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Adopting a Purposeful Approach to Hybrid Working

integrating notions of place, space and time

Abstract

Hybrid working is a prevalent way of working, representing a significant change for public sector organisations. The change management literature brings together the notions of place and space; however, little research on hybrid working has used this framing. In this article, we extend this framing to include time, arguing that key to hybrid working effectiveness is the adoption of a purposeful approach to integrating place, space and time. This article has the potential to assist public sector human resource practitioners, managers, employees and policymakers as they navigate their way through these changing times.

Keywords hybrid working, public sector, change management, working from home, telecommuting, temporal flexibility

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Hybrid working is here to stay. It involves employees splitting their time between working from home (or remotely) and at employer sites (Gibson et al., 2023; Halford, 2005). The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in many Western organisations, including public sector organisations, moving to widespread working from home (Berry, Trochmann and Millesen, 2022; Fischer et al., 2023). We now see the continuation of working from home in the form of hybrid working. It is so prevalent as to be considered the 'new normal' (Babapour Chafi, Hultberg and Bozic Yams, 2021; Choudhury et al., 2022; Hamer, Waddon and Guilfoyle, 2022; Llave et al., 2022).

Many organisations are currently in a transition phase of implementing and embedding hybrid working (Raghavan, Demircioglu and Orazgaliyev, 2021). While the initial crisis of the pandemic has passed, establishing hybrid working arrangements still represents a significant organisational change that continues to require adaptability. The change management

literature brings together the notions of place and space and examines their effect on organisational life; specifically, how organisations are disrupted and consequently change, adapt and evolve (Wright et al., 2023). However, little research on hybrid working has explicitly used this framing. We note studies in adjacent areas: feminist geographers have examined place in the context of working from home (Orman, McGuirk and Warren, 2023); researchers have considered space in relation to co-working spaces (see, for example, Bouncken, Kraus and Martínez-Pérez, 2020) and virtual spaces (see, for example, Petani and Mengis, 2021). Our article goes some way towards filling this gap.

Additionally, while there is extensive literature on remote working and working from home, fewer researchers have focused on the public sector since the onset of the pandemic (those who have done so include Buick et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2023, Palumbo, 2020; Schuster et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2023; Williamson, Colley and Foley, 2022). Research on how hybrid working is undertaken in the public sector is even more scant. Public sector organisations, therefore, have limited academic research to draw upon as they design and implement hybrid working. We aim to rectify this situation by using the framing of place and space, as well as time, which is a key component of hybrid working, to identify main considerations for public sector organisations embedding hybrid working. Our study has wide applicability, as one study found that 50% of public servants – which included frontline workers – could work from home for at least two days a week (NSW Innovation and Productivity Council, 2020).

We provide an overview of the emerging literature on hybrid working, noting that the paucity of research on hybrid working in the public sector means we are unable to solely focus on public sector research. However, we draw out insights which are relevant to the public sector. Additionally, we include findings from two of our most recent projects examining flexible, and hybrid, working in the public sector in Australia (Buick et al., 2022; Williamson and Colley, 2022). These studies have

… … adopting a purposeful approach to place [is] focused on optimising the benefits of working both from home and from employers' sites. It involves the careful consideration of the reasons for working in different locations

focused on the perceptions of managers and employees, which is the lens we adopt in this article. We argue that key to effectiveness is the adoption of a purposeful approach by managers, teams and individuals to integrating place, space and time. We use this framing as these elements are inextricably linked, with this approach useful to highlight the synergies and tensions inherent within hybrid working. We aim to assist public sector human resource practitioners, managers, employees and policymakers as they navigate their way through these changing times.

Place
'Place' focuses on *where* employees work, with locations typically including working from home and employers' sites. Hybrid working involves employees operating from both locations, making decisions about how much time is spent in each.

