Reimagining Work through Spatial Dynamics

A qualitative case study on the hybrid workspace influence on the experience of work

Written by,

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Abstract

Title	Reimagining Work through Spatial Dynamics
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Course	BUSN49 Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change
Purpose	The purpose of our research is to explore how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace, the combination of virtual and physical workspaces. We want to contribute to the existing literature on flexible work arrangements and organizational space by delving into the emerging phenomenon of hybrid work post COVID-19.
Methods	Adopting a symbolic interactionist perspective, our research utilizes a qualitative single-case study with an abductive approach. The empirical data were collected through fourteen semi-structured interviews conducted with employees who work within a hybrid workspace.
Theoretical background	The theoretical background encompasses literature related to flexible work arrangements, as hybrid work is one form of such arrangements. In addition, literature on workspaces is examined, considering the hybrid workspace's combination of virtual and physical spaces. Moreover, literature on organizational space provides insights into the analysis of spatial dynamics of workspaces.
Contribution	Our research contributes to an understanding of how the hybrid workspace influences employees' experience of work. Contributing to the existing body of knowledge by revealing the differentiation and interpretation of work based on the workspace employed. These distinct

attributions of new meanings to each workspace shape the overall experience of work by distinguishing work into distinct workspaces that cater to the nature of work and individual needs.

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We hope you enjoy the reading!

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1 Introduction

The pandemic COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the way we work, with the rapid acceleration of digital transformation leading to an increase in remote work across various industries (Nagel, 2020). Research suggests that the rapid shift to remote work has resulted in a greater realization of the benefits and flexibility associated with remote work, leading to positive experiences in terms of work-life balance, work control, and individual productivity (Ipsen et al. 2021). To align with the evolving preferences of employees in the post-pandemic landscape, organizations are now expected to embrace a hybrid workspace model, enabling employees to switch between remote work and office-based work (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021; Verma et al., 2022).

Hybrid work is not a completely novel concept and adds to one of many terms in the literature of flexible work arrangements (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). Halford (2005) was one of the first to define hybrid work as allowing employees to work remotely and physically at the office. However, it was not until post the pandemic COVID-19 that the term gained popularity (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022), and is now described as the future of work (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021; Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021; Smite et al., 2023a, 2023b). Recent research indicates that as employees have become more accustomed to working remotely, many do not wish to return to working exclusively in the traditional office (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022; Smite et al., 2023b). Moreover, research by Barrero, Bloom and Davis (2021) reveals that employees are actively considering switching employers if they are not provided with the option of flexible remote work.

However, according to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022), employers are confronted with a substantial challenge in responding to the evolving workspace preferences of employees. This necessitates the implementation of comprehensive measures, including the integration of policies, regulations, and workspace adaptations, to effectively support this emerging paradigm of hybrid workspaces (Smite et al., 2023b; Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022). Tredinnick and Laybats (2021) point out that some industries are more likely to require employees to return to

the office as a response to decreased productivity and employee feelings of isolation while working remotely during the pandemic COVID-19. However, Smite et al. (2023b) assert that organizations will encounter significant resistance if they fail to adapt to the new employee preferences. Hence, it is crucial to determine the optimal level of flexibility, as excessive control is now viewed as discriminatory and insufficient control can lead to employee absenteeism in the office.

The changing preference for workspace prompts the inquiry, "What has changed?". Researchers have focused on how workspaces are interpreted and experienced by individuals by studying the social processes involved in organizational space (Halford, 2005; Petani & Mengis, 2021; Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Taylor and Spicer (2007) emphasized in their research that understanding spatiality is essential for understanding the dynamics of workspaces. In regards to the hybrid workspace, attention has been given to the influential role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in redefining spatial boundaries and enabling work to be conducted irrespective of physical location (Petani & Mengis, 2021). Consequently, it has made possible open, virtual, flexible, and now hybrid workspaces. The nature of a hybrid workspace as multi located allows employees to work in the virtual workspace, the physical workspace, or a space in between (Petani & Mengis, 2021). For instance, employees can be working in the physical workspace while interacting virtually with other coworkers who are working from home, or at another location. Thus, Halford's (2005) research suggests that spatial hybridity fundamentally changes experiences of work, as employees navigate a combination of virtual and physical workspaces. Most importantly, since spatial hybridity is changing the physical spaces where work takes place, with less reliance on the traditional, physical, workspace.

Furthermore, Wilson et al. (2008) studied how spatiality affects virtual teams and the feeling of proximity whereas their research indicates that employees can still feel close to one another despite being physically separated. However, more recent research on dispersed teams argues that striking a balance between in-person and virtual communication is necessary for employees to maintain a sense of perceived proximity (Ruiller et al., 2019). In addition, that proximity in a shared space is essential for job performance and employee relationships. More recent literature by Petani and Mengis (2021) argues that even if the hybrid workspace is accessible from

anywhere and at any time, work will always belong to space, time and emotional contexts. A virtual workspace, for instance, may be practiced and experienced differently by employees in different locations and contexts. Thus, they advocate for more research on how the hybrid workspace is experienced in order to adapt to the needs and preferences of individuals.

The existing literature predominantly focuses on remote work (Ipsen et al., 2021; Nagel, 2020; Ruiller et al., 2019; Smite et al., 2023b), but significantly less is written about experiences of hybrid work that has now emerged post the pandemic COVID-19 (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022; Petani & Mengis, 2021). With prior research indicating that the combination of virtual and physical workspaces changes the experience of work (Halford, 2005) and recognizing the significance of individual perceptions of space (Petani & Mengis, 2021), it is essential to deepen our understanding of how employees experience and navigate work across multiple workspaces. Therefore, the purpose of our research is to explore how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace, the combination of virtual and physical workspaces. Thereby, provide purposeful insights into organizations who are transitioning towards becoming hybrid post the pandemic COVID-19 and make a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge on flexible work arrangements and organizational space. Following this background, problematization, and purpose of this study, the following research question is posed:

How does the hybrid workspace influence the experience of work?

To fulfill the purpose of this research, we will conduct a single-case study at HybridCo, a media and communication firm that is part of a larger organization. HybridCo is a firm that worked fully remotely during the pandemic, and has worked hybridly since the pandemic. In addition, they have also implemented hybrid workspace guidelines accordingly and are renovating their physical workspace to adjust their hybrid workspace model. Conducting a single-case study at HybridCo allows us to analyze the emerging phenomenon of hybrid workspace in depth in its real-life context (Yin, 2009).

This section outlines this thesis' structure. Initially in Chapter 2, we will review the literature that establishes our research's theoretical background. Then in Chapter 3 we will present our qualitative research method. We use an interpretative and abductive approach to understand the subjective experiences of participants working in a hybrid workspace. Hence, the single-case study employs in-depth and semi-structured interviews to collect empirical data. In addition, we highlight the importance of ethical and confidential considerations, as well as the quality and potential limitations of our research. Additionally, in Chapter 4 we will present the analysis of our empirical data, revealing the findings from the interviews conducted as part of our research. Here we explore how the hybrid workspace has influenced the experience of work in our case company. Next, we will discuss our empirical findings within the context of the theoretical background in Chapter 5. Finally, in Chapter 6, we respond to our research question with our key findings, theoretical contributions and practical implications. In addition, address this study's limitations and make suggestions for future research.

2 Literature Review

The following chapter lays the foundation for our research by delving into the theoretical background. We will explore the existing literature on hybrid work, a flexible work arrangement that is currently gaining attention and being approached differently in research and organizations. Additionally, we will examine both virtual and physical workspaces, as the hybrid workspace encompasses elements of both. Lastly, we will delve into the literature on the analysis of organizational space, focusing on understanding spatial dynamics of workspaces and how it has been addressed in relation to the hybrid workspace.

2.1 Hybrid Work

The concept of hybrid work consists of various and diverse definitions both in research and in organizations (Smite et al., 2023b). Nevertheless, Halford (2005) provided an early and widely accepted definition of hybrid work as a combination of working from home and working in an office. However, as evident in the research by Smite et al (2023b), hybrid work is not exclusively regulated to the home-office since work can be done remotely from other locations due to the use of ICT. Thereby, hybrid work implies that work and relationships must be navigated in both virtual and physical workspaces (Halford, 2005; Smite et al, 2023b). Consequently, the hybrid workspace is defined by Petani and Mengis (2021) as multi located, allowing employees to work in the virtual space, the physical office space, or a space in between.

Hybrid work is part of a larger body of research on flexible work arrangements, which is a field that has been extensively studied over the years (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). Flexible work arrangements, including telecommuting, telework, remote work, and virtual work, have been defined and explored by researchers (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). These definitions are expansive and overlap in many ways, however they all stem from the advancements in ICT that provide flexibility in terms of when and where work can be performed. The adoption of flexible work arrangements is not solely driven by technological progress but also reflects changing employee preferences for increased flexibility (Hunter, 2019). The desire for flexible

work arrangements is often associated with positive work experiences (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). A significant focus in the literature is on the positive impact of remote work on work-life balance, as reduced commuting time allows employees to allocate their time to activities that enhance their well-being (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015; Hunter, 2019; Ipsen et al., 2021; Mahler, 2012). Achieving work-life balance is frequently highlighted as a key outcome of remote work in research, enabling employees to effectively manage their work and family responsibilities (Groen et al., 2018).

Despite the advantages and technological advancements, remote work has historically been met with resistance from managers, resulting in a relatively low proportion of remote workers (Caillier, 2013). However, due to the limited opportunities for physical meetings, the pandemic COVID-19 has resulted in a significant increase in remote work across industries (Smite et al., 2023b). During this period of change, organizations have relied on technology to facilitate remote work and ensure business continuity. In addition, employees reported on experiences of greater individual efficiency and productivity due to more time for focused work (Ipsen et al., 2021). These experiences of remote work during the pandemic align with previous research by Mahler (2012), highlighting that remote work is linked to increased personal productivity, reduced work-related stress, and higher job satisfaction. The flexibility afforded by remote work and a shift towards performance management, rather than strict control, contribute to these positive outcomes (Mahler, 2012; Groen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, research on remote work also reveals negative experiences as collaborative tasks become more difficult since employees work in silos (Mahler, 2012; Yang et al., 2022). The study of Yang et al. (2022) on collaborative networks in remote work-wide organizations revealed that teams were highly siloed, which has a negative impact on cross-functional collaborative work, as there were fewer ties and less real-time communication between different business functions. Additionally research demonstrates negative experiences of remote work during the pandemic COVID-19 as numerous employees experienced fatigue due to an overload of digital meetings (Hussain, Mirza & Hassan, 2020).

Research on hybrid work is limited, however it has emerged as a research topic in the aftermath of the pandemic COVID-19 (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022). Smite et al. (2023b) conducted a

multiple case study on the various approaches and regulations pertaining to hybrid work in organizations. The study reveals a significant range of approaches, with some organizations granting employees full autonomy over their work location, while others enforce specific days for all employees. Furthermore, it is worth noting that many organizations face challenges in finding the optimal balance, as an excessive level of control in regulating workdays can result in employee resistance. Additionally, it is stressed to address the issue of excessive flexibility, as remote work may not be suitable for everyone, potentially creating a significant divide between those who prefer working in the office and those who prefer remote work.

Similarly to how the location is governed, hybrid work may also feature a more flexible arrangement of working hours. The research of Smite et al. (2023b) also shows that flexible working hours have become more prevalent when adopting a hybrid work model. Nonetheless, this flexibility can present difficulties for employees. In hybrid workspaces, for instance, it may be more difficult to approach and collaborate with coworkers who do not share the same work schedule which can negatively affect communication and teamwork. On the other hand, Gratton (2021) highlights the benefits of flexible work hours for certain teams or professions. Adapting work hours to align with individuals' most productive or creative times can enhance overall performance. There is no standard approach when it comes to structuring work hours in hybrid work, Gratton et al. (2021) and Smite et al. (2023a) rather suggest that organizations should tailor their approach to the specific needs and preferences of their employees.

