 360-feedback focusing on how included direct reports feel.
- Foster Structured Informal Interactions: To combat relational friction and loneliness, companies should create opportunities for casual social interaction that includes remote workers. Virtual coffee chats, team gaming sessions, or "donut chats" (randomly pairing employees for a short get-to-know conversation) can simulate watercooler moments. While such efforts can feel forced, research shows they help – one study found that introducing virtual social time (non-work conversations via video) improved remote teams' cohesion and reduced loneliness over a period of months (Wang et al., 2021). Some organizations have instituted "core team hours" where everyone, whether remote or in-office, is online simultaneously and encouraged to have informal talks or open video rooms for co-working. The goal is to deliberately inject the glue of social bonds that form naturally in co-located settings. Additionally, periodic in-person gatherings remain valuable: bringing the whole team together quarterly or semiannually for workshops, retreats, or celebrations can rejuvenate connections and give remote members that visceral sense of belonging to a real

community. Our framework doesn't imply hybrid must be fully virtual – rather it encourages using strategic in-person time for bonding, while daily work can remain flexible. By planning such events, organizations demonstrate commitment to everyone's inclusion.

- **Enhance Communication Quality and Transparency:** Given that miscommunication fuels friction, organizations should adopt robust communication norms. This can include requiring that all meeting notes or decisions be documented in shared channels accessible to those not present, thus avoiding backchannel exclusion. As one practical fix, many companies now record meetings or provide transcripts for those who could not attend, ensuring information parity. Another tactic is using tools that visualize participation – for example, some teams use digital "hand raise" features to cue remote members to speak, or round-robin apps to make sure everyone speaks in turn. Emphasizing a culture of documentation and openness (often championed in fully remote companies like GitLab) helps so that being absent from a discussion doesn't equate to being forever out of the loop. Where possible, teams might embrace asynchronous communication to a greater extent (with thoughtful written updates) so that even if people aren't together in time or place, they stay aligned and feel informed. The underlying practice implication is: reduce the informational privilege of co-location – make sure that knowledge and updates travel beyond the physical office. This will alleviate perceptions of an inner circle with special access.
- **Monitor and Measure Belonging:** Companies should treat belonging as a key metric, just like engagement or satisfaction. Regular pulse surveys can include specific items on belonging and inclusion (e.g., "I feel like a valued member of my team" or "Our hybrid work arrangement enables me to participate fully"). By slicing responses by work arrangement (mostly remote vs mostly in-office) or demographic group, HR can detect if belonging friction is occurring in particular segments. If data show that, say, remote women have significantly lower belonging scores, that's an actionable insight to drive interventions (perhaps mentoring programs, or focus groups to hear their challenges). Some organizations have begun tracking network connectivity via communication metadata – essentially measuring if remote staff are less central in email/Slack networks – which can signal emerging disconnect. While there are privacy considerations, even self-reported network strength (like asking "Do you have a trusted colleague you can confide in?") could be illuminating. The practical implication is that leaders cannot assume a hybrid policy is working equally for all; they should use data to uncover belonging gaps and then address root causes, much as they would tackle engagement dips.
- **Avoid Creating Second-Class Citizens:** Perhaps the most direct implication of our work is a caution to avoid a two-tier workforce. If leadership notices that, for example, remote employees are consistently passed over for promotions or high- visibility projects, this needs correction through equitable talent management processes. Organizations might institute rules such as requiring at least one remote/hybrid employee candidate in any promotion shortlist (analogous to diversity Rooney Rules) to consciously counteract bias. Compensation and benefits should also be scrutinized – ensuring that remote workers are not inadvertently penalized or that office-based workers aren't the only ones getting perks (e.g., if office staff get catered lunch daily, consider a stipend for remote staff's lunch or other benefits). The guiding principle is to signal parity: both groups are different in where they work but equal in status. Leaders should champion success stories of remote contributors and craft a narrative that the company is succeeding because of its flexible model, not in spite of it. When employees see that performance and inclusion, not proximity, drive outcomes, it builds trust and commitment. In a Future Forum report aptly titled "Leveling the playing field," experts noted that hybrid can foster a flexible and inclusive workplace only if guardrails prevent remote employees from being treated as second-class [10]. Our model strongly supports that advice. Organizations that heed it can turn hybrid work into a competitive advantage (attracting diverse talents who seek flexibility) rather than a pitfall.

