

# **Learning network approach to enhancing corporate hybrid work models**

**Meeting the challenges of community,  
learning and innovation**

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## Abstract

This paper presents the learning network approach adopted by the CHILL research project (2025–2028) jointly conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and Turku School of Economics, which aims to enhance corporate hybrid work models. Skilfully managed and organized, hybrid work includes a wide range of opportunities for improving the performance of company operations whilst also improving well-being at work. However, the evaluation of the functionality of different models and their organizational prerequisites requires research-based knowledge to support it. A learning network approach based on the sharing of knowledge between researchers and several work organizations offers a forum for mutual learning between researchers and practitioners as well as the scaling up of new innovative solutions in hybrid work.

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# 1 Introduction

This is a conceptual paper that examines how the productivity potential of hybrid work can be promoted as based on joint learning between researchers and a broad group of companies. The paper uses the concept of a *learning network* as a context for joint learning. The paper has been prepared as part of the CHILL research project implemented by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and Turku School of Economics, 2025–2028.<sup>1</sup> The project is funded by Business Finland.

The paper does not discuss the research questions of the CHILL project, or the methods used in data collection in more detail. *The focus is on describing the nature of the research project as a learning network and the opportunities and challenges associated with the same.*

*Chapter 2* discusses the productivity potential of hybrid work and the challenges of communality, learning and innovation that it entails. *Chapter 3* examines the concept of a learning network and the possibilities of learning network-based activities in the development of hybrid work models in companies. *Chapter 4* contains a summary and conclusions.

## 2 Hybrid work: an overview of opportunities and challenges

### 2.1 Understanding the communal nature of innovation

The spread of remote work was slow in many companies for a long time, due to management concerns that extensive remote work would lead to a decline in work morale. The sudden shift to enforced working from home during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic largely proved this concern to be unfounded. In many European and US companies, the large-scale transition to remote work led to a boost in productivity, at least in the short term and under the specific circumstances of the pandemic (Barreto et al. 2021; Van Loo et al. 2021). As hybrid work, where employees spend some of their time working remotely and some working on the employer's premises, has become an established practice in many companies after the pandemic, a new concern for management has emerged regarding the potential negative effects of hybrid work on the company's *long-term* capabilities for organizational learning, innovation and business renewal. Companies' policies in response to this concern have ranged from a complete return to the office (RTO) to self-directed hybrid work, where employees or teams are still free to decide their daily places of work.

The debate over the scope and permissibility of remote work has largely overshadowed the more fundamental question for companies about the business development potentials of the increasingly technology-mediated nature of human encounters at work, a trend boosted by the pandemic. This trend, which touches upon virtually all modern companies, contains many new *opportunities* for them to re-organize their operational processes, improve their talent acquisition, and enhance their knowledge creation. Our starting point here is that by further developing hybrid forms of working and skilfully seizing and utilizing the diversifying options for human encounters at work enabled by

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation CHILL comes from the words Communality, Hybrid work, Innovation, Learning and Leadership.

new digital technologies, companies can significantly improve their innovation and business performance. The capability for innovation has become an increasingly important competitive factor for companies in a business environment, where changes that companies are facing are more sudden, more unpredictable, more complex, and more uncontrollable (Baldwin 2019).

According to the statistically representative MEADOW employer survey conducted among Finnish 10+ companies (N=1,106) in 2021 and 2022, the innovation performance of companies (i.e. their ability to produce product and service innovations) in such a volatile environment is highly dependent on, in addition to a company's level of digital sophistication, its ability to utilize external networks and the knowledge derived from customer involvement and broad employee participation in innovation processes (Alasoini & Selander 2023). The synergistic effect of these factors concerned both innovations that were new to the market and innovations that were new only for the company, albeit stronger in the first case. The results highlight the *communal* nature of innovation and the fact that organizations evolve based on mutual interaction between different groups of actors. The development of digital technologies opens new ways for companies to develop their innovation-supporting forms of both internal and external interaction.