Since hybrid work entails work in multiple work spaces, Grzegorczyk et al. (2021) highlight in their policy contribution the emphasis should be placed on integrating virtual and physical workspace (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021). Furthermore it is suggested that culture and leadership are significant factors in establishing commonality between the two workspaces. Therefore, it is suggested to emphasize cultural values as inclusion to prevent the formation of in and out groups between groups who prefer to work from home versus the office. Staples and Webster (2008) address the tendency of in and out group formatting in hybrid work, demonstrating that it can have negative effects on the social interaction and knowledge sharing of hybrid teams. In addition, Grzegorczyk et al. (2021) emphasize that cultural cues are less prevalent in the virtual workspace, which management must consider. They recommend the implementation of regular

check-in meetings or informal chats, allowing both remote and office-based workers to participate, thus ensuring the inclusion of all employees.

Furthermore, the study by Ruiller et al (2019) demonstrates the importance of such managerial practices in geographically dispersed teams, as they enhance the employees' sense of belonging and foster a shared identity, despite their diverse locations. Additionally, trust-based leadership is emphasized as important since the consequence of hybrid work involves an increasing number of employees working from home with managers having less direct control and supervision. (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021). The importance of building trust has been extensively studied in the context of virtual work, with numerous researchers emphasizing its significance (Ruiller et al., 2019; Staples & Webster, 2008). Ruiller et al. (2019) specifically highlight the role of trust in enabling employees to embrace the autonomy associated with remote work, ultimately leading to positive impacts on productivity and employee development.

2.2 Hybrid Workspace

Since the hybrid workspace is a constitution of virtual and physical workspaces in which individuals alternate between (Halford, 2005; Tredinnick & Laybats, 2021), we need to acknowledge both. This prompts the questions of what it entails to work in both the virtual and physical workspaces, as these two dimensions are independently and distinctly discussed in the existing literature. Firstly, the physical workspace is understood as the traditional office space (Halford, 2005), in which we will further refer to. While the office may be perceived as a mere physical space by some, there has been a notable emphasis on the significance of the physical workspace in recent research, as highlighted by Jauantha and Oladinrin (2019). This attention has been directed towards exploring ways to enhance office design to promote productivity and improve overall business performance.

The traditional physical workspace can be characterized by privacy and boundaries between employees, departments, and management (Brennan, Chugh & Kline, 2002). However, as organizations are constantly changing, so is their physical workspace. Already in the 1970s, organizations started to change their physical workspaces to open landscapes with shared desks

and fewer private rooms, with the belief that it would improve communication and productivity (Brennan, Chugh & Kline, 2002). Since then, the open landscape design has been heavily criticized since employees report noise disturbance and crowdedness (Brennan, Chugh & Kline, 2002; Harris, 2015). However, in the early 2000s, the office design changed again by focusing on activity-based office design to ensure that the office is designed for activities such as collaboration, concentration tasks, and opportunistic encounters (Harris, 2015). In addition, neither assigned desks nor private rooms are characteristics of activity-based office design (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022).

Recent research focuses on how businesses are rethinking their physical workspaces in relation to hybrid work. The activity-based office design is described as advantageous for hybrid work (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021). First, it generates cost savings because the physical workspace will no longer be occupied by as many people (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021; Jayantha & Oladinrin, 2019). Second, according to researchers, activity-based design can compensate for the absence of social interaction in the virtual workspace by providing spaces for collaboration, learning development, socialization, and mentoring (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021). Therefore, Grzegorzyk et al. (2021) recommend that employers reconsider their physical workspace in light of the activities that necessitate employees' physical presence. Thirdly, Appel-Meulenbrook et al. (2022) emphasize that the activity-based design complements hybrid work because it requires employees to plan their workday based on their work activities, which is also a requirement of the activity-based design.

Furthermore, the virtual workspace is characterized by no physical boundaries and can be reached from anywhere and at any time (Ahuja & Carley, 1998). The virtual workspace can therefore be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection, such as from home, while commuting, from a cafe (Halford, 2005), or even while traveling, as the emerging literature on digital nomads demonstrates (Nash, Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2021). When considering the hybrid workspace, it begs the question of how the work dynamics are affected when employees navigate between physical and virtual workspaces. The virtual workspace is the space where employees communicate and coordinate work through the use of ICT (Ahuja & Carley, 1998). In addition, Wilson et al (2008) note that virtual workspaces benefit from organizations with strong structure

assurance, which includes promises, regulations, technology, legal contracts, guarantees, and standard procedures. Thus, relationships are strengthened as communication and recognition with other remote workers improve.

Most importantly, the virtual workspace must be supported by the necessary technological infrastructure that facilitates employees' work, communication, collaboration, and interpersonal interactions in the virtual workspace (Alsharo, Gregg & Ramirez, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008). In the virtual workspace, collaboration and work are supported by tools such as video and audio conferencing, email, chat forums, software applications, and shared living repositories (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2012). Nonetheless, the virtual workspace is complex, as it presents difficulties such as misinterpretations, a lack of communication, and delays in feedback and responses (Alsharo, Gregg & Ramirez, 2017). Relying on the virtual workspace for communication and coordination of work, raises the intriguing question how it impacts the dynamics of hybrid work. Given that the hybrid workspace incorporates both physical and virtual workspaces, there is still uncertainty regarding the specific roles and functions of each space in employee usage.

2.3 Understanding Spatiality in the Context of Hybrid Workspace

Since the hybrid workspace involves multiple workspaces, and Halford's (2005) notion that spatial hybridity changes the experience of work by multi-locating organizational space, we will redirect attention to previous research that focuses on organizational space. Instead of focusing on a particular workspace, it is important to consider the overall spatial package of working lives in all the spaces that comprise hybrid workspaces (Halford, 2005). Taylor and Spicer (2007) emphasized in their research that understanding spatiality is essential for understanding the dynamics of workspaces. The authors argue that spatiality significantly influences the structure and functioning of work in organizations. Thereby, researchers can understand how workspaces are created and used by individuals by studying the social processes involved in organizational space.

Furthermore, Taylor and Spicer (2007) provide a comprehensive conceptual framework that explores how organizational space has been studied in organizational and management studies, with an aim for future research to register how organizational space is experienced. Based on Henri Lefevbre's notion of space as socially constructed and retrospective research, their framework involves two dimensions, each consisting of three processes. The first dimension delves into the social processes involved in how space can be understood through, practices of proximity and distance, the planning of power relations within spatial contexts, and the shaping of imagined experiences. The second dimension, referred to as spatial scales, encompasses different levels of social action in organizational space, namely macro, meso, and micro. The micro scale specifically focuses on individual experiences of space within organizations, particularly the workspace, highlighting the interactions and influences between individuals and the physical and social aspects of organizational spaces. Within the micro scale, particular emphasis is placed on individuals' perceptions and interpretations of organizational space. Given our research focus on employees' experiences in the hybrid workspace, the micro scale assumes significant importance. The three social processes are distinctive, however, create a multidimensional space within an organization that influences how people interact with one another and their working environment when all three are taken into account. We will now explore these concepts in greater detail, focusing on the social process in how space can be understood and how it has been studied in relation to the hybrid workspace.

Practices of distance and proximity

Taylor and Spicer (2007) define the first process, practices of distance and proximity, as the physical and social arrangements within an organization that create varying degrees of closeness and distance between individuals or groups. Researchers have been interested in the experiences of distance and proximity within virtual work (Ruiller et al, 2019; Wilson et al, 2008). However, proximity has been explored in various academic fields leading to different conceptualizations of it (Ruiller et al, 2019). In relation to virtual work, geographical proximity has been frequently discussed since employees are dispersed. Geographical proximity refers to the measurable distance between two or more individuals and can also be subjectively assessed based on individuals' sense of closeness or distance. Nevertheless, Wilson et al (2008) argue that considering proximity solely in physical terms provides an incomplete understanding of how

individuals perceive it. In their study, they not only emphasize the distinction between physical proximity and perceptions of proximity, but also explore the paradoxical phenomena of feeling close to colleagues who are geographically distant. They conclude in their study that employees working at a distance can experience high levels of perceived proximity due to communication and identification.

In addition, Ruiller et al. (2019) study revealed the moderating role of ICT in the relationship between employees' perceived proximity and the quality of their relationships. They found that in dispersed teams, collective identity plays a significant role in enhancing perceived proximity, particularly through informal virtual communication. The study also emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance between face-to-face interactions and virtual communication for fostering perceived proximity. Amin and Cohendet's (2004) research expands on this notion by introducing the concept of relational proximity, which emphasizes that proximity extends beyond the physical space and encompasses broader social aspects. They further argue that relational proximity can diminish physical distance within organizations through shared interests, travel, shared routines, and common standards.

Planning of spatialized power relations
The deliberate structuring of power relations within an organization through the use of physical and social space constitutes the second process, the planning of spatialized power relations. Taylor and Spicer (2008) contend that spatial planning can be utilized to exert greater control over employees and to create or dissolve the boundaries between the workplace and the home. Moreover, architecture, workplace layout, and working environment are crucial in establishing and sustaining power relations (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Fleming and Spicer (2004) have conducted research on the topic, emphasizing how management controls the boundaries between work and non-work spaces and how the distinction between inside and outside the organization can blur. Consequently, spaces traditionally associated with activities such as leisure or personal development can be incorporated into the workplace, and company culture can extend into the personal lives of employees.

In addition, Halford concluded how different physical spaces, such as offices, homes, and virtual spaces, affect power dynamics and control in the workplace. Halford (2005) argues that power relations are not fixed and can vary depending on the surrounding environment. Consequently, people's interactions and work performance are impacted by the space they occupy and the power dynamics at play in that space. However, Kingma's (2016) study on workspace and Lefvebere's framework of organizational space conclude that the spatial and technological integration of hybrid workspaces creates a new mode of work that characterizes modern work practices. Specifically, the constant virtual connection, via phones or laptops, enables the continuity of work relationships across a vast array of workspaces and facilitates a nearly permanent presence in the virtual work environment.

Shaping of imagined experiences

The third process, the shaping of imagined experiences, is defined as individuals' perceptions, expectations, and emotions associated with the physical and social spaces within an organization (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). For instance, the space is comprehended through the symbols that individuals assign to it. Research on the topic demonstrates for instance, that office design can have cultural symbolic value as openness, control, responsibility (Hatch (1990) as cited in Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Furthermore, Hislop and Axtell (2009) who studied the meaning of space for task variation discovered that consultants assign different meanings to spaces based on the current work task. For instance, the task preferences of consultants, such as completing concentration-intensive tasks at home. This further aligns with the quantitative study conducted by Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022), which highlights new preference of employees in completing focused tasks at home following the pandemic. Lastly, Petani and Mengis (2021) conducted research on IT-enabled hybrid workspaces and utilized Lefevbere's framework. Their findings demonstrate that even if the IT-enabled hybrid workspace is accessible from anywhere and at any time, they argue that work will always take place in spatiotemporal and emotional contexts. Petani and Mengis (2021) conclude that the rise of virtuality affects the affective processes of work and how employees perceive and experience their workspaces.

The literature review has provided a comprehensive theoretical background that will serve as the analytical lens for our research. Building upon this foundation, the next chapter will present our

research method, demonstrating how the theoretical background, in conjunction with our research design, guides our exploration into the influence of the hybrid workspace on employees' experience of work. By outlining the research approach and design, we establish a clear pathway to achieve our research purpose.

3 Method

In this chapter, the research method used for our research is presented. A constructivist approach and symbolic interactionism have influenced the research due to the subjective nature of perceptions of the hybrid workspace. An abductive approach is adopted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the hybrid workspace by letting theoretical concepts and empirical data interact with each other. The chapter also includes an overview of HybridCo, the case company for this research. Furthermore, the process of data collection and analysis is explained. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the ethical considerations and limitations of the research.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

Ontology and epistemology are two philosophical assumptions that influence how research is carried out and the outcomes (Blomkvist, Lindell & Hallin, 2018). Epistemological assumptions are concerned with what knowledge is and how it can be obtained, while ontological assumptions address questions about how the world appears and whether actors within it help to create it or simply interpret reality objectively from the outside (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

Given that there are various definitions of hybrid work, our research assumes that it is a concept that can be perceived differently depending on context and individuals present. Furthermore, we perceive it as constantly evolving as flexible ways of working have been a topic of research for many years (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). As a result, our research adopts the ontological position of constructivism, which holds that social phenomena are constantly created by social actors and thus subject to constant revision (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Furthermore, we adopt the ontological position of constructivism since our purpose aligns with the exploration of the hybrid workspace and its multi-located organizational space (Halford, 2005), recognizing the socially constructed nature of organizational space (Taylor & Spicer, 2007).