Examining working at home first, recent research highlights that decisions to work from this location are shaped by the type of work undertaken by employees, with Working from home enabling employees to focus on tasks that require deep concentration (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022). This is particularly important for those engaged in knowledge-based work or when working on complex aspects of a project or task (Buick et al., 2022).

This deep focus and fewer interruptions results in increased productivity (Bloom, Han and Liang, 2023; Williamson and Colley, 2022; Williamson et al., 2023). Working from home is also reported to aid work–life balance (Williamson and Colley, 2022) and, in turn, enhance employee well-being (Vyas, 2022). However, challenges associated with working in a home environment include professional and social isolation (Babapour Chafi, Hultberg and Bozic Yams, 2021) and digital exhaustion (Microsoft, 2021). For some employees, working from home is associated with an increase in work–life conflict due to blurred lines between work and leisure (Palumbo et al., 2022; Vyas, 2022). It also presents limitations to the development and maintenance of quality relationships in the workplace, with concerns about the impact of sustained working from home on organisational climate and cultures (Hilberath et al., 2020). Therefore, home as a place of work has both positive and negative aspects.

Conversely, working from employers' sites is valued by those working in collaborative projects, who have high levels of task interdependence and a need to solve complex problems. These activities all benefit from face-to-face communication (Buick et al., 2022). Research shows that employees in consultancy and advisory roles do not feel the need to have their own workstation, as their job roles require them to be outside the office often. They instead value workspaces that enable collaboration (Skogland, 2017), such as employer sites. Working from the office is also considered central to strengthening team cultures (Gallagher, 2021; Hirsch, 2023), including in the public sector (Babapour Chafi, Hultberg and Bozic Yams, 2021). It is also considered important for the effective onboarding of new employees and

strengthening relationships and connections within teams or groups (Buick et al., 2022). Some managers also prefer their team to work from the office due to the perception that face-to-face engagement improves motivation and effective performance management (Gratton, 2021; Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023). Face-to-face interactions also aid employee well-being, due to facilitating improved communication and relationship quality (Beckel and Fisher, 2022; Charalampous, Grant and Tramontano, 2022; Simone, Geiser and Lockhar, 2019).

Reasons for office-based working are therefore varied, covering task/project, motivation, performance, well-being and relational factors. However, the challenges of working in office environments are well-known, and include frequent interruptions and distractions, particularly in open-plan workplaces (Puranik, Koopmann and Vough, 2020; Salvadori, Hindmarsh and Heath, 2023), which can impede both employee productivity and well-being. In a Covid-normal context, employee health and safety concerns also present additional challenges for use of open-plan office space (Samani and Alavi, 2020; Spicer, 2020).

The increased use of hybrid working has exposed tensions in working preferences and expectations of employees and senior managers regarding place (Gratton, 2021; Hirsch, 2023; Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023; Pianese, Errichiello and Da Cunha, 2023). For example, employees prefer to work from home two to three days per week, whereas senior managers would prefer employees to work from the office at least three days per week (Aksoy et al., 2023; Hirsch, 2023; Williamson and Colley, 2022). Our research suggests this may be, at least partly, due to employees focusing on the benefits of working from home to them individually, whereas senior managers focus on the implications for team and organisational functioning. These tensions are also underpinned by the perception that the different locations are opposing, rather than complementary. They focus on whether employees work from home or the office, rather than considering the benefits of working from both locations.

> ... a purposeful approach to space ... involves a shift from employers focusing on where people work to creating an optimal space in which employees can deliver their work outcomes

Our research suggests that these tensions can be resolved through adopting a purposeful approach to place, focused on optimising the benefits of working both from home and from employers' sites. It involves the careful consideration of the reasons for working in different locations, including task requirements (including level of task interdependence), team requirements, and what activities are needed to maintain a positive and supportive work environment and quality relationships. It also involves conversations among team members (and managers) regarding when task and team goals could be aided by face-to-face interactions, enabling high performance at the team level. Finally, it entails attaching primacy and value to maintaining team cultures, identifying ways to ensure desired behaviours are consistently encouraged and reinforced. Once this is established, such an approach involves utilising a combination of locations to ensure that individual and team outcomes are achieved. This includes managers, teams and individuals adopting a coordinated approach to office-based working, ensuring that employees who need to work together attend the office at the same time. However, this needs to work in conjunction with 'space' to ensure that benefits are optimised.