## 2.2 Communicating virtually

Instant messaging tools, online meeting applications, and electronic workspaces and collaboration platforms have now become effective tools at work for the exchange and spread of information that is in explicit form. The rapid and flexible transition to remote work after the outbreak of COVID-19 would not have been possible in many organizations without the fast development of such interactive technologies in recent years. Such widely used applications can be considered examples of 'lightly immersive' technologies in which people can perceive the virtual stimuli as contextually relevant but still more or less artificial (i.e. recognize that the stimuli are technology-mediated). In the future, the development of 'more deeply immersive' technologies, such as virtual (VR), augmented (AR), mixed and expanded reality or various forms of the metaverse, open new possibilities also for forms of interaction and fully-fledged telepresence in which the virtual stimuli are perceived as both contextually relevant and realistic. Immersion can manifest itself in different forms, such as sensory-motoric, cognitive, emotional or spatial (Björk & Holopainen 2004). Telepresence, in turn, can act as an accelerator for telemigration, i.e. the possibility to transfer the location of team and organization members and the implementation of many of a company's work tasks around the Globe, utilizing 5G mobile networks, AI, robotics and VR/AR (Baldwin 2019).

A more complex issue than the transmission of information in explicit form in technology-mediated human encounters, partly regardless of the degree of the immersive capacity of the technology, is the transmission of tacit forms of knowledge. The term tacit knowledge, attributed to Polanyi (1966), refers to knowledge that is difficult to extract or articulate and thus to fully codify. Early knowledge management literature, such as the well-known Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) model, assumes that knowledge conversion between explicit and tacit forms of knowledge is possible, but a significant proportion of tacit knowledge is only bodily transferrable, requiring face-to-face encounters.

This rather straightforward view of early knowledge management literature has since been questioned as new theoretical perspectives have taken over the field. It has been argued that with the 'domestication' of technologies, people no longer simply 'use' digital technologies; rather, they

increasingly 'live with' them, which has largely bridged the gap in the quality of communication between face-to-face and online encounters (Faraj et al. 2016). It has also been claimed that as the Internet has become an increasingly dominant information space for social action and exchange, an increasing proportion of the transition of tacit knowledge is bound now to take place online (Boes et al. 2017). Moreover, with the evolvement of new 'more deeply immersive' technologies, it is possible to foster people's experience of being present, connected and involved in collaborative processes and thus to overcome many of the limitations inherent in previous applications with regard to the transmission of tacit knowledge in online encounters (McVeigh-Schultz & Isbister 2022). This, in turn, opens new possibilities to rethink which activities (including also those with high levels of social interaction) can be carried out online, thereby increasing flexibility and efficiency in work and organization design.

However, many works leaning on behavioural and neuroscience literature argue that many aspects of online encounters inherently contradict what is considered natural for human interaction. Despite 'technology domestication' and humans' ability to partially adapt to the lower degrees of naturalness in online encounters, the simultaneous lack and overload of information in long and repeated computer-mediated communication is prone to increase communication ambiguity, cognitive effort, fatigue and stress potential (Riedl 2021). According to research on virtual teams, online interaction is also typically more formal than interaction in face-to-face meetings, leaving less opportunity for informal and unintentional information exchanges and the facilitation of trust (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz 2020), all important conditions for the successful transmission of tacit knowledge.

Leonardi and his associates (2024) make a useful distinction by pointing out that physical distance inherent in working remotely can manifest in various forms. The authors distinguish four forms of distance people experience. They call them *psychological* distance (based on the cognitive, affective or social separation between oneself and other), *temporal* distance (based on separation in time), *technological* distance (based on discrepancies in technology-related features and practices of using technology) and *structural* distance (based on formal or informal organizational or administrative misalignments). In real life, the four forms are often intertwined, but their analytical separation can broaden our understanding on the challenge of remoteness and communicating virtually from both the management and worker perspectives.

## 2.3 Rethinking forms of working

The issue whether and to what extent it is possible to overcome hindrances in the transmission of tacit forms of knowledge whilst increasingly encountering people remotely and online instead of face to face in the context of hybrid modes of working, tickles our intellectual curiosity in the CHILL project. Hybridity brings its own ingredients to the discussion about the challenges, as, in terms of communication and trust building, hybrid work, in which employees alternate between working onsite and remotely in idiosyncratic temporal rhythms, is a new kind of social phenomenon, and hybrid teamwork is a genuinely new and unique organizational form compared to both co-located and virtual teamwork due to its temporal dynamics and team geographical configuration (Bell et al. 2023; Bula et al. 2024; Handke et al. 2024). Research on both hybrid work and hybrid teamwork is still in its infancy, and research-based knowledge on their productivity-enhancing potential is still scant and scattered (see, however, Barreto 2025; Bartik et al. 2025; Bloom 2024; Bloom et al. 2024).