Moreover, because our research assumes that individuals can have different perceptions of the hybrid workspace, we intend to approach our research questions by drawing on the subjective meanings that individuals attach to it. Interpretative research traditions implies that knowledge

about the social world is created through individual interpretations and meaningful sensemaking (Prasad, 2017). Consequently, our research will be influenced by interpretative research traditions as it entails the opportunity to focus on and create an understanding of individuals' experiences in order to then interpret them.

To understand how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace, this research is specifically influenced by symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is an interpretative research tradition which holds that objects and events have no intrinsic meaning other than what individuals assign to them through social interaction (Prasad, 2017). Furthermore, fundamental assumptions are described as revolving around meaning and the meaning that various objects have for individuals. Additionally, Prasad (2017) argues that meaning arises through social interactions and is constantly being modified. With an assumption that individuals attach meaning to objects through social interaction, an interpretative approach influenced by symbolic interactionism will allow us to understand how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace, and make interpretations about the empirical data.

3.2 Research Approach

Our research applies qualitative methods to understand how work is experienced by employees in the hybrid workspace. According to Bryman and Bell (2017) qualitative research complements a constructionist and interpretative approach by emphasizing words, making it suitable for understanding social phenomena. With qualitative methods we were able to collect individual experiences through interviews at a case company, which provided us with a better understanding of how individuals experience and perceive this phenomenon.

3.2.1 Case Study

Understanding the hybrid workspace can be a difficult process since there exists many and diverse definitions of it, as well as organizational approaches to it (Smite et al., 2023a). Additionally, as we aim to examine employee experiences of work in the hybrid workspace we decided to conduct a single case study at the company HybridCo. A case study implies that a real-life phenomenon is studied in depth (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, it is a suitable approach when

researchers aim to gather detailed data to capture the complexity of reality and discover new dimensions.

Blomkvist, Lindell, and Hallin (2018) emphasize the importance of selecting a relevant case to study. In addition, they argue that in order to achieve high qualitative research, case selection must reflect the purpose of the research. HybridCo is a global marketing and communication firm headquartered in Sweden that employs roughly 550 people. Following the pandemic COVID-19, HybridCo allows employees to choose to work both in-office and remotely, and the company has implemented a guideline that allows employees to work away from the office two days per week. Furthermore, HybridCo is currently in the process of renovating their office to adapt to hybrid work. Because of the adoption to hybrid work and the ongoing transformation, HybridCo was an ideal case for us to study. Furthermore, the company and interviewee names are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all parties concerned.

3.2.2 Abductive Approach

In addition to conducting a case study to collect individual experiences, we used existing theories to improve our understanding and interpretation of the empirical data. Thus, our research adopts an abductive research approach. Blomkvist, Lindell and Hallin (2018) describes an abductive approach as a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. They further argue that it leads to a better understanding of the empirical data because it allows theories and empirical data to interact and influence one another. Consequently, our research began with a review of various theories within the field of flexible work arrangements, which helped us identify an intriguing research gap. Furthermore, the initial meeting with the case company provided us with valuable insights that guided our research further.

To illustrate, during our initial meeting with two representatives from our case company HybridCo, we learned about difficulties that they were experiencing in transforming their office into a hybrid workspace. Driven by an abductive approach, the experiences shared by the representatives motivated us to delve into the existing literature on organizational space, as they highlighted the challenges of creating an environment suitable for working both in the physical and virtual workspaces. This exploration provided new insights that complemented the initially

reviewed literature on flexible work arrangements. Additionally, an abductive approach aided us in comprehending our data and presented an opportunity to uncover novel perspectives within the established literature (Blomkvist, Lindell & Hallin, 2018).

3.3 Data Collection

Data for our qualitative case study was gathered through interviews. According to Bryman and Bell (2017) interviews are suitable together with a case study as it allows to gather detailed and rich data from one specific case. The following paragraphs will furthermore outline how we collected our empirical data.

3.3.1 Sampling

Prior to collecting the data, a sample of appropriate interviewees had to be determined. Bryman and Bell (2017) emphasize the importance of a sampling method that is relevant to the research questions. Since our research question was designed to understand how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace, we used purposeful sampling. Bryman and Bell (2017) describe purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling method. Through this method the researcher can choose participants strategically so that they and their experiences are relevant for the purpose of the study. This resulted in a selection process based on following criteria: (1) *The interviewee works at HybridCo and has the option of working hybridly*.

To get in contact with participants who met the criteria our contact person at HybridCo provided us with a list of employees. HybridCo confirmed with all employees that we could contact them before sending us the list. After obtaining consent from the employees to participate, we proceeded by sending an email containing a meeting request via Microsoft Teams. The email also included details about us, our research topic, and practical information. Sixteen employees were initially contacted, and ultimately, fourteen of them actively participated in the research.

Bryman and Bell (2017) highlight the difficulties in determining how many interviewees are necessary. On the one hand, the sample size should not be so small that there is a risk of

insufficient information. On the other hand, having a large sample size makes it difficult to conduct a successful analysis. Blomkvist, Lindell, and Hallin (2018) argue that the sample size is determined by the quality of the interviews. Consequently, our initial target was to conduct fifteen interviews in order to achieve a balance. However, we began to identify recurring themes and reached a theoretical saturation after fourteen interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

To ensure a good representation, our sample encompassed individuals of diverse ages and from various departments at HybridCo, including both female and male participants. However, it is important to note that gender and age were not factors that emerged significant in our analysis of the empirical data. Furthermore, the interviewees ranged in hierarchical levels, where some held a managerial position with personnel responsibility. Table 1 below presents an overview of the conducted interviews.

Table 1: Overview of Interviews

Name of employee (pseudonym)	Position within the company	Length of the interview (minutes)
Marcus	Employee	36
Samuel	Employee	37
Omar	Manager with personnel responsibility	32
Alexander	Employee	49
Henry	Manager with personnel responsibility	33
Michael	Manager with personnel responsibility	33
James	Employee	37

Ethan	Employee	53
Emma	Employee	38
Amelia	Employee	35
Chloe	Employee	43
Ava	Manager with personnel responsibility	23
Isabella	Employee	37
Sophia	Manager with personnel responsibility	49

Note: The table displays the pseudonym, position, and length of the interview in minutes for each interviewee.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen employees who all worked hybridly at the case company HybridCo. Interviews, according to Blomkvist, Hallin, and Lindell (2018), are appropriate as a research method when the researchers aim to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon and make new discoveries. Furthermore for new discoveries to emerge a semi-structured interview is preferred. We conducted all interviews over a period of two weeks using Microsoft Teams video meetings. One limitation with conducting interviews through video meetings, was the inability to have physical interaction and observe body language (Bryman & Bell, 2017). However, we opted for video meetings due to the geographical distance between our location and that of the interviewees, their hybrid work, and their familiarity with Microsoft Teams, which serves as HybridCo's communication platform. Alvesson (2011) further emphasizes the importance of making the interviewees feel comfortable throughout the interview to build trust and commitment between researchers and interviewees. Consequently, we began each interview by introducing ourselves and sharing our interest in this research issue. The interviews were further recorded with the approval of the participants in order for us to review

and analyze the material. The duration of the interviews varied between 20-55 minutes (See table 1), depending on the amount of follow up questions and length of responses.

Using semi-structured interviews we developed themes based on prior knowledge gathered from our literature review. Alvesson (2011) contends that the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee is crucial for the quality of the interview. To guarantee a good interaction, we developed introductory questions (Se appendix 1 for interview guide) as suggested by Blomkvist, Hallin and Linden (2018), to introduce the interviewee to the various themes. However, they further emphasize the importance of not preparing too detailed questions, in order to leave room for new discoveries. Consequently, we made room for follow-up questions related to what the interviewee answered.

Furthermore, it is essential to practice active listening and being curious throughout the interview (Alvesson, 2011). To ensure that we had correctly understood the interviewee, we repeated and confirmed their responses. Repeating and acknowledging the interviewees' responses also aided us in practicing active listening. Moreover, it assisted us in asking interpretative and direct follow-up questions (Blomkvist, Lindell & Hallin, 2018). By asking unscripted follow-up questions, the interviewees were able to bring up topics that interested them and that they thought were relevant.

3.4 Analytical Process

Qualitative research frequently generates a large amount of data (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Consequently, to organize and make sense of the collected data, we followed the advice of Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) and divided the process of qualitative analysis into three stages: *sorting, reducing and arguing.*

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasize that qualitative data is characterized by a certain amount of disorder. Furthermore, to address the challenge, sorting as they describe it *"represents a way of addressing the problem of chaos"* (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 71). To initiate the sorting process, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) highlight the significance of actively engaging

with the collected material. During the data collection process, we used Microsoft Teams to conduct the interviews, which provided automatic transcriptions as recordings took place. However, to ensure that the transcriptions were correct we manually reviewed each transcription. This process not only validated the content but also allowed us to gain familiarity with the material, as advised by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018).

After completing the transcriptions, we imported them into the coding program NVivo to facilitate the coding process. NVivo is a qualitative research analysis software that provides tools for organizing, categorizing, and analyzing large amounts of unstructured data, such as interviews and other qualitative data types (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The software enables users to create and organize codes, which can then be applied to text, audio, and visual data, helping researchers in the identification of patterns and themes within the data. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) contend that, in addition to familiarizing oneself with the material, the sorting process requires categorizing the content in order to make sense of it. To identify categories we followed the recommendation of Charmaz (2002; as cited in Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018) of being open to the data. Consequently, we individually reviewed the material and highlighted quotes that were interesting in relation to our interview guide, recurring experiences or perceptions mentioned by multiple interviewees, and sections that stood out in comparison to existing research in the field. In order to prevent cognitive biases, we began the sorting process by working independently, and subsequently engaged in discussions to compare and analyze our respective thoughts.

According to Charmaz (2002; as cited in Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018), the initial coding process is eventually replaced by focused coding, which comprises the process of developing labels to illustrate what the data contains. After the initial coding process, we went over the transcriptions again and began the focused coding process based on Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) "what's and how's". Gubrium and Holstein (1997) suggest that themes emerge as a result of paying attention to the content of the interviews and how it is expressed. Using this method, we were able to identify numerous themes related to what the interviewees discussed. We summarized the themes in the application NVivo once we finished coding all of the interviews, which provided us with an overview of the themes and the frequency of occurrence.

The sorting process resulted in many and diverse themes. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) argue that in order to make the data more comprehensible, researchers should reduce the number of themes. Furthermore, they argue that the reduction should be based on prior knowledge of the field, overall perception of the findings, and the research methodology. As a result of our interpretive research approach, we concentrated on themes that were relevant in order to understand how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace. Moreover, we eliminated themes that were irrelevant to our research and had previously been extensively covered in previous research. For instance, improved work-life balance and less commuting time were two themes we discovered in our empirical data, however, this has already been studied by researchers (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015; Groen et al., 2018; Hunter, 2019; Ipsen et al., 2021; Mahler, 2012), and were also irrelevant to answer our research question. Furthermore, because several of the identified themes were related to one another, we identified overarching themes to which we connected subthemes. The overarching themes that were left after sorting and reducing the material were: "Meaning of work", "Perceived Proximity" and "Virtual Communication".

Besides sorting and reducing it is further important to reflect on, discuss and argue for the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) further contend that the process of arguing implies creating an independent position considering previous knowledge about the field and developing a concept that represents our findings. To do this we will present our findings through the excerpt-commentary unit, which implies that analytical points are made through the discussion of quotes from the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Our findings will further be presented in chapter 4.