Space

Space focuses on how the various spaces involved in hybrid working are used. These spaces include both the physical workspace (office and home-based) and the virtual workspace in which work is conducted. This is due to hybrid working allowing employees the flexibility to work both from conventional office spaces and remotely, utilising digital technologies. Consideration of space recognises that the benefits gained through hybrid working are largely shaped by how these spaces are configured.

First, we examine the space when working from home. Physical aspects include the configuration and use of space within home offices and at employers' sites. Working from home is valued as employees have more control over their home work environment (Gratton, 2021; Taylor et al., 2022). This control includes arranging work equipment to facilitate comfort and accessibility, and controlling noise levels within the environment, thereby increasing well-being and productivity due to reducing interruptions and distractions. This may be why older workers prefer to work from home, as research suggests this demographic group prefers more privacy and quiet work environments (Hoendervanger et al., 2018; Leesman, 2017; van den Berg et al., 2020). It is also a core reason why employees with sensory sensitivities and disabilities prefer to work from home (Williamson et al., 2023).

However, research conducted during Covid-19 lockdowns highlighted how the blending of work and personal spaces at home heightened interruptions and worsened work–life balance (Craig and Churchill, 2021; Dockery and Bawa, 2020). In addition, unavailability of ergonomic work equipment and a dedicated work area, the risk of overwork, and psychosocial problems, such as sleeping disorders and social isolation, were highlighted as some of the main hazards of working from home

during the pandemic (Buomprisco et al., 2021).

Second, we consider space and employers' premises. Physical aspects of employer sites primarily concern workspace design. Organisations have experimented with different workspace designs, primarily focused on hot-desking, activity-based working where employees do not have assigned workstations but instead share office spaces optimised for different types of activities (Hoendervanger et al., 2019), and traditional office environments (Eismann et al., 2022; Migliore, Ceinar and Tagliaro, 2021).

Key debates regarding space concern whether hot-desking and activity-based working environments are more efficient and effective than traditional office set-ups. They have been popular due to being more cost effective (Van Der Voordt, 2004) and because they can facilitate collaboration and interactions (Eismann et al., 2022). However, key challenges of hot-desking and activity-based working are frequent interruptions and noise (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022), due to being open-plan. The distractions and lack of privacy in office spaces impose additional demands on employees, resulting in them spending extra energy, cognitive resources and time to complete work, thereby impeding job satisfaction, health and well-being (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2020; Hodzic et al., 2021; van den Berg et al., 2020).

Our research highlights that negative perceptions of activity-based working emerge for various reasons. These include employees not having their own workstations, associated disruptions caused by needing to unpack and re-pack belongings each day, being restricted to certain spaces, and the configuration of the physical workspace (Buick et al., 2022). Our research also highlights that workspace design and configuration shapes experiences and perceptions of the attractiveness of employer sites. We also found that interruptions and noise are most disruptive when collaborative and social spaces are not enclosed, and/or there are insufficient quiet spaces to work from. This contributes to perceptions that employees are unable to undertake focused work from the office (ibid.). This is

… virtual space, which bridges both home and employers' sites … enable interactions, collaboration and knowledge sharing

particularly important due to the recent focus on how employees might be 'attracted back to the office' (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022, p.2).

Research explores how office workspace design characteristics influence employee choices regarding space (Ansio, Käpykangas and Houni, 2020; Arundell et al., 2018; Engelen et al., 2019). However, a deeper understanding of the differences in spatial experiences is needed to determine the impact of these experiences on employees and organisations (Wright et al., 2023). This means that there are a range of factors requiring consideration, and that the current emphasis on making offices more sociable, to entice workers back (Capossela, 2022), may be oversimplified. A nuanced approach to determining where work is best performed would be beneficial for both organisations and employees.