As remote work became more common due to COVID-19, the public began to talk about remote work as the 'new normal'. However, instead of a 'new normal', the situation today can be described more as a diversification of and increased experimentation with ways of working in general (Handke et al. 2024; Haque 2023). Increased diversity forms a fertile ground for boosting learning from different solutions that companies apply, and is thus an important potential force contributing to the renewal of working life and companies' productivity, competitiveness and business expansion in the digital transformation. However, utilizing this potential requires research-based knowledge based on a systematic assessment of the functionality of different solutions and consciously created forums for company-to-company learning.

The crucial issue is not the hybrid work mode itself, but rather its role as a trigger for new process flows, leadership and management practices, working hour models, forms of interaction, and technological and workspace solutions. For example, investments in VR, fuelled by the increasing shift to remote work, are expected to grow globally at a compound annual growth rate of nearly 28% from 2023 to 2030 (Grand View Research 2023). The hybrid work mode can therefore be considered a significant workplace innovation (Oeij et al. 2017) enabled by digital technologies, which contains greater potential for helping companies improve their productivity and gain a competitive advantage while also boosting work engagement and employee well-being than the more conservative RTO policies. This *transformation challenge* – in other words, the ability of companies to bring about new solutions that improve their productivity and competitiveness based on hybrid work – is at the heart of the CHILL research project.

A recent longitudinal study among U.S. small business owners reports perceived gains in firm productivity of remote work through organizational learning, investment in IT and process changes (Bartik et al. 2024). One of the world's leading productivity researchers, Stanford University professor Nicholas Bloom, argues as based on vast empirical sources of data that 'Hybrid work is a win-win-win for employee productivity, performance and, retention' and that 'From an economic policymaking standpoint, hybrid work is one of the few instances where there aren't major trade-offs with clear winners and clear losers. There are almost only winners' (Stanford Report 2024; for underlying data, see Bloom 2024; Bloom et al. 2024). The findings of a recent statistical analyses among a sample of Standard and Poor's 500 firms, on the other hand, do not provide any support to the argument that RTO increases firm financial performance, but may instead deteriorate the prospects of productivity development due to declines in employees' job satisfaction (Ding & Ma 2024).

### 3 Learning networks: what, why, how and for whom?

As stated above, the diversity of hybrid work models forms a fertile ground for mutual learning between companies. However, mutual learning requires forming an understanding of both the usability of the solutions included in the models and the contextual conditions of usability, as well as forums where information about these solutions and their usability can be exchanged. We use a research project implemented as a learning network between researchers and a wide range of companies as a vehicle to address these challenges. In the following, we will shed light on the learning network-based approach through four questions: what, why, how, and for whom.



### 3.1 What?

The learning network is based on the idea of bringing together actors who share an interest in sufficiently similar development issues, but who still have a sufficiently broad diversity of expertise. The actors are engaged in long-term interaction, with the aim of creating development and innovation potential. As the name suggests, the concept of a learning network refers to a network that is created specifically for the purpose of learning. Here, learning is not just a 'by-product' of sharing experiences, which occurs in all networks. Rather, it is the explicit and primary function of the network to produce learning events (Bessant & Tsekouras 2001; Knight 2002; Toiviainen 2003). Depending on the situation, the learning subjects involved may be individuals, teams or other work communities, entire organizations, or even broader associations. The network has interaction forums that serve as tools for information exchange. Such forums can include workshops and seminars, but also various training and discussion events, workplace visits, joint experiments or web-based platforms.

One of the prerequisites for a learning network to fulfil its mission is that the network participants have complementary expertise. This means that, in any given situation, everyone in the network can occupy the role of a learner. Learning opportunities provide important motivation for members' network participation in the first place. Participants cannot, on the other hand, be 'freeloaders'; all must be able and willing to allow other participants to utilize and benefit from their knowhow and ideas. Similarly, in a genuine learning network, no participant can take the role of master or apprentice only. In addition to participating companies, this is also true of the researchers or other possible experts who are members of the network.

According to the participants' role in the network's interactive forums, three main set-ups can be distinguished (Alasoini 2011, Table 1):

Table 1. Different interactive forum set-ups in learning networks (source: Alasoini 2011).