In summary, the practical message is that hybrid work needs active management of belonging. Left alone, hybrid structures may drift into inequitable patterns that breed disconnection. But with conscious strategies – equitable design, inclusive leadership, rich communication, and monitoring – companies can reduce belonging friction and cultivate an inclusive hybrid culture. Not only does this benefit employees (through greater well-being and fairness), it also improves organizational performance and innovation by leveraging everyone's contributions. Our model provides a roadmap for practitioners to identify pressure points (e.g., lack of informal touchpoints, or biases in evaluations) and apply remedies grounded in research.

Future Research Directions

This conceptual paper opens several avenues for future scholarly research. We encourage researchers to build on and empirically test the belonging friction model in hybrid work contexts:

- **Measurement and Operationalization of Belonging Friction:** A first research priority is to develop a reliable scale or set of indicators to measure the belonging friction construct. Researchers could design survey instruments capturing the spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions (e.g., items like "Important discussions happen when I'm not in the office" for spatial, "I often feel out of sync with my team's schedule" for temporal, "I miss out on the camaraderie my colleagues share" for relational). Psychometric validation (via factor analysis, reliability tests) would establish if these dimensions form a cohesive factor and how they interrelate. Such a scale would enable quantitative studies on how prevalent belonging friction is in different populations and its correlation with outcomes. Researchers might also use qualitative methods – interviews or diary studies – to capture the lived experience of belonging friction, which could refine the conceptualization and add depth (e.g., uncover additional dimensions or context-specific frictions).
- **Testing Antecedent-Outcome Relationships:** Future studies should empirically examine the links proposed in our model. For example, researchers could use a multilevel or longitudinal design to test whether employees working

mostly remotely (antecedent) report higher belonging friction, and in turn whether those with higher friction show declines in engagement or higher turnover intent over time (outcomes). A longitudinal panel study following employees as they transition from fully on-site to hybrid work could be especially illuminating – one could measure their sense of belonging and identification before and after the transition to observe causal effects. Moreover, cross-sectional surveys across multiple organizations could compare fully remote teams, hybrid teams, and traditional teams on belonging friction and outcomes like performance or well- being, to quantify the impact of hybrid structures. Considering our model's emphasis on subgroups, an interesting angle is who is most susceptible: for instance, a study might find that new hires in hybrid roles have a steeper decline in organizational identification over their first year compared to new hires onboarded in person, unless certain supports are provided. Similarly, researchers might investigate if minorities indeed experience less belonging friction remotely as some data suggest – perhaps via moderated regressions to see if minority status interacts with remote work extent in predicting belonging [9].