Finally, we consider virtual space, which bridges both home and the employer's site. While the physical workspace remains relevant for employees who choose to work at employers' premises, the virtual space offers opportunities to employees (Halford, 2005). The virtual space encompasses virtual platforms and online communication tools (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams). The effective utilisation of the virtual environment relies heavily on access to resources, including adequate internet connectivity, and effective digital literacy skills. As employees return to

offices after pandemic lockdowns, the use of virtual space has increased. One study has found that online messages increased by up to 20% when employees worked from home, and 10% even on the days when employees worked from their employer's site (Bloom, Han and Liang, 2023). This suggests that even as employees work side by side in an office, they are increasingly preferring virtual communications.

Our research highlights how these platforms and tools enable interactions (formal and informal), collaboration and knowledge sharing among employees who are geographically dispersed. Teams who reported high levels of connectivity and engagement used these platforms and tools frequently for a range of purposes. This included more informal exchanges, including sharing GIFs in chat rooms and discussing social matters, and more formal exchanges of information for work purposes. Such usage can enhance accessibility and inclusivity of employees from diverse groups (e.g., people with disabilities), mitigate the risk of social isolation when working from home and remotely, and help maintain positive team climates (Buick et al., 2022). However, utilising the virtual space presents challenges for managers as it constrains their ability to observe employee behaviours and track team performance (see Downes, Daellenbach and Donnelly, 2023).

Further, research highlights that some teams may find virtual collaboration more effective than in-person collaboration, meaning that a working from home, deep thinking/working in the office, communicative-based work binary is too simplistic (Pozen and Samuel, 2021). Our research also found, however, that some employees lack these resources and skills, thus posing risks for inclusion and ability to participate in team interactions online. This finding supports our argument for a purposeful approach to space, considering both physical (employer sites, home-based offices) and virtual spaces. This involves a shift from employers focusing on where people work to creating an optimal space in which employees can deliver their work outcomes (Falkman, 2021; Scottish Futures Trust, 2021), while facilitating positive

work environments and employee well-being.

Focusing on optimal workspace involves purposeful workspace design and the utilisation of all three spaces in hybrid working. In home-based offices, purposeful workspace design requires employees to have control over their work environment. This includes the ability to control noise levels and the number and type of interruptions experienced, as well as having the resources to set up their workspaces in an ergonomically safe way. In employer sites, this includes configuring space to foster serendipitous interactions, collaborative working and social interactions, thus ensuring that the space supports team and organisational-level productivity. It also includes configuring space in a way that facilitates acoustic and visual privacy, enabling focused work and private conversations. This means that building design considerations should include practical interior design elements, such as locating quiet zones away from social zones (Candido et al., 2021), and allowing employees the flexibility to choose their workspace for collaboration with colleagues. This enables employees to feel part of a team and not isolated.

Purposeful design is important due to recent research showing that employees who prefer to work from home for focused tasks also prefer to do communicative work in the office (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022). This suggests that employees do want to work from both their homes and the office; however, they also need workspaces that enable communication and collaboration, as well as focused work. When space is not managed in a purposeful way, employees can be deeply resistant to office attendance and critical of requirements to work from the employers' premises (Colenberg et al., 2021). Ultimately, it acts as a deterrent to working from employers' premises, with a strong preference to solely work from home; this has the potential to erode the quality of team dynamics and relationships. Virtual spaces can bridge the work/office divide and ameliorate any resistance. They can support collaboration and enhance connectivity and inclusivity of employees. They can also replicate ad hoc queries and discussions between team members

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through chat functionality, and availability for such interactions can be easily displayed on several common virtual platforms.