Position of participants	Allocation of knowledge	Typical learning actions
Teacher and learners	One member of the network has more extensive expertise in a given area than others	Other members gain ideas and encouragement for their own development work in that area
All teachers and learners	Several members of the network already have experiences of a given area	Benchmarking of experiences between members presenting their practices serves as a learning opportunity for them
All learners	A network examines matters which are relatively new to all members	Explorative activities, which help all members acquire greater expertise in the area in question, are launched

In the '*teacher and learners*' set-up, one member of the network (researcher or frontline company) has superior knowhow or more extensive expertise in some area than others, which the others could benefit from as generative ideas. This represents the traditional, expert-driven learning perspective.

In the '*all teachers and learners*' set-up, several members of the network already have experiences of a given area. This can be characterized as a benchmarking situation. However, and as a difference

from traditional benchmarking activities in which participants review their own practices against one that is indisputably defined as 'the best', concerning forms of working (such as hybrid work), opportunities for such mechanical benchmarking activities are often limited by the considerable context-dependency and system-dependency of practices. Context-dependency (the 'external fit' perspective) means that the characteristics of a company's environment determine how applicable any given practice may be in that company. System-dependency (the 'internal fit' perspective), on the other hand, means that other practices adopted earlier affect the applicability of any new practice in the company. This means that the nature of benchmarking must be more reflexive by nature. The key issue in this kind of reflexive benchmarking is the use and evolution of dialogical methods, rather than the construction of detailed sets of indicators and strict measurement systems.

In the '*all learners*' set-up, a network examines matters which are relatively new to all members. In such a set-up, which is genuinely searching for something new, the network will initiate research, development or experiments shared by various participants. These aim at gaining new, in-depth expertise on the matter in question, sharing related experiences, and discovering new kinds of scientific findings and/or usable, local applications in the network.

### 3.2 Why?

The key advantage of a research project implemented as a learning network for the companies participating in the project compared to a more traditional research project is that it offers more learning opportunities. Learning opportunities are expanded not only by the larger number of participating organizations, but also by the closer interaction between network participants and their potentially greater diversity in terms of knowledge they possess or practices they deploy. At the same time, diversity is a double-edged sword. The similarity of the knowledge base among participants may narrow the knowledge domain of the network, but diversity can prevent them from understanding each other's situation, aims, language, concepts and values (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998; Simsek et al. 2003; Tell 2001). The latter challenge can probably be more easily overcome than the former – although it takes time – through interactive forums and other network activities.

The sheer number of participants in a learning network also brings other advantages of scale. These concern, for example, the sustainability of the project in the event of participants dropping out, the embedding of the project's practice-oriented results, the dissemination of the results to a wider group of companies, and the raising of public awareness of the issues promoted by the project in general. On the other hand, the large number of participants, the increasing number of possible interactions within the network, and the potential complexity of the network structure, can increase problems of coordination. All in all, a learning network is a demanding form of project implementation, but if successful, it includes great potential for building collaborative relationships, mutual learning and shared knowledge construction between network partners, and co-developing, experimenting with and scaling up new innovative solutions.

### 3.3 How?

One special feature of a project implemented in a learning network form compared to a more traditional research project is that the interactions between researchers and practitioners are

complemented by a large number of interactions between practitioners. This means that in the creation of new knowledge, the 'vertical' set-up between researchers and practitioners, which has priority in traditional research projects, is increasingly supplemented with a 'horizontal' set-up between practitioners. This also affects the types of roles that researchers can adopt in the project.

There is a long debate in the social science literature about the role of the researcher as an external, impartial and 'passive' generator of scientific knowledge *versus* a collaborative and reflective actor that combines research with the purpose of change and intervention in her/his objects of research (e.g. Reason & Bradbury 2008). In a project implemented in a learning network form, researchers cannot assume the pure neutral or passive role of an external observer in relation to their research subjects. Researchers must also, if the situation requires it, take the role of a learner in the network. In addition, as noted above, the dynamics of a learning network include an increasing number of horizontal interactions between the participating organizations; a fact which undermines the (traditional) position of researchers as sole or superior producers of new knowledge.

The actors in the network have different roles. Researchers mainly act as collectors of data, facilitators of interactive encounters between network participants, elaborators of new research knowledge and network coordinators. The role of researchers in a learning network comes close to what Ellström and his associates (2021) call *interactive research*. In interactive research, researchers focus on creating opportunities for them and practitioners to engage in joint learning and knowledge creation and conducting research *with* the participants (and not only *for* them) during the research process. Important tools for this are collaborative forums, where researchers and relevant participants meet to jointly analyse and reflect on research findings with the aim of achieving shared conceptualizations and interpretations of the research object as well as opportunities for its re-conceptualization and re-interpretation.