3.5 Research Quality and Limitations

When conducting qualitative research it is essential to reflect about the quality and limitations of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Guba and Lincoln (1994; cited in Bryman & Bell, 2017) provide two crucial criteria for measuring the quality of qualitative research: *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*. The criteria trustworthiness further consist of four sub-criterias: *credibility,*

transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility entails ensuring that the respondents' social realities have been appropriately interpreted by the researchers. Since we draw upon individuals' subjective perceptions to answer our research question, it was critical to ensure that we had comprehended them accurately. Consequently, we followed the advice of Alvesson (2011) to practice active listening throughout the interviews. To reassure the credibility of our study we reiterated their comments through active listening to ensure that we had correctly understood their experiences. However, one potential limitation in terms of credibility was that part of the interviews were conducted in English, despite the fact that it was neither the researchers nor some of the interviewees native language. This could present a language barrier, as we may have misunderstood important nuances. However, to prevent this we consistently repeated their response to ensure we understood them correctly. Nevertheless, the majority of our interviews were conducted in Swedish, which in those cases, was the native language of both researchers and the interviewees.

Furthermore, individual beliefs or values should not be allowed to influence the conclusion of the research, according to the criteria of confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2017). To reduce the risk of misinterpreting data or forgetting vital information we recorded all of the interviews. This allowed us to revisit the interviews and thoroughly go over them in order to avoid allowing our personal opinions or values influence our conclusions. Furthermore, to ensure the confirmability of our research, both of the researchers went through all the collected material in the sorting and coding process individually. This, to do our best to avoid biases through the research process by being reflexive and challenging each other's beliefs and critical thinking. This allowed us to create a shared foundation of what was interesting related to our research question.

Considering the dependability, Guba and Lincoln (1994; as cited in Bryman and Bell, 2017) implies that a thorough description of the research process allows other researchers to evaluate the trustworthiness of the research. Consequently, in order to assure the dependability of our research, we documented and described each step of the process. The criteria transferability further implies that a detailed description of the specific case allows other researchers to conduct a similar research in a different environment. Therefore, we described the case company and the

context thoroughly. However, due to the interviewees' and case company's confidentiality, not all information was disclosed.

According to Bryman and Bell (2017), one limitation of qualitative research is that it is difficult to generalize due to the use of case studies and small sample sizes. Our study has a small sample size of fourteen interviews, which one can argue is small compared to company size and could influence the findings of our research. However, given the time limitations of this research, we have made a deliberate and thoughtful selection of fourteen interviews. In addition, a single case study is derived from a unique context, and seeks explanations rather than to generalize the results to organizations across industries (Yin, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this study was not to generalize, as the findings are dependent on the context of our case study, the subjective perceptions of the interviewees and our interpretations of the data.

3.6 Ethics and Confidentiality

It is expected that when performing qualitative research, the researchers will operate ethically. (Blomkvist, Lindell & Hallin, 2018). To ensure good ethics throughout the research we have considered several aspects. Blomkvist, Lindell, and Hallin (2018) emphasize that it is critical to inform participants about the purpose of the research and to obtain their permission before they participate. Therefore, each interviewee received an email with information about us and our research prior to the interviews. The email also notified the interviewees of critical information, such as their and the company's anonymity. During the interview, we further expanded on the information supplied in the initial email. Additionally, we asked all interviewees if we could record the interviews and informed them of its purpose.

Blomkvist, Lindell, and Hallin (2018) further highlight the need of keeping the information acquired confidentially. To ensure confidentiality, we have disguised the real names of the organization and employees and replaced them with pseudonyms. Furthermore, when presenting our findings, we chose quotes that did not conceal the interviewees' identities and avoided lengthy descriptions of the interviewees' positions since the details are specific to the firm.

By following the recommendations of Blomkvist, Lindell and Hallin (2018) we believe that our research fulfills good research ethics. However, we are aware of this research's limitations and have therefore been reflective throughout the process. In this chapter, we outlined the procedure of our research method. In the following chapter, we will provide our findings from conducted research.

4 Empirical Findings

In the subsequent chapter, we present findings derived from our empirical data. First we introduce the context to our case company HybridCo and then three main themes that emerged from our empirical data. The first theme, "Meaning of Work" focuses on the meanings of work that employees attach in their various workspaces, home-office and physical office, based on their personal preferences and the nature of work. The second theme, "Perceived Proximity" examines how the perception of being close to colleagues when working hybridly and in hybrid meetings, which appeared to be a significant factor in the empirical data. Finally, the third theme, "Virtual Communication" examines how employees perceive the changing nature of communication with colleagues when working hybridly.

4.1 Context of HybridCo

HybridCo is a marketing and communication company that creates materials and content for the entire global organization to which it belongs. An explanation is given by Michael, *"We work with communication and mainly with marketing communication and creators",* and Sophia, *"I mean in house as we are inhouse agency, there's little bit like you know the framework is set. We only work within our organization. We don't work with other brands obviously".*

Amelia expressed admiration for the fact that the company's size affords opportunities for cross-functional collaboration, despite the fact that it is a complex organization.

"But it's a fantastic company to work for, there are so many different parts of the organization. It's incredibly huge. I think that when you come to us, you expect everything to be simple, but it's quite complicated because there are so many stakeholders in different parts who need to collaborate, and making changes can also take some time due to its size." - Amelia

Sophia further elaborates on their main production in the markets they operate in:

"The whole digital content that we are planning and producing for our markets, so you know, whenever in each market has a store and some marketing department, like a local, that the country we are responsible to produce and deliver, we call it like a common global content that includes images, films, catalogs, and sometimes even the markets are reaching us with their specific requests if they need some special campaign." - Sophia

Sophia gives a background to the content they produce, such as catalogs, images and films, which is something that is specific for the context of HybridCo. Their office is also a studio for producing this content, which often demands physical presence, as Amelia explains *"Because when I am working on projects in the studio, I have to be there. I can't do it from home, and we have lots of carpenters and other people who have to be on site".* However, it does not count for everyone, as Ethan emphasizes, *"but maybe we have 100 different job titles in the company. It's everything from the handyman, from the craftsman in the studio to lighting technician to a photographer to interior designer. Of course they need to be in the studio and the building to do your job, but then we also have so many other people".*

HybridCo has a guideline outlining how they have approached hybrid work post-pandemic, which allows for flexibility under responsibility but implies three days per week in the office. This flexibility was perceived differently by the interviewees, as some adhered to the guideline while others used it as encouragement and worked, for example, every day in the office some weeks and none other weeks. The manager, Ava, explains it thoroughly,

"Here and now, we are expected to be at the workplace three days a week, but there is no exact stated which days, and none of us employees have to punch a time clock, so there is still freedom under responsibility. And I am not sure that all groups consistently follow this three-day rule, but I also respect that it is not made into too big of a deal, and that we are all on a journey now. People are a bit cautious about being too strict with exactly how and what to follow." - Ava

HybridCo is currently renovating their office to accommodate new ways of working, such as hybrid meetings, while also accommodating the needs of creatives as a space for collaboration. Their physical workspace has been activity-based for many years, and they are now working to

make it more tailored to the company's brand and values. In addition, the office is located in a small town, requiring long commutes for many employees. The importance of having an attractive office to come to the office was recurrent in the interviews, as in the example of Amelia:

"They have started to redesign the office, it is starting to look really homely downstairs and we should have had it like this for several years, but we never got it together. But now it looks so cool that it has attracted people because they feel that, well, this is a nice place, we can work here, so you get more inspired by it too because before that it felt like there were so many people all the time and we never found any rooms. You never got your own space, so I think that change to a more designed and more relaxing environment makes you want to hang out there. It's a big change from previous years, so it's a bit fun, I think people seem more excited to come to work."

Given the context of HybridCo, we will now present the themes that emerged from the interviews.

4.2 Meaning of Work

When reflecting on the hybrid workspace, the interviewees frequently made a distinction between how they experience work from home and from the physical workspace. The different workspaces have different meanings, as well as different functions depending on the employee's preferences and the nature of work. The following paragraphs will therefore outline the meanings employees attach to their work in their different workspaces.

4.2.1 The Home-Office

4.2.1.1 A space for concentration

During our interviews, we noticed that whenever the interviewees reflected on the hybrid workspace, they referred to the flexibility it gives them to work on their tasks in their preferred environment. There is a distinction between the tasks preferred in the physical workspace and at home, which is determined by the interplay between the nature of the task and the preferences of the individual employee. However, what is significant is that working from home was described

as a space for concentration and productive individual work for eight out of the fourteen interviewees. Employees often find it easier to complete work tasks that require concentration at home and have therefore changed the way they organize their work depending on whether they are working in the physical workspace or at home.

"And I think that is extremely individual, but at least, what should I say, the conditions for focusing and working concentrated on tasks in depth, such as formulating, packaging materials, creating presentations, preparing different forums or management groups, or other things. For me, it works better when I sit by myself at home without bumping into too many colleagues who, of course, seek my attention when I am in the office. Nothing wrong with that. But then I don't get quite as much produced." - Henry

Being around colleagues in the physical office is seen as a distraction for focused work, and working from home is more productive. Even though Amelia talks enthusiastically about working hybridly, she shares a similar view as Henry.

"But I think, personally, that it's fantastic, I think it's so fantastic to sit at home and work. Sometimes I split my day and work half the day at home and half the day at the office, because it can still be a little tough to come into the office since everyone just wants to talk all the time. So, it's like you notice that when I need to concentrate, I work from home. - Amelia

Chloe expresses that working from home and performing work tasks that require greater concentration are also perceived differently based on personality type.

"And so actually what I find being quite being introverted is that the office environment where there is a lot of people, and I'm very socially aware as well. So I get affected by other people's conversations, other people's emotions, other conversations like about business happening and I also need to have a time when I balance myself out from the noise of work, and yeah, that's post-pandemic. I almost feel even though I'm in the office four days a week post pandemic I feel something about needing to root and balance in my home space, which makes me feel more in control and it allows me to focus more." - Chloe

Chloe's experience exemplifies one of the challenges managers explained that they face when working in hybrid workspaces, namely that employees are diverse, which influences their preferences. Even though Henry, who has a managerial position, feels that he is more productive and focused at home, he is humble about the fact that this is not shared with everyone in his team and expresses that he needs to be flexible to the preferences of others. In addition, the managers Henry and Sophia expressed that accommodating the preferences of others requires the planning and organization of team activities by them as leaders.

Nevertheless, for tasks that require teamwork and collaboration, the physical workspace was frequently mentioned as a preference for the interviewees. Even though collaborating virtually works, meeting physically serves more productive and creative collaborations, as Amelia expressed it;

"Yes, they take for granted that you can work from home and sometimes it's not optimal, for example, if you do, like we have many creative workshops. And they are much better when we all meet and sit in the same room. But when you do it online, it works, but it's not the same as having a person face to face. You don't get the same energy or so, so creatively and in terms of workshops". - Amelia

Furthermore, the manager Henry also experienced that tasks of a collaborative nature, such as problem solving, are better done together in a physical workspace, *"If I need to get the team to work together in a different way than they have before, or combine their skills in a different way to solve a particular issue, then believe it or not, we often need to sketch on a whiteboard together to create and it's not nearly as effective or quick digitally."*

The interviewees find it easier to concentrate on focused work tasks while working from home, since it is without the noise from the physical workspace. They have more control over factors such as noise level, interruptions, and their workspace setup, which can have a significant impact on their ability to focus. However, they still find the physical workspace as crucial for collaborative tasks and creative workshops, where face-to-face interaction is valued for its

energy, productivity, and creativity. The hybrid workspace offers greater flexibility, but managers must be mindful of the differing needs of employees. It is noteworthy to point out the distinction in the employees' perceptions of work between the home-office and the physical workspace. The finding that focused work is perceived as challenging in the physical workspace raises questions about what factors may have contributed to this shift. Our findings suggest that work at the home-office is associated with individuality, focus, concentration, and productivity, whereas work at the physical workspace is perceived as more collaborative, creative and productive. This distinction sheds light on how the different workspaces may influence employees' experiences of work.

4.2.2 The Physical Workspace

During our interviews, we discovered the frequency with which employees viewed the physical workspace as a space for socializing. Additionally, for many of the interviewees, the physical workspace and its layout are important for their inspiration and creativity.