- **Examination of Moderators (Boundary Conditions):** Another fertile area is to probe the moderators we proposed. Scholars could test, for example, the hypothesis that inclusive leader behavior buffers the negative relationship between remote work and belonging. This might involve measuring leader inclusiveness (using validated scales) and seeing if the correlation between remote days and belonging is weaker under highly inclusive leaders (Sewell & van der Meulen, 2024). Experimental vignette studies could also be done participants read scenarios of hybrid teams with varying leader styles or cultures and report expected belongingness – to isolate causal moderation effects in a controlled way. Additionally, research can explore individual differences that moderate friction. Does personality (extraversion, need for affiliation, self-efficacy for remote work) change how much belonging friction one feels or how well one copes? For instance, we might hypothesize that highly proactive personalities report lower belonging friction because they actively reach out to colleagues (this could be tested via interaction effects between proactivity scale scores and remote frequency in predicting belonging outcomes). By mapping out these boundary conditions, researchers will clarify when and for whom hybrid work is most challenging, providing nuance to the one-size-fits-all debates.
- **Interventions and Causal Experiments:** Building on our practical implications, future research should also investigate interventions to reduce belonging friction. Quasi-experimental field studies could be deployed in organizations that are willing to innovate – for example, implement a new meeting equality policy or a mentorship program for remote staff in one group (treatment) and compare to a control group on belonging outcomes over time. If feasible, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) might even be done randomly assign some teams to receive an "inclusive hybrid training" for their managers and then measure downstream effects on team members' perceived inclusion and performance compared to teams without the training. Such research would provide evidence on what works to alleviate friction. Another intriguing idea is leveraging the A/B testing approach some large firms use – for instance, randomly requiring some meetings to adopt an all-virtual format while others remain hybrid, then surveying participants on perceived fairness and inclusion. This could empirically validate whether certain practices (like the "one remote, all remote" rule) indeed improve outcomes. Natural experiments may also arise: as some companies enforce return-to-office while others stay hybrid, researchers can compare these contexts as a natural experiment on belonging (assuming pre- intervention measures are available, or industry differences can be controlled).
- **Long-term Identity and Cultural Changes:** More longitudinal and qualitative research is needed to understand the long-term effects of hybrid work on organizational culture and employee identity. Our model hints that a persistent hybrid arrangement might slowly change what it means to "belong" to an organization – perhaps shifting it more toward digital communities or sub-group identities (team or project-based belonging rather than office-based). Ethnographic research inside organizations that have embraced hybrid work could explore questions like: Do remote employees form alternative communities (e.g., active online affinity groups or forums) to fulfill belonging needs? Does organizational culture fragment into micro-cultures (office-centric vs remote-centric)? Another question is how professional identity evolves – for instance, does an employee begin to identify less with the company and more with their profession or external networks if they rarely come on-site? These deeper identity dynamics might not be fully captured by surveys, so interviewing employees about their connection to the company after extended hybrid work would add richness. We also lack research on leadership identity in hybrid contexts: do managers struggle with their identity as a leader when they can't see their team, and how does that impact their ability to cultivate belonging? Such questions tie into leadership and identity theory and can extend our model.
- **Diverse Contexts and Equity Implications:** Future research should also examine belonging friction across diverse contexts: different industries, job types, and cultural settings. For example, does belonging friction manifest similarly in a tech company (where most work is knowledge-based and easily remote) versus a hybrid university setting or a government agency? The degree of virtuality might interact with outcomes; perhaps industries that were remote-friendly, even pre- pandemic (like IT) has norms mitigating friction, whereas more traditional sectors might see stronger effects. Cross-cultural studies would be valuable since the meaning of belonging and preferred work modes differ by culture – some cultures place higher value on in-person relationships, which could intensify friction when remote, whereas others might adapt more readily. Research could compare, say, collectivist cultures (where belonging needs are high) with individualist ones in terms of hybrid work impact. Additionally, equity-focused research could delve into how hybrid work affects the inclusion of various minority groups (racial/ethnic minorities, working parents, employees with disabilities). Does hybrid work reduce microaggressions and biases (since interactions are

curtailed or more formalized) or does it simply hide them? And does belonging friction disproportionately cause certain groups to exit the organization? Answering these questions would inform DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) strategies in a hybrid era. For instance, initial evidence shows working mothers often prefer hybrid arrangements for flexibility but also fear being mommy- tracked; studying their belonging and career outcomes under different hybrid policies would be highly informative for both theory and practice.

- Relation to Other Constructs: As a final direction, scholars should position belonging friction relative to related constructs like workplace loneliness, organizational identification, engagement, and team cohesion. While we argued belonging friction contributes to these outcomes, empirical research could use structural equation modeling to test if belonging friction is a distinct latent construct or overlapping with, say, loneliness. One could test a model where belonging friction mediates the effect of remote work on loneliness and identification, to see if it indeed plays the explanatory role we propose. Another angle is examining if belonging friction has a nonlinear effect – perhaps a threshold exists where a certain amount of friction triggers a sharp drop in outcomes (useful for pinpointing early warning signs). Research might also explore coping strategies employees use (beyond what we've noted): do some treat friction as a temporary trade-off and thus tolerate it without disengaging? Investigating such nuances would refine the construct and integrate it with broader organizational behavior literature.