Time

Hybrid working enables employees to work to a different conception of time. The Industrial Revolution quantified time as people moved to cities to work. Rather than working to complete tasks, workers became employees and worked to linear conceptions of time. This rigid and static conception of time is known as 'time discipline', revolving around standard working hours in a standard week (Lee and Liebenau, 2002). Widespread working from home – and other forms of temporal flexibility – disrupt this time discipline. This is due to less emphasis being placed on *when* employees work than on what they are achieving (Buick et al., 2022).

Research highlights that providing employees with temporal flexibility and autonomy over time can reduce work/life conflict, and improve employee well-being (Gonsalves, 2020). It can also enable productivity gains through enabling individuals to undertake work aligned with their circadian rhythms (Martin, 2023). The increased use of temporal flexibility has led to traditional conceptions of time being disrupted, even as organisations and managers attempt to impose rigid working hours to alleviate concerns that employees working flexibly will be less productive (Gratton, 2021; Kotera and Correa Vione, 2020; Lee and Liebenau, 2002).

Key debates have been around whether the traditional focus on chronological time around specific schedules (e.g., 9–5) is helpful or whether it is useful to instead think about what needs to happen in synchronous ways and what can take place asynchronously (Gratton, 2021). Since the onset of the pandemic, technological improvements have enabled both synchronous and asynchronous working. Teams have become more comfortable working hybridly, and asynchronous working has increased (Gallagher, 2021; Whillans, Perlow and Turek, 2021). While this is beneficial, our research highlights the need for planned synchronous work, both in-person and virtual. Practitioner research also emphasises the need for effective planning of asynchronous work, to ensure workflow and to manage group input (Teevan et al., 2022). Additionally, asynchronous collaborative working can increase inclusion, giving all team members the opportunity to participate; however, it can also be more time-consuming due to increased levels of consultation (Whillans, Perlow and Turek, 2021).

Another key debate concerns whether employees should be required to spend a minimum amount of time working from their employer's site. Some organisations, notably Twitter, Amazon, Zoom, Disney and the Commonwealth Bank in Australia (Mahdawi, 2023; Nolan, 2022), are that mandating employees return to the office for at least part of the week. In research conducted by Williamson, 40% of 5,000 survey respondents stated that their organisation imposed a cap on the number

of days employees could work from home. The most common cap was two days a week at home (Williamson and Colley, 2022). These mandates appear to be arbitrary and not supported by any evidence. Furthermore, they can result in backlash from employees (Castrillon, 2023) and are not the most effective way to encourage in-person communication and collaboration. Therefore, ongoing debates regarding the amount of time that employees should work in the office (see, for example, Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022; Barrero, Bloom and Davis, 2021; Hedges, 2023) may become irrelevant, as hybrid working enables time for concentration, thus aiding productivity, *and* for team-based communication.

Our research suggests that a purposeful approach to time is needed for effective hybrid working. Managers, teams and individuals all have a role to play in adopting this approach. Managers need to veer away from the traditional focus on core business hours and towards a more fluid and dynamic focus on time. Teams need to openly and frequently communicate about team priorities and activities, agreeing on what activities require them to work synchronously, either virtually or in person, and adopt a coordinated approach to synchronous working (e.g., attending the office at the same time). This can enable a central focus on team goals and productivity, clarifying what is required for high performance at the team level, and adopting an outcomes focus, rather than just measuring outputs. This is particularly important in contexts where work outputs are not easily measured, where managers require a combination of control measures to ensure that productivity is maintained. It also enables managers to monitor the attitudes of employees working remotely, which is important for maintaining performance (see Downes, Daellenbach and Donnelly, 2023).

Teams also need to agree on what activities and tasks can be done asynchronously. This approach also involves providing employees with sufficient autonomy and control to determine how to configure their working day in order to undertake asynchronous activities in a way that optimises their productivity and well-being. The effective

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implementation of a purposeful approach to time relies on mutuality and negotiation, with discussions centering on how to meet organisational, team and employee needs.