4.2.2.1 A Space for Socializing

Several interviewees stated that the pandemic demonstrated that it is possible to work efficiently from home. As a result, unless the nature of the work requires it, some of the interviewees expressed less need for a physical workspace to perform work. For example one of the interviewees expressed:

"I don't see it as a necessity in this time and age, actually. You can, almost, do most of the jobs that we have in this, in the 21st century, remotely. Most of them. I would say unless it's like handwork. But if your tasks are reliant on, or can be done through a laptop or phone or so. The physical environment is not really needed." - Samuel

Furthermore, Ethan adds a similar view to Samuel, that individual work can be done somewhere other than the office, *"Before we had a high focus area here in the office where you could go in and then it's quiet. But this we are taking away now because we need more places for chat boxes. So that you can have more virtual meetings. At the same time, it's like, you don't want to come to the office to sit in a little room just to get some work done".*

Rather than solely a place for completing work tasks, the physical workspace was frequently referred to as a space for socializing. Its function for socializing, was expressed by Emma:

"It's probably that I feel like I expand my network by coming to the office and contribute to a better atmosphere by being able to say hello to a manager who is not really my manager, but someone else's manager, who I have occasional contact with, but not on a day-to-day basis, and to see them more often and that they can come up and check how things are going." - Emma

Working from the office is more frequently viewed as an opportunity to socialize and create relationships with people other than one's closest colleagues. Furthermore, Emma elaborated on the need for spontaneous social interactions, "*When I come to the office, I don't usually schedule as many meetings because I want to be able to bump into people and have those little chats in between, instead of locking myself in a meeting room all day"*.

Another perspective on the physical workspace and its function for socializing was also mentioned as a crucial aspect of effective work.

"In terms of my department, where we are quite dispersed. Like. On the whole, we are very dispersed. We work so much together and then I think it is very important that we have, just, that we meet at the office, that we have the social parts because I think it leads much more to efficient work". - Marcus

Although Ethan and Samuel expressed that the physical workspace is not required for performing work, the physical workspace was more frequently emphasized as a space for socializing, spontaneous interactions, and efficient work. Therefore, the findings suggest that employees are seeking social interaction while working in the physical workspace.

4.2.2.2 A Space for Creativity and Inspiration

Since the company produces a tremendous amount of creative content, it is evident that their office requirements have changed since they returned to the office post-pandemic. Currently, the

interviewees who are working in creative project teams said that for them to come to the office, it needs to be a space where they can be inspired. As in the example below,

"I think for the creatives, they need to kind of feel and ideate. If you want them to come to the office, otherwise they will rather stay online, each of them in their own bedroom, living room, whatever. If it's more kind of inspiring for them, because you know the ideas are not just ok now I'm working from 8:00 to 5:00 and will come up now. It's a creative process. So it's good to make some effort to make the office nicer."- Sophia

Moreover, Sophia, Amelia, Alexander, and Chloe expressed a desire for the office to be more comfortable and equipped with comfortable spaces, as it inspires and motivates them to work. Chloe elaborates on this change in needs.

"The need has changed, I think from needing the office to have a little bit more of a home environment feeling, it's really weird, but I think we've got so used to having the comfort, it's so weird for us to go into the office environment and not have that. We are lucky, there are loads of different sofas and cushions and lighting and you know textiles, they've changed the downstairs area to a proper relax. You don't go into it now and go and think "it's an office hour". " - Chloe

Michael, who is a manager, talked passionately about the importance of being surrounded by people who work for his own source of inspiration,

"There's something special about being able to get a cup of coffee and walk out to the physical studio to witness the wonderful interior designers and photographers at work creating magical solutions. Walking past a 3D-artist or simply looking at the pictures on the walls to see how talented we are. That is not available at home. It only takes five minutes. It involves moving from one teams-meeting to another. You walk past something that provides you with something. It is, in my opinion, extremely important". - Michael

The physical workspace is described as a source for inspiration and motivation for some, and Chloe is pleased with the changes that HybridCo already accomplished with changing to more

comfortable spaces. However, for some working on creative processes, there is still a need for change, expressed by the manager Sophia *"Right now it is messy, not creative at all. So what I need for my team is to have some space where we can be creative, you know, brainstorm ideas, and space just for us"*. Interestingly, even if Sophia and other interviewees such as Ethan, Marcus and Amelia expressed dissatisfaction with the current physical workspace, they still recognized its value for their inspiration and motivation. This suggests that physical workspace still remains important for many employees. Additionally, our findings highlight the perception that the office should be more comfortable, with a home-like atmosphere, which is a novel and intriguing finding. This view may indicate that the boundary between work and home is becoming increasingly blurred in the hybrid workspace.

4.3 Perceived Proximity

During our interviews, we discovered that there were differences in how the interviewees perceived proximity, also known as closeness, to their colleagues depending on their relationship and meeting format. The following paragraphs will therefore describe the various experiences and how working within a hybrid workspace affects their sense of proximity to each other.

4.3.1 Distance and Employee Relationships

Throughout the interviews it became evident that the interviewees experienced proximity to their colleagues in a hybrid workspace in different ways. When employees only met virtually through Microsoft Teams, the interviewees experienced a greater distance between themselves and their colleagues.

"If you have met someone physically, it's much easier to be like, you don't need to be so formal. There is a little more distance if you have only met them on Teams, I would say. If you have had lunch with someone, it's a different thing. If you have gotten under people's skin and talked about things other than work for a while, then you have a different relationship with the person". -

James

Amelia shares the same feelings as James, but she emphasizes that the feeling of distance diminishes when interacting through Microsoft Teams if you have become familiar with one another.

"It depends a bit, I think. If I know the people, which you often do when you work on projects, then you work together, you get to know each other, then you don't feel that distance. But if it's people you don't know then that distance can feel very far sometimes". - Amelia

The preceding statement emphasizes the importance of establishing a relationship in order to feel closeness to colleagues. However, throughout the interviews, we noticed that the interviewees had different experiences with establishing relationships in a hybrid workspace. Chloe expresses the importance of physical interaction in establishing relationships.

"You know, it's harder to build, it takes longer and it's harder to build relationships online. It is more immediate when you're physically building. I think for me, a lot of the things I have to do is build relationships. That's my role to sometimes establish new relationships. And so those key things like I trust you, I hear you, build trust, and how do you empathize and have understanding. It's harder to do online because you're just missing that physical, you know, animal to animal – thing that you get. That I really understand what this person is saying and I understand how they're saying it and understand how they're feeling. You know, all of this stuff that you get physically, it's harder to do online". - Chloe

Nevertheless, in contrast to Chloe´s perception, Samuel describes how he and his team established good relationships despite never meeting before by creating a virtual group chat. Samuel expresses, "*it is always a busy group chat, it is like a group chat with close friends where we share everything with each other, and that creates good communication and good relationships in the team.*" He furthermore describes their first physical meeting*, "We never met and we just went with the first time physically and never felt weird, never felt awkward, never felt like you are meeting a new person. You're already friends with that person".*

The findings indicate that when only meeting virtually through Microsoft Teams, it is difficult for employees to get to know each other and establish relationships, which creates a feeling of distance. Moreover, it is important for colleagues to meet physically in early stages of projects and collaborations to create good relationships. However, the feeling of distance becomes less tangible and has less impact in the later stages of the work if relationships have been established. However, Samuel's experience is noteworthy because, despite never physically meeting, they developed a sense of proximity and relationship.

4.3.2 Challenges of Hybrid Meetings

It was remarkable how many of the interviewees detested hybrid meetings, in which some participate virtually and others physically. It is interesting to recognize that hybrid meetings frequently make up their daily work, which itself is a result of hybrid work. As Sophia expressed it, *"It's the hybrid meetings actually that half of the people are online and half are together. I don't like it. We don't like it"*. She further elaborates on the challenges:

"Yeah. And as I said, if you have the sessions that you need to kind of discuss and work together, and half of the team is online and half of the team in the room. Then the team online can easily kind of lose the connection, because the team that are together, they go for a coffee break, they go and have lunch. So, the people that are online are missing this team spirit, you know." -
Sophia

Hybrid meetings create a feeling of distance between the employees that participate physically and the ones that participate virtually, as they are missing informal chats and activities. James further shares a similar experience of hybrid meetings as Sophia, and explains that it is easy to feel excluded when participating digitally.

"It's very rare that I'm the only one connected and the others are at the office. Then I try to go there too if I know something is going to happen. Otherwise, one gets a bit disconnected actually. I must say. Because they have a dynamic in the room and they talk and draw on the board. I can't see that because it's so small and even when they talk they may stand up and draw something, so

the computer doesn't pick up the sound properly, so I didn't really hear it, so, I would say that's a

problem.” - James

James finds that when he participates virtually, he misses out on the dynamics of the room and is forgotten. The managers Henry and Ava recognize the challenge of including virtual participants in hybrid meetings. Ava expressed that it creates a feeling of exclusion, “*It's easy, if you have a hybrid meeting, it can easily become a bit excluding. If you're in the room, you might suddenly forget to include those who are on the screen in the same way. You might not hear them, not pick up on their body language, not find all the dimensions"*. Henry emphasized that it occurs naturally, “*Without thinking about it, you focus more on those who are physically present in the room and forget a bit that there are other participants too. It's also a behavior that you need to work on, of course, but unfortunately it happens a bit automatically”*.

These findings indicate that hybrid meetings are undesirable as they create a distance between those who participate virtually and those who are physically present, making the latter feel disconnected from the team dynamics and informal conversations. This further generates a feeling of exclusion among those who are participating virtually. Interestingly, the challenge ensuring virtual participants' inclusion in the hybrid meetings is also experienced by managers, as it is easy to forget about them due to the natural focus on physically present employees.

4.3.3 Challenges with an Open Office Design

In the hybrid workspace, when working from the physical workspace, interviewees frequently expressed a desire to be near their colleagues. Moreover, to have a designated workspace to work together with their closest colleagues was described as desirable by Chloe and Marcus. It was further described by Marcus as important for a sense of belonging and team effectiveness:

"I believe in having a clear, dedicated space for one's team, not necessarily a fixed desk but a distinct area where the team gathers and works together. I find it strikingly effective when suddenly you realize that eight people from the same team are sitting around a table, each working on their own thing, and then you can say, 'Oh, I wanted to check something with you,' and instead of needing to schedule a half-hour meeting and find a time three weeks from now,

you can simply ask, 'How's it going? What do you think about this?' or 'We need to discuss that.'
'Was that okay?' Those kinds of things. I think it's really important to have a sense of belonging,
somewhere physically in the office." - Marcus

However, the open office landscape at Hybridco was described as challenging due to unallocated places. Henry further elaborates on the challenge: "*Now we place ourselves where there is a free seat so we have completely open seating, which means that if I go to the office, it is not certain that I will meet my co-workers because I might end up on the first floor and several others on the second or third or fourth floor as well*".

The challenge to be near one's closest colleagues, despite being at the physical workspace is further shared by Emma. She adds, *"Well, you know, almost everyone knows, you can actually find people more easily on Teams than in the office now"*. The open office landscape makes it challenging to be near close colleagues and collaborate. Moreover, the findings indicate that simply being present in the physical workspace does not guarantee that you will meet your colleagues.

4.4 Virtual Communication

4.4.1 Structured Communication

The pandemic-induced remote work has led to more organized virtual communication both within teams and across organizational boundaries at HybridCo. In the hybrid workspace, it is now customary for meetings to be hybrid, providing the option to join virtually from the office and virtually from home or other location. This flexibility in physical office attendance has resulted in structured communication at HybridCo, with virtual meetings scheduled through Microsoft Teams.

"Well, it's a bit more planned because you don't have these spontaneous meetings in the same way. You have to schedule spontaneous meetings, so it's changed a bit in terms of planning. So there are more planned meetings, which can be good, of course. We should always have an

agenda-driven meeting with a decision point, but it's a bit more time-bound, less spontaneous." -
Michael

However, the outcome of everything becoming a meeting is experienced as frustrating, as expressed by the manager Ava,

"We've gotten stuck in the idea that everything becomes a meeting because a lot of things can be solved in a workplace if everyone comes in, you see each other in the morning, you go off to your different tasks, and you solve a lot of things along the way. But now it's easy to say, "But now we have to invite everyone to a meeting," and then it becomes a situation where some people can't attend, and it becomes a lot of involved parties and a lot of different meetings, and then you have an agenda where you're just going from meeting to meeting."