Similarly, participating companies may also have various roles in the network. The roles may vary for an individual company depending on the situation (e.g. learner vs. teacher). The network may also be structured in such a way that its members have different relatively permanent roles from the start to fulfil different tasks in the network.

### 3.4 For whom?

The objective of the CHILL project is to bring about new solutions which help Finnish companies gain a competitive advantage from the opportunities opened by the hybrid work mode, with the help of new research knowledge. The project combines the expertise of two scientific partners (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and Turku School of Economics) and that of more than 30 companies and other work organizations<sup>2</sup>, which can participate in the project in four different roles. We call the roles core research partner, research partner, learning partner and enabler (Table 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Approximately two-thirds of the participating organizations are companies of various sizes, and the rest are public entities or NGOs.

Table 2. Options for participating companies and work organizations in the CHILL project.

Role	Key form of commitment	Key benefits
Core research partner	Development of the company's hybrid work model with the support of researchers, enablers and other participants of the learning network	New solutions for promoting communality, learning and innovation in a hybrid work environment with the help of research data
Research partner	Provision of interview data, survey data and other research data to researchers for research purposes and for the development of the company's hybrid work model	Research-based feedback data for the development of the company's hybrid work model
Learning partner	Dedicated participation in project workshops, and sharing of the company's experiences of its hybrid work model in the learning network	Opportunities for benchmarking, sharing experiences and learning
Enabler	Generation of technological, workspace and other solutions for the hybrid work models of participating companies	Opportunities for testing and developing the company's products and services

Core research partners form the most significant subset for the study, while they are the most important source of new research knowledge and learning opportunities for other participants. However, various roles can partly coexist and evolve in the network. Participants can also cluster in the network, for example by topic, organization size, sector or region, and form sub-groups for the exchange of experiences that they consider most appropriate.

The diversity of hybrid working models creates the best conditions for mutual learning and reflexive benchmarking in the network. In reflexive benchmarking, an object of comparison for participants is not regarded as a standard but as a mirror that reflects similarities and differences and helps place own practices in a broader context and boost innovative thinking (Alasoini 2009). The hybrid work models of the participating organizations meet the diversity goal well in the CHILL network. The participating organizations are divided into two roughly equal groups in terms of their hybrid work models. The models are referred to below as 'self-directed' and 'constrained'.

*Self-directed hybrid work model:* About half of the participating organizations allow either individual employees or an organizational unit (e.g. team or department) to decide independently on their own ways of working. In organizations where the decision-making power lies with employees, remote work typically accounts for slightly more than half of the total working time. In organizations where the decision is made by an organizational unit, the share is typically somewhat lower.

*Constrained hybrid work model:* About half of the organizations have set some maximum limit on the proportion of total working time that an individual employee can do remote work throughout the organization. The limit can be, for example, two or three days a week. Due to the differences in limits, the average amount of remote work done by staff can vary significantly but remains typically

lower than in organizations that allow employees to decide independently on the amount of remote work they do.

The diversity of the participating organizations also concerns their background characteristics. There are a wide range of companies involved, from micro-enterprises to large corporations. The participants also come from many different sectors, though it is typical of the organizations that many of their personnel do the type of knowledge work that can also be done remotely.

## 4 Summary and conclusions

Many companies in Finland were *functionally* ready to a swift transition to remote work at the outbreak of COVID-19, based on the high digital skills of employees, efficient data communication connections, and the strong institutional trust prevailing in Finnish society. However, not even close to all of them were *culturally* as prepared for the shift. Ways of working evolved faster in companies than their leadership and management practices, or any other forms of organizational support for employees who switched to remote work. Prevailing management concerns about the harmful effects of extensive remote work on communality, cooperation, learning and innovation indicate that the process of bridging the gap in the management and organizational support of the hybrid work mode is still under way in many companies.

Hybrid work can take very different forms in different organizations. The diversity of forms is an opportunity and a challenge for both company management and researchers. The functionality of different hybrid work models – such as different variations of the ‘self-directed’ and ‘constrained’ models – varies, depending on the nature of the organization’s operating environment and the culture of the organization. For this reason, the CHILL project does not aim to find any unambiguous ‘best practices’ through the efforts of researchers, but rather solutions that help organizations seize the opportunities of hybrid work and respond to the aforementioned challenges along with their contextual conditions.

The learning network provides a supra-organizational context for evaluating and experimenting with different solutions and their prerequisites in the CHILL