In sum, there is a rich research agenda to pursue. Given that hybrid work is likely to remain prevalent (over 50% of knowledge workers globally are now hybrid, these questions are not only theoretically intriguing but practically urgent [10]. Future research grounded in our model will help ensure that the evolution of work arrangements is guided by evidence on sustaining employee connection, inclusion, and well-being [13,14].

Conclusion

Hybrid work models bring undeniable benefits of flexibility and autonomy, but they also introduce subtle challenges to employee belonging and identity that organizations ignore at their peril. In this article, we developed a comprehensive theoretical outline for understanding belonging and social disconnection in hybrid work. We introduced the concept of "belonging friction" to describe the psychological and relational strain caused by reduced visibility, informal exclusion, and spatial or temporal inequities inherent in many hybrid arrangements. Through a review of literature and theory, we identified how hybrid work can alter the social fabric of organizations – sometimes for the better (empowering underrepresented groups and improving work-life balance), but often risking new forms of exclusion and "out of sight, out of mind" bias.

Our conceptual model (Figure 1) synthesized these insights, delineating how belonging friction arises (via spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions) and linking it to outcomes like lower engagement and higher turnover. We argued that while hybrid work doesn't automatically erode belonging, it must be actively managed. Without conscious efforts, hybrid teams may split into insiders and outsiders, weakening the very culture and collaboration that drive performance. The onus is on leaders and organizations to flatten those divides – by fostering inclusive practices, leveraging technology wisely, and nurturing a culture that values all employees regardless of where they work.

Theoretically, our work extends foundational ideas in social identity and inclusion to the context of distributed work, offering a new lens to examine the interplay between work design and employee psychology. Practically, it serves as a call to action: as firms embrace the future of work, they should design that future not just for efficiency, but for human connection. Belonging is more than a "nice-to-have" feeling; it is a core ingredient of a healthy, innovative organization. A hybrid model that achieves both flexibility and belonging can unlock the best of both worlds – the productivity gains of remote work with the cultural cohesion of traditional teams (Future Forum, 2022).

In closing, belonging friction reminds us that as the workplace evolves beyond walls, the bonds between people require new kinds of support. By recognizing and addressing the frictions identified in this paper, organizations can ensure that no employee feels like a peripheral figure in the hybrid workplace. Instead, each person – whether behind a screen or in a conference room – can experience the fundamental assurance: I am seen, I am included, and I belong here. Such an outcome is not only desirable on a human level, but also the foundation of sustainable performance in the hybrid era. The path forward is clear: invest in belonging, design for inclusion, and convert the challenges of hybrid work into opportunities for a more connected and equitable world of work.

As hybrid work becomes the dominant organizational model in knowledge industries, management research must shift from celebrating its flexibility to interrogating its relational effects. This paper has argued that while hybrid systems offer autonomy and work–life balance, they also give rise to a subtle yet significant phenomenon: Belonging Friction. This construct captures the experiential gap between formal participation in organizational life and felt inclusion, particularly for those who are less physically co-located or less socially connected.

By introducing a conceptual model of spatial, temporal, and relational friction, the paper reframes inclusion not as a matter of access or diversity metrics alone, but as an ongoing psychological and structural negotiation shaped by visibility, rhythm, and embeddedness. In doing so, it invites scholars to explore new theoretical ground at the intersection of organizational design, digital work, and identity formation. Rather than viewing hybrid work as a neutral configuration, this model positions it as an evolving terrain of privilege, exposure, and connection—where some employees remain "in the room," while others hover at the edge of participation.

For practitioners, the implications are clear. Designing hybrid systems without attention to social cohesion and psychological safety risks deepening inequities, disengagement, and attrition. Instead, organizations must cultivate inclusive rituals, visibility pathways, and leadership behaviors that counteract the drift

toward symbolic marginalization. Managers, in particular, need tools to detect early signs of relational distancing and to redesign workflows that support equitable belonging.

Finally, by naming Belonging Friction, this paper opens a pathway for empirical research into how hybrid experiences are distributed across employee groups, how identity and participation interact in digital- physical settings, and how organizations can systematically foster connection without resorting to control. In doing so, it contributes to a broader scholarly call for more human-centric models of work—ones that value not just where work is done, but how deeply people feel part of the communities they work within.

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