Moreover, Chloe experiences it as the communication needs to be more clear on where and how the meetings will be held. She expressed, *"And I would say that, something that we never had to consider before, but now we have to be super clear in whether an interaction that we have as a group or together will be physical, hybrid, whether it's recorded or not."* Alexander and Marcus share a similar perspective, where they both emphasize that they have become so accustomed to virtual meetings that more organized communication has added a layer of complexity to the communication's clarity. Marcus expressed it as follows,

"It requires that you are more clear when you're going to have a physical meeting. And even though the clarity exists, I experience that everyone, including myself, thinks it's okay to join on Teams. But what should one say? Yes, but there is a... You just say no, I had to join on Teams and then it ruins it, because maybe you had planned to sit together in a room and talk about something. It's quite common that there's something that I don't really feel, maybe in the workplace, how to create that clarity or how to get good enough tools so that it doesn't matter if someone is on Teams or digital or in the room. So, there are still many "problems" with it, in my opinion."

The adoption of a hybrid workspace has led to enhanced communication structures, but employees expressed frustration with the transformation of all interactions, including spontaneous conversations, into meetings. Moreover, the anticipation of employees to attend meetings virtually from other locations than the office has hindered the effectiveness of meeting planning and collaboration. Intriguing is the observation that the increasing number of meetings has extended beyond scheduled meetings to spontaneous conversations that could be resolved face-to-face if everyone were physically present in the office. These observations raise concerns about the potential escalation of meeting significance, posing the question of whether meetings have outweighed the value of face-to-face communication.

4.4.2 Frequent and Informal Communication

In contrast to more structured communication, the intensive use of Microsoft Teams at HybridCo, has led to the perception that virtual communication in the hybrid workspace is more frequent and informal.

"I think it has affected things in a way that there are often more frequent, a little more informal check-ins. Like, there's more of an ongoing dialogue rather than, you know, "Now we're meeting at our weekly meeting, and now we're going to talk about this thing that's on the agenda." Instead, you solve things a little more on the go. Like, "Oh, we need to talk about this, let me write to someone instead of looking them up at the office or booking a meeting", it's more spread out." - Marcus

Marcus emphasizes that virtual communication is more informal, but the interpretation is that it is also more efficient because it is easier to contact one another than to locate one another in the office. Additionally, Marcus finds that his interactions with senior colleagues and managers are simplified and less formal due to Microsoft Teams in the hybrid workspace.

"No, I think that I experience a rather positive effect from it, as it lowers the level of formality quite a lot. It can be quite intimidating to deal with people who have very high positions in large companies. When I started working at HybridCo, I was going to start working with the person who was like second highest in all of HybridCo, the whole world. And which was very special

and of course you're very nervous when you meet them. The first 10 times or so, and then you start to realize that you could just write on chat and say hi, David. What do you think about this? And then David replied and then there wasn't much more to it. It made it easier, maybe the next time you met in person it wasn't as distant and nervous and formal." - Marcus

Interestingly, this view is also similar to the manager's perspective, who finds virtual communication through Microsoft Teams as a way to keep their daily contact possible in the hybrid workspace. As Henry expressed it,

"I have found ways to have daily chats with my colleagues when I'm not on site. I try to make sure I know how people are doing, how they feel, or if there are challenges or other things they need support with. The advantage of being on site is that you can also have a parallel dialogue with several people at the same time, whereas in a chat it becomes very one to one in a way. But I feel that I am also closer to everyone in the team." - Henry

Nevertheless, this informal and more frequent communication through Microsoft Teams when working hybridly can also be used as a control function, as the manager Michael expressed it,

"It becomes somewhat about having a bit more control. It's a little bit like sending out a Monday chat early in the morning, where are you, where are you located, because I don't have such an obligation to report. You don't have to tell me that you're at home, but I would like to know". - Michael

Although Michael does not find the control with a purpose to monitor their work, he expressed enthusiasm when some employees took the initial contact automatically.

I think that one could imagine that my colleagues feel monitored, but I believe we have learned so much in 2.5 years that we understand that is not the purpose, but rather to have a check-in, a small check. What's fun is that sometimes you can see your colleagues who always send a little morning chat to note that they are actually at work but not physically there. But here comes a little good morning. It's nice." - Michael

The frequent communication and use of Microsoft Teams has also been viewed as positive for gaining an overview of communication channels, as Amelia emphasized, "*We created different communication channels in Teams so that since I oversaw everything, it was great for me because then I could go into these channels and see. I have full control over my channels and I always communicate with my colleagues as well. I chat with them and things like that, so I think it's become much easier to keep in touch with people via Teams.*".

The use of ICT, such as Microsoft Teams, in the hybrid workspace has transformed the way employees interact with each other, making communication more frequent and informal, yet also more efficient. The perception of virtual communication through Microsoft Teams has been positive for many employees, especially in terms of reducing formality and making it easier to connect with colleagues and managers. However, the frequent and informal nature of communication through Microsoft Teams also raises the issue of control. In addition, the findings suggest that the use of Microsoft Teams has contributed to keeping an overview of communication channels and creating a more connected workspace.

After presenting the empirical findings, we will now shift our attention to the discussion phase, where we will interpret and analyze the results in light of the research purpose and existing literature. In the following chapter we intend to provide a deeper understanding of our findings' implications, significance, and potential contributions. By analyzing the relationships and patterns that emerge from our empirical findings, we will investigate the central themes, provide insights, and generate new perspectives. Through analysis and synthesis, we hope to shed light on the broader contributions of our research.

5 Discussion

In this chapter we will discuss our empirical findings in relation to the theoretical background with the purpose of answering our research questions: "How does the hybrid workspace influence the experience of work?". We will start with presenting the understanding of hybrid work and how work in the hybrid workspace has different meanings depending on which workspace employees employ. In addition, the new meanings attributed to the multiple workspaces constituted in the hybrid workspace. Furthermore, we present how proximity is perceived in the hybrid workspace, as it answers to the perception of how work and relationships are impacted by working in the hybrid workspace. Lastly we will present the influence of virtual communication on employees' work practices.

5.1 Understanding Hybrid Work

5.1.1 Division of Work Across Workspaces

In the case of HybridCo, hybrid work is perceived as the flexibility to organize work at home or in the physical workspace. Concurrently, work is conducted within the virtual workspace while employees are situated in either their homes or the physical workspace, aligning with Ahuja's and Carley's (1998) observation that the virtual workspace enables accessibility from any location and at any time. Our findings indicate that spatiality has significantly influenced the experiences of work in the hybrid workspace as stated by Halford (2005). There is a clear shift towards perceiving the home-office as a dedicated space for focused and individual work, while recognizing the physical workspace as essential for collaborative work and social interaction. Our findings align with Kingma's (2016) assertion that spatial integration and technology give rise to new work modes in the hybrid workspace. Specifically, our findings indicate that these new work modes involve the division of work across workspaces, which is determined by the nature of work and personal preference.

Recent and previous studies indicate that employees have developed a new preference for performing focused work at home (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022; Hislop & Axtell, 2009), which is consistent with the participants in our research who experience work at home as focused and individual. In addition, our findings demonstrate that working hybridly has given them the flexibility to allocate work of this nature to be performed at home, which is also perceived as more productive. This is aligned with the positive experiences of remote work in the research of Mahler (2012) and research situated around the COVID-19 pandemic by Ipsen et al. (2021) who present that working from home increases individual productivity. However, the preferences for performing focused work at home is interpreted as highly individual at HybridCo. Hence, it is also experienced as a personal need, depending on the personality as introvert and extrovert which adds a new perspective to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022) research.

Furthermore, the empirical findings present that while participants value the flexibility of their hybrid workspace, they also perceive the physical workspace as a hindrance to their ability to concentrate on tasks. The activity-based office design, as exemplified in HybridCo, is conceptualized as a design approach that aims to facilitate the diverse activities undertaken by employees. As Harris (2015) study shows, the activity-based office is designed with space for activities such as concentration, collaboration and opportunistic encounters. In contrast our findings differ by revealing that a space for focused work is being removed. Furthermore, the adoption of hybrid workspaces has increased the potential for employees to view their home office as a flexible workspace, where they can allocate their focused work activities, rather than a designated room within the physical workspace.

While the physical workspace was seen as a potential hindrance and a source of distraction for individual work, our findings reveal an interesting perspective. They demonstrate that collaborative work is perceived to be more efficient and productive when conducted in the physical workspace. Grzegorzyck et al. (2021) suggest that the physical workspace can compensate for the lack of social interaction experienced in the virtual workspace by providing dedicated spaces for collaboration. The participants at HybridCo emphasize the importance of face-to-face interaction and describe it as having an essential "animal-to-animal feeling" that fosters collaboration and creativity. This highlights the significance of the physical workspace in

facilitating the necessary social interactions for effective collaboration that cannot be met in the virtual workspace, which aligns with the proposition put forth by Grzegorzyck et al. (2021).

Despite the preference for collaborative work in the physical workspace, adherence to HybridCo's guideline of spending three days per week in the office is not universally followed, leading to challenges in collaboration. Specifically, we found that hybrid meetings were perceived as frustrating for collaboration, to the extent that employees organized their work around physical workspace to avoid them. While ICTs, including Microsoft Teams, are instrumental in supporting virtual collaboration (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2012), participants expressed that conveying context, nuances, and practices can be more challenging in a virtual workspace. Therefore, our findings are consistent with studies by Mahler (2012) and Yang et al. (2022) who have shown that collaborative tasks can be more challenging in a virtual setting, as individuals may feel isolated and disconnected. Grzegorzyk et al. (2021) suggested in their policy contribution that by integrating the virtual and physical workspace, it can mitigate rifts between virtual and physical employees in the hybrid workspace. However, our findings show that hybrid meetings, which are an integration of participants from both workspaces, are still perceived as frustrating, less affectionate and ineffective for collaboration. Thereby, our findings demonstrate how the increased flexibility in workspace choice has introduced complexities in conducting meetings, challenging the efficiency of collaboration in the hybrid workspaces. This prompts the question of whether more structure is needed to optimize the functioning of hybrid meetings, drawing insights from existing literature on virtual workspaces of Wilson et al. (2008) who suggest that virtual workspaces benefit from structure, promises and regulations.

Furthermore, many participants expressed that the current activity-based office design, characterized by open desks and lack of personal seating, lacks sufficient spaces for collaboration. They express a need for dedicated areas where they can collaborate with their closest colleagues. This perspective adds to the understanding that the activity-based office is intended to complement the hybrid workspace model and provide opportunities for the social interaction required for collaboration, as emphasized by Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022). It also highlights how some participants perceive the current office design as a hindrance, preferring spaces that cater specifically to their needs and the needs of their closest collaborators.

Moreover, participants consider the space for collaboration as a specific requirement at HybridCo, given the creative nature of their work. This additional perspective underscores the importance of adapting the physical workspace to meet the unique needs of the organization with practical relevance. However, the importance of creativity at HybridCo raises concerns about the adequacy of the current physical workspace in meeting these needs effectively.

5.1.2 Meaning of Workspaces

By the perceptions of how work is perceived at home and in the physical workspace, our findings demonstrate that there are new perceptions and also expectations attributed to their workspaces, especially the physical workspace. Which type of work that is associated with the workspace, is understood and interpreted through the meaning that the participants attribute the space with (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Participants in our study at HybridCo exhibited similar tendencies, as demonstrated by Hislop and Axtell's (2009) research on the symbolic significance of particular tasks in particular spaces. When considering the hybrid workspace, the participants differentiated between the workspaces in which they reside, namely their home-office space and their physical workspace. This distinction was initially determined by whether work was collaborative or individual and concentrative in nature. However, in their reflections on the home-office space, the participants imbued it with significance as a site for concentration and grounding.