Discussion and conclusions

The change management literature has brought together the notions of place and space and has examined their effect on organisational life (Wright et al., 2023). We have used and extended this framing to understand hybrid working by incorporating notions of time. We contend that hybrid working requires
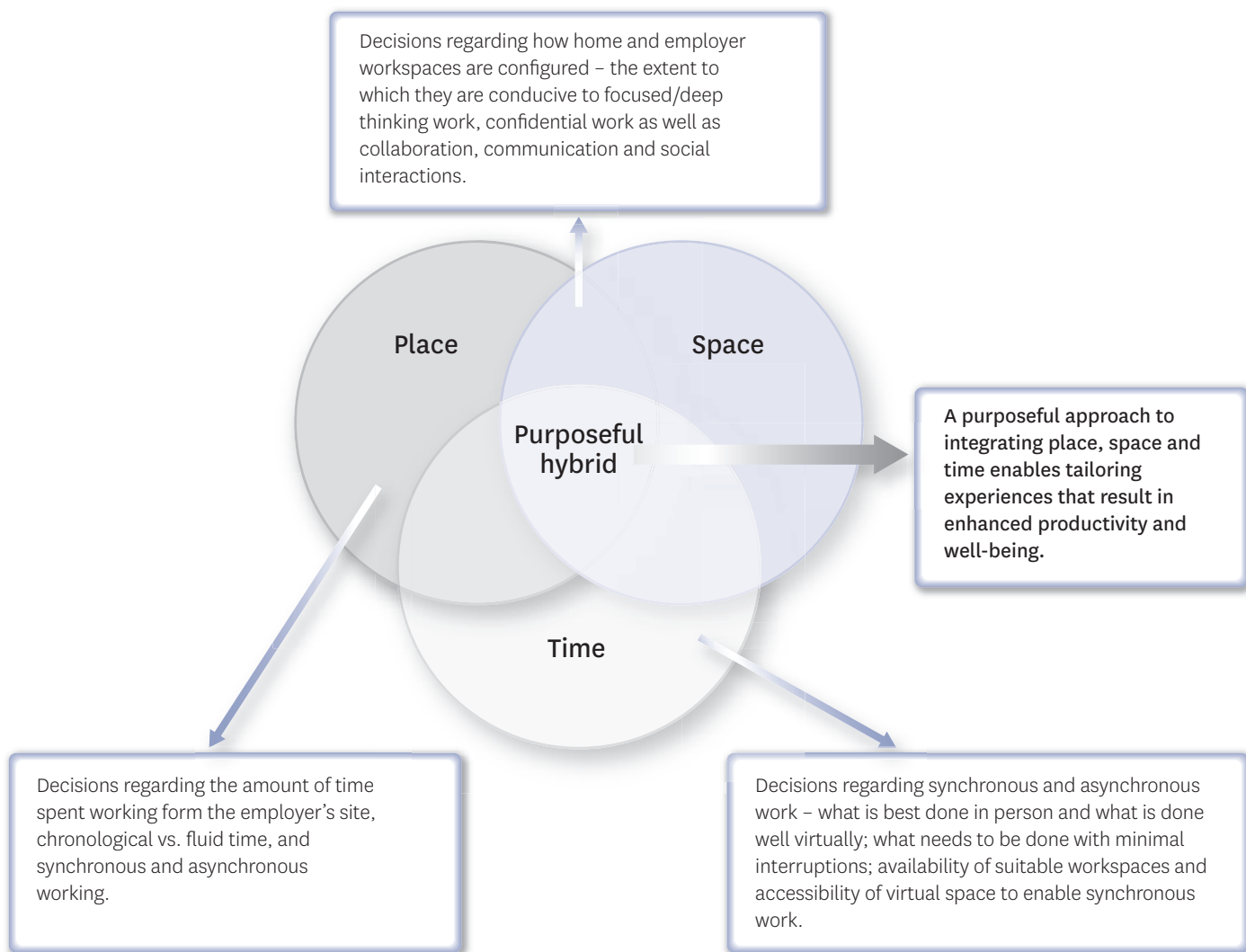
a paradigmatic change in the previous ways of working, where the workplace encompasses not only the employer's site but also the employees' homes and other locations; the workspace is not confined to the employer's office space but also includes the home and virtual spaces; and time includes not only rigid time discipline, but also fluid time.