Furthermore, the physical workspace emerged as a particularly salient focus of their attention, with new meanings and associations within the hybrid workspace. The emphasis on that the physical workspace is space to be inspired in and with spaces to be creative resides with Hatch (1990) notion that workspaces can be experienced through cultural values (cited in Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Our findings suggest that participants attribute inspiration and creativity as cultural values to their physical workspace. In addition, our analysis emphasizes the role of socialization in the physical workspace, which adds a new dimension to its meaning compared to the home-office workspace. Specifically, the physical workspace serves as a space for informal conversations and spontaneous interactions, highlighting its social significance. The study by Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2021) highlights the need for employers to reevaluate their physical workspaces in the context of hybrid work and align them with employees' preferred activities.

Building on previous studies that highlight the influence of spatial experiences on work (Halford, 2005), our findings reinforce the significance of the physical workspace for activities such as socialization, creativity, and collaboration, as evidenced by the meanings attributed. Moreover, drawing from our analysis of the findings, the consistent distinction in the interpretation of work depending on the specific workspace it takes place in is a novel perspective on work.

In the context of the hybrid workspace, it is important to acknowledge the subjectivity of meaning-making and experiences (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Our findings also reveal that hybrid work has had an impact on the meaning of the physical workspace, with employees perceiving it as less important for task performance. This highlights the potential for work to be supported by the virtual workspace (Ahuja & Carley, 1998; Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015), facilitated by technological devices such as laptops and phones. While the prevalence and desirability of flexible work arrangements as remote work are not novel (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015; Mahler, 2012), our findings have implications for the experience and understanding of the hybrid workspace. Specifically, they suggest that the meaning of the physical workspace can be diminished, posing a challenge for employers who require physical presence, as evidenced by Smite et al.'s (2023b) findings regarding employee resistance to excessive control of physical office presence.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that our research findings indicate a blurring of boundaries between work and home within the physical workspace. Notably, the physical workspace is perceived and expected to provide comfort, even resembling a "home-like" environment. From the perspective of spatialized power relations (Taylor and Spicer, 2007), this can be interpreted as a control mechanism employed by management to intentionally blur the boundaries between work and personal life (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). It is intriguing to observe that employees feel the need to come to the office when the space is inspiring and comfortable, suggesting a strong association between the home-office and work. This raises the intriguing point that the physical workspace is now expected to evoke a sense of home-like comfort, which would require further study to establish.

5.2 Exploring Proximity and Spatial Dynamics

Proximity and distance demonstrated itself important when the participants reflected on their relationships to colleagues. According to Taylor and Spicer (2007), spatiality plays a significant role in shaping the perception of relationships between individuals, influenced by factors such as practices of distance and proximity. In addition, Ruiller et al. (2019) emphasize the significance of proximity in relation to job performance and employee relationships. The employees at HybridCo experienced varying degrees of closeness, influenced by their relationship quality and meeting formats. Existing research on perceived proximity in virtual workspaces emphasizes the role of ICTs in maintaining connections (Ruiller et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2008), which aligns with the experiences of HybridCo employees. However, at HybridCo they also highlighted the challenges of establishing relationships virtually, including difficulties in establishing trust and understanding. Relying solely on Microsoft Teams for communication created a sense of distance. Therefore, the participants highlighted the significance of physical meetings in establishing new relationships. However, once these relationships were established, the perceived distance between geographically separated employees using Microsoft Teams diminished, leading to the development of stronger bonds. These findings are consistent with Ruiller et al.'s (2019) emphasis on balancing face-to-face interaction and virtual communication to enhance perceived proximity.

Furthermore, a notable finding is the use of informal communication via ICTs, particularly through frequent contact and check-ins between managers and employees. This practice has increased the perception of proximity between managers and employees in HybridCo. The increased sense of proximity is attributed to the manager's ability to maintain regular and more intimate interactions compared to the pre-hybrid work period. These findings provide additional support for the recommendation made by Grzegorczyk et al. (2021) regarding the importance of informal check-ins in fostering inclusivity among remote and office-based employees. Moreover, our findings indicate that employees view this managerial practice as instrumental in fostering stronger relationships and increasing managers' approachability by reducing formality.

At HybridCo, an intriguing case emerged where employees successfully formed close relationships and expressed a strong sense of connection, despite never having met face-to-face. By effectively building and maintaining relationships through an informal group chat in Microsoft Teams, challenging the notion that physical presence is necessary for meaningful connections. This can further be understood through Ruiller et al.'s (2019) research which emphasizes the importance of creating a collective identity through informal virtual communication to foster perceived proximity in dispersed teams. It appears that in this particular case experiences of relational proximity occur, as Amin and Cohedent (2004) define it, by having frequent informal chats and sharing interest despite never meeting physically. While some participants expressed the belief that physical interaction is necessary to reduce the sense of geographical proximity, this finding aligns with Wilson et al. 's (2008) proposition that virtual teams can still develop a sense of perceived proximity despite geographic dispersion. In the context of the hybrid workspace, this raises an important question regarding the ability of increasing virtual communication and collaboration to sustain relationships across spatial dynamics. Furthermore, considering the finding that the open office space does not facilitate the desired closeness among colleagues, this question becomes particularly significant for practical relevance, as well as for further research.

In the context of hybrid meetings, where both virtual and physically present employees are involved, the perception of proximity and distance are altered. The combination of virtual and physical presence in these meetings changes spatial dynamics and influences how employees perceive their proximity. The intriguing aspect lies in the fact that individuals who gather physically in the office also simultaneously engage in the virtual workspace. Our findings indicate that virtual interaction in the presence of physically present colleagues creates a sense of exclusion and disrupts the connection, which is particularly significant as it received considerable attention from the participants. Informal conversations and interactions among individuals physically present are not transmitted to virtual participants, creating a sense of distance and diminishes perceived proximity. Based on the insights from Amin and Cohendet (2004) regarding relational proximity, established relationships can diminish the feeling of distance. However, our findings indicate that despite the establishment of relationships, feelings of exclusion and distance can still persist.

The study conducted by Stapler and Webster (2008) provides further insight into this matter, emphasizing the tendency for in-groups and out-groups to form in hybrid work settings, which negatively impacts social interaction and knowledge sharing within hybrid teams. Our findings indicate that participants who are physically present during hybrid meetings struggle to include those joining virtually, often unintentionally omitting them from the discussion. This supports the findings of Staples and Webster (2008), as the employees at HybridCo encountered difficulties in receiving and perceiving the information provided by those who were physically present. Moreover, this finding introduces a new perspective to existing research on perceived proximity in virtual workspaces, which has primarily focused on overcoming geographical distance through communication technologies (Ruiller et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2008). The dynamics change when a hybrid meeting format is introduced, shedding light on the complexities of proximity in the context of mixed physical and virtual presence.

5.3 Understanding the Influence of Virtual Communication

In the hybrid workspace, virtual communication appeared to be a significant factor in reflections on work, both for meetings as well as for daily communication. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of technological infrastructure in enabling collaboration, communication, and interpersonal interaction within virtual workspaces (Alsharo, Gregg & Ramirez, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008). At HybridCo, employees regularly engage in the virtual workspace both at home and in the physical office. Employees frequently emphasize the role of Microsoft Teams as a crucial tool for communication. These findings align with the research conducted by Malhotra & Majchrzak (2012), which suggests that the utilization of chat platforms, video conferences, and software applications supports communication and work within virtual workspaces. Interestingly, literature on virtual workspace is situated around virtual teams (Alsharo, Gregg, Ramirez, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008). However, within the hybrid workspace of HybridCo, where employees transition between virtual and physical workspaces, it becomes clear that virtual communication is an integral part of their daily routine. As a result, employees engage in the virtual workspace while being physically present in the office, effectively operating in both workspaces simultaneously.

Alsharo, Gregg and Ramirez's (2017) study highlights challenges related to slow and absent communication within virtual workspaces. However, our findings contradict this notion, as participants reported an improvement in communication efficiency when using Microsoft Teams to interact with colleagues. Rather than physically locating one another within the office, employees find it more efficient to communicate through the platform. Consequently, the impact of Microsoft Teams on communication practices at HybridCo has led to a shift in employee behavior. Through the findings of Kingma's (2016) study, this can be understood as a new employee behavior, as it is emphasized that hybrid workspace creates new work practices. Furthermore, the constant virtual connection enables to continue work relationships and a permanent presence in the virtual workspace (Kingma, 2016), which can underlie as explanation to why the employees at HybridCo experience that colleagues are more efficiently reachable through Microsoft Teams, than in the physical workspace.

The increase in use of Microsoft Teams in HybridCo has resulted in a significant shift towards virtual communication and interaction practices. As highlighted earlier, many social interactions have transformed into virtual meetings, making communication more structured. Even spontaneous interactions become pre arranged meetings, eliminating their inherent spontaneity. This development can be attributed to employees recognizing the feasibility of maintaining work relationships through virtual means, as Kingma (2016) demonstrated. However, Petani and Mengis (2021) stress that work always occurs within an emotional context, regardless of spatial dynamics and the impact of virtuality on affective processes. Our findings clearly indicate that the increasing number of virtual meetings is perceived as frustrating, suggesting that the meeting itself and the flexibility it offers are prioritized over face-to-face communication and interaction. Moreover, based on our findings, it is evident that virtual meetings have become a widespread practice within the hybrid workspace, resulting from the remote work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hussain, Mirza & Hassan, 2020), thus indicating a shift toward a new norm for meetings. However, the experience of frustration aligns with the findings of Hussain, Mirza, and Hassan (2020), who also highlighted the implications of virtual meeting overload.

However, the inherent complexity of hybrid work, with employees situated in various locations, has brought forth the issue of control. As highlighted by one manager, the regularity of virtual communication can be seen as a means to monitor employees. As Halford (2005) and Taylor and Spicer (2007) emphasizes, power dynamics and control can manifest differently depending on the workspace individuals occupy. The hybrid workspace may influence the work of the manager with personnel responsibility, to find new ways to stay connected and overview the work of subordinates. According to the research on virtual teams, managers should prioritize trust over control and monitoring, allowing workers to embrace flexibility and autonomy (Ruiller et al., 2019). In addition, increased remote work can be enhanced by refocusing on performance and disregarding the spatial and temporal boundaries of work (Mahler, 2012; Groen et al., 2018). Consequently, it is interpreted that managers encounter challenges in exerting control over employees in the hybrid workspace and maintaining power relations. To address this, virtual communication can serve as a mechanism to uphold the necessary power dynamics. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study, particularly the restricted sample size of managers, which hinders our ability to draw definitive conclusions from the analysis above.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of our research was to explore how employees experience work in the hybrid workspace, the combination of virtual and physical workspaces. Through conducting a single case study at HybridCo with semi-structured interviews we gathered valuable empirical data that enhanced our understanding of these experiences. After discussing the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical background in chapter 5, we will provide an answer to our research question and highlight the theoretical contributions of our study. Moreover, practical implications will be addressed, limitations, and we will offer suggestions for future research.

6.1 Key Findings

To achieve the purpose of our research and contribute with an understanding of how employees experience and navigate work in the hybrid workspace, we intend to answer our research question by drawing on our key findings.

How does the hybrid workspace influence the experience of work?

Our first finding demonstrates that alternating between the virtual workspace, the physical workspace and the home-office give rise to different perceptions of work in the hybrid workspace. With the accessibility of the virtual workspace from any location, there is a recognition among employees that various types of work are not consolidated in a single workspace. Instead, work is perceived as contingent upon the spatial dynamics of the home-office and the physical workspace. In addition to the perception of work being contingent upon the specific workspace, there is a simultaneous attribution of new meanings to the various workspaces. The home-office, as a space for concentration and personal grounding, shapes the experience of work as an individual and focused activity. In contrast, the physical workspace, as a space for socialization and creativity, influences the perception of work as collaborative and interactive. However, it is essential to recognize that the meanings attributed to work and the various workspaces are subject to individual interpretations and perceptions. Notably, our findings show that the physical workspace may hold varying degrees of significance, or even no

significance for work, for different individuals within the context of hybrid work. Together, these distinct attributions of new meanings to each workspace shape the overall experience of work by dividing work into different workspaces that cater to the nature of work and individual needs.

Our second finding demonstrates that the hybrid workspace introduces complexities that influence the dynamics of work practices, such as meetings. The unique structure of hybrid meetings, involving both virtual and physically present employees, influences how proximity and distance are experienced by individuals. This hybrid meeting structure specifically impacts the perception of distance between virtual and physical participants, shaping the formation of in-groups and out-groups. This two-way influence has implications for virtual participants, who may feel a sense of exclusion and perceive a lack of access to important informal conversations and knowledge sharing. Conversely, physical participants may unintentionally exclude virtual participants, due to their natural tendency to focus on those physically present. The hybrid workspace has therefore influenced the experience of work, in terms of meetings, with a diminished sense of proximity between employees that meet across spatial dynamics.

Our third finding demonstrates that the integration of ICTs, particularly Microsoft Teams, in the hybrid workspace has significantly altered the experience of work, especially in terms of work practices of communication, which have shifted to a more virtual format. As a result, employees are able to engage in work simultaneously within both the physical and virtual workspaces, fostering the continuation of work relationships beyond spatial boundaries. The emergence of virtual communication as the dominant mode of interaction has led to paradigm shift, with employees perceiving it as a more efficient means of communication. This shift has also led to employees experiencing a more structured approach to communication, with social interactions being organized as virtual meetings. Consequently, the influence of the hybrid workspace on the experience of work in virtual communication is two-fold. On one hand, it is seen as informal and frequent, facilitating easy connectivity. On the other hand, the prevalence of virtual meetings has diminished the value of face-to-face interactions due to the increase of virtual meetings and scheduled spontaneous interactions.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

As indicated in our background and problematization, hybrid work is an emerging flexible work arrangement (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022; Smite et al., 2023b), allowing people to work remotely and from the office. As flexible work arrangements is a field that is well studied (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015), little is yet studied on hybrid work as described as the future of work post the pandemic COVID-19 (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022; Petani & Mengis, 2021). We contribute to the existing literature on flexible work arrangements by emphasizing that work in the hybrid workspace provides flexibility for individuals to allocate tasks to their preferred workspaces. Whether it is the virtual, physical, or home-office workspace, the choice is determined by employee preferences and the nature of work. Moreover, our research uncovers that the preference for work in the home-office is not solely a matter of personal preference but can be influenced by individual needs, such as introversion, broadening our understanding of the role of flexibility.

Our research shows that the flexibility in work allocation in the hybrid workspace has had a significant impact on the experience of work, as it is now closely tied to the specific workspace in which it is conducted. Building on Halford's (2005) study which highlights that spatial hybridity changes the experience of work, there is a need for further exploration of these experiences, as emphasized by Petani and Mengis (2021). We find that work is no longer confined to a single location but spans across multiple spaces, which is not a new finding (Halford, 2005; Petani & Mengis, 2021). However, we contribute to studies of Halford (2005) and Petani and Mengis (2021), within the field of organizational space, with a deeper understanding by uncovering the consistent differentiation and interpretation of work based on the particular workspace employed. We find that work perceptions are shaped as employees navigate different workspaces. Furthermore, we contribute to existing literature by demonstrating how the hybrid workspace has influenced the experience of work, by dividing it into different workspaces that cater to the nature of work and individual needs.

Our research delves into the clear distinctions between focused individual work and collaborative work which are influenced by the spatial dynamics of the home-office and the physical

workspace. Drawing upon a symbolic interactionist perspective (Prasad, 2017) and the insights by Taylor and Spicer (2007) on imagined spatial experiences, our research contributes with an understanding of how experiences of work can shape the meanings ascribed to the diverse workspaces. Firstly, the new meaning of the physical workspace as a space for socialization and creativity, with a growing expectation for it to provide a comfortable and homelike ambiance. Secondly, the meaning of the home-office as a conducive space for concentration and grounding. Importantly, our research contributes new qualitative empirical findings that complement the quantitative research conducted by Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022), shedding light on employees' tendency to engage in focused work at home. Additionally, our findings build upon the work of Hislop and Axtell (2009), who explored the experiences of consultants and revealed the symbolic significance of the home office for tasks requiring concentration.

Our various findings on the experience of proximity and distance in the hybrid workspace align with previous research conducted by Ruiller et al. (2019) on the significance of balancing face-to-face and virtual communication to enhance perceived proximity, as well as the research by Wilson et al. (2008) that highlights the potential for perceived proximity in virtual teams. Additionally, with Amin and Cohedent's (2004) research on how relational proximity can bridge geographical boundaries to increase perceived proximity. However, our research offers a unique perspective on practices of proximity and distance (Taylor & Spicer, 2007), that has not been extensively explored. We find that the spatial dynamics in hybrid meetings, where employees participate from both the physical and virtual workspaces, lead to a diminished perception of proximity. While previous studies have emphasized the role of ICT in facilitating geographical proximity, our findings suggest that in these types of meetings, ICT alone is insufficient. Moreover, despite the notion that relational proximity can reduce the sense of distance, our research contributes to literature by demonstrating that employees still experience a sense of exclusion and disconnection from their physically present colleagues.

Furthermore, our research contributes with a novel viewpoint on virtual communication. While prior research has highlighted the disadvantages of communication in the virtual workspace, such as slowness and absence (Alsharo, Gregg, & Ramirez, 2017), our findings indicate that communication is experienced as frequent and enhanced in the virtual workspace. Our research

demonstrates that the use of ICTs, as Microsoft Teams has evolved into an integrated communication tool that enables the continuation of work relationships across workspaces. Concurrently, new employee behavior is characterized by a preference for virtual communication over locating one another in the physical workspace. Thus, our research provides empirical support for Kingma's (2019) assertion that spatial and technological integration of hybrid workspaces generates new work practices. Our research introduces an additional perspective on the challenges arising from the increased frequency of virtual communication in the hybrid workspace. We reveal that virtual meetings have become the new norm for interactions, indicating that the meeting itself and the flexibility afforded by hybrid work in terms of location take precedence over face-to-face communication and interaction.

6.3 Practical Implications

Given that hybrid work is widely regarded as the future of work (Grzegorczyk et al., 2021; Smite et al., 2023a), our research offers valuable insights for organizations undergoing the transition to a hybrid workspace model. Our findings suggest that the hybrid workspace fosters distinct perceptions of work within each respective workspace. Additionally, individuals attribute subjective significance to the different workspaces and organize their work around it. This finding holds immense value for organizations and managers, as it highlights the necessity of adapting to accommodate the distinct requirements of individuals and the organization in order to effectively meet their needs. By recognizing that the hybrid workspace allows employees to allocate their work across different workspaces according to their needs, organizations can leverage this knowledge to optimize their workspaces and better support employee work, ultimately maximizing efficiency and productivity.

Furthermore, our research highlights that the hybrid workspace brings about complexities that impact work practices, especially meetings. Our findings shed light on how the distinct structure of hybrid meetings, which involve both virtual and physically present employees, affects individuals' experiences of proximity and distance, whereas a sense of distance potentially leads to feelings of exclusion. For organizations that work hybridly, hybrid meetings may be a big part of how to meet, as evident in our research. Therefore, companies can seek to improve new ways

of how to collaborate and foster inclusion in these types of meetings. Considering that the feeling of proximity in shared space, as a hybrid meeting, is essential for job performance and employee relationships (Ruiller et al., 2019), makes this practical implication significant. Companies can also seek to raise employee awareness and develop new meeting practices to ensure that both virtual and physically present meeting participants are included.

Additionally, recognizing that virtual communication has emerged as the primary mode of interaction among employees in the hybrid workspace, and significantly alter the experience of work, enhances the understanding of the critical role of ICTs. This awareness is essential for organizations as it can help sustain relationships across spatial dynamics. However, it is encouraged for organizations to also recognize the challenge posed by the prevalence of communication through ICTs. During the pandemic COVID-19 many remote workers experienced digital fatigue due to the increase of virtual meetings (Hussain, Mirza & Hassan, 2020). Our research emphasizes that this is still prevalent post pandemic, and its potential for every interaction becoming a virtual meeting. Therefore, depending on the needs of the organization, it can be beneficial to strike a balance between face-to-face meetings and virtual meetings.

6.4 Limitations

While the findings of this case study provide valuable insights into the phenomenon of hybrid workspaces, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One limitation with our research relates to the lack of generalizability of our findings, primarily stemming from a small sample size derived from a single case study. Since our findings are based solely on the experiences of fourteen interviewees, it is conceivable that different outcomes would emerge if data were collected from a different case or with different methods. Moreover, the use of interpretative research traditions entails that the empirical data are subject to interpretation by the researchers themselves. However, as outlined in chapter 3, both researchers carefully reviewed the material to mitigate the potential influence of individual opinions or values on the research.

Furthermore, our sample encompasses employees from diverse departments and hierarchical levels, encompassing a range of work types. The influence of symbolic interactionism in our research brings attention to the possibility that our findings could have differed if the interviews had been conducted with different employees within the same case, or a specific department. Nonetheless, our aim was to ensure a comprehensive representation of employees, enabling us to explore variations and capture different subjective meanings within our research.

Additionally, work in the hybrid workspace is highly new for many organizations, as in our case company, which means that employees and organizations are still adapting to this new way of working. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences by the participants in our research are not fixed and may evolve as they become more familiar with the hybrid workspace. However, our findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how work is currently experienced in this specific case.

6.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Our research presents intriguing findings that hold significance in both theoretical and practical contexts regarding the impact of the hybrid workspace on experiences of work. Nevertheless, due to the growing prevalence of hybrid work in the aftermath of the pandemic COVID-19, there is a need for additional studies to deepen our understanding of this emerging and flexible work arrangement. Our research contributes to an understanding of the hybrid workspace by revealing that the experience of work is closely tied to the workspace and influenced by the unique meanings attributed to each workspace. Considering the limitations of our research, future studies can build upon our findings by conducting a multiple case study. Employing a multiple case study may assist to determine whether our findings are generalizable beyond specific organizations or industries (Yin, 2009). Additionally, conducting longitudinal case studies can provide insights into the impact of time-related factors and contextual elements on participants' experiences (Blomkvist, Lindell & Hallin, 2018).

Furthermore, future research could delve into the implications of increasing virtual communication within the hybrid workspace. Our findings highlight improved communication

but also indicate potential challenges in hybrid meetings, such as feelings of exclusion and distance. Consequently, it is valuable for future research to examine how the rise of virtual communication through ICTs affects work dynamics. An ethnographic study would be particularly useful in exploring the potential impact of increased virtual work on individuals, meeting outcomes, employee relationships, and collaboration.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview guide

The interview guide contains examples of questions that were asked to the interviewees. However, this guide was flexible in regards to the semi-structured nature of the interviews. As new knowledge emerged, the interview guide was simultaneously updated. The general interview guide with examples of questions is presented below.

Introduction

1. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do at HybridCo?
    a. Your position
    b. Your team
    c. How long have you been working at HybridCo?
2. How many days do you work at the office vs at home/other location?
    a. How do you experience the balance?
    b. Is it the same for everyone?
3. What is your understanding of hybrid work?

Employee preferences

4. What is important for you when working hybridly? Why?
5. Do you experience any challenges when working hybridly? Why?
6. Do you experience anything positive with working hybrid? Why?

Space

7. How do you work within a hybrid workspace? Could you exemplify this?
8. How has your workplace changed and adapted to the hybrid workplace? How do you experience those changes and adaptations?
9. What does the physical office mean to you? Any spaces that are important for you and your work?

10. How do you experience working in the virtual workspace?

11. How do you perceive the distance between yourself and colleagues? Do you feel close or distant?

Interpersonal relationships and communication

12. How do you maintain good relationships when you are working hybridly? What do you find important?
    a. With your team (if applicable)
    b. With your manager
    c. Other colleagues

13. How do you experience to:
    a. Collaborate
    b. Communicate

    in the hybrid workspace? Important practices, tools, spaces? Anything challenging?

Final question to all interviewees

Is there anything else you wish to express regarding your experience of hybrid work at HybridCo, that you did not have the opportunity to during the interview?