We have highlighted that existing debates on hybrid working are often narrow and simplistic. They adopt binary arguments with preferences of working either from employer sites or home and working either to rigid time or fluidly. What is often overlooked is that when managed well, hybrid working involves the utilisation of all spaces, physical (employer, remote) and virtual. Hybrid working also enables more fluid notions of time, particularly through thinking about what activities need to happen in synchronous ways and what can take place asynchronously (Cazaly, 2022; Gratton, 2021). As such, we propose that the notions of place, space and time inevitably overlap when working hybridly (see Figure 1).

We argue that adopting a purposeful approach to integrating place, space and time within hybrid work models enables the tailoring of work experiences that foster enhanced productivity at both the individual and team levels, with benefits experienced at the organisational level. It has the potential to enhance individual, team and, consequently, organisational productivity through centring the need for optimal work environments, considering how employer sites can be designed to support collaboration, communication and social interactions while also providing quiet spaces for focused and confidential working. It also involves consideration of how to optimise virtual spaces for team meetings and interactions, ensuring that collaboration is accessible to all (GitLab, 2023). Doing so shapes decisions regarding place and time in a more nuanced way, moving away from the binary portrayals that have dominated discourse to date.

Similarly, purposefully integrating place, space and time in hybrid work models has the potential to optimise employee well-being. It does this through emphasising the need for employees to work across multiple locations, engaging

Figure 1: Overlaps between place, space and time in hybrid working

Decisions regarding how home and employer workspaces are configured – the extent to which they are conducive to focused/deep thinking work, confidential work as well as collaboration, communication and social interactions.

Place

Space

Purposeful hybrid

A purposeful approach to integrating place, space and time enables tailoring experiences that result in enhanced productivity and well-being.

Time

Decisions regarding the amount of time spent working form the employer's site, chronological vs. fluid time, and synchronous and asynchronous working.

Decisions regarding synchronous and asynchronous work – what is best done in person and what is done well virtually; what needs to be done with minimal interruptions; availability of suitable workspaces and accessibility of virtual space to enable synchronous work.

in both solitary, focused work and team-based working and activities (in person and virtually). This mitigates feelings of isolation and fosters a more balanced and fulfilling work experience. It also centres the need to provide employees with the autonomy to shape their work, having the freedom to choose the place to work from and creating workspaces aligned with individual needs. Such measures mitigate the stressors associated with rigid office environments and contribute positively to employee well-being. Further, the autonomy to choose the 'time' of work that hybrid working permits also has significant influences on employee well-being (Wang et al., 2021). Free from the constraints of fixed schedules, employees can align their work hours with their personal

commitments, enhancing their overall work–life balance. This, along with the reduced stress of commuting, enables more flexibility to manage work and personal lives, thereby contributing to heightened well-being.

Organisations, including public sector organisations, would benefit from recognising the nuances in hybrid working. As we have shown, hybrid working involves much more than working in two (or more) locations. The binary framing of hybrid working which has dominated debates and practices obscures the interstices and overlaps between home and work. Using a framing of place, space and time reveals that where, how and when work is conducted are all related, yet each has specific factors requiring consideration.

Additionally, academic theorising around the intersections of space, place and time could be further developed. There is still much work for practitioners, human resource professionals, policymakers and academics to do to fully realise the benefits of hybrid working, particularly to ensure that this form of working is available for a wide range of public service roles. We acknowledge that the feasibility of hybrid working and how it is implemented depends on the context and the type of work undertaken. However, we also argue that the emergence of novel technologies presents immense opportunity for public sector organisations to minimise the contextual restrictions for implementing hybrid working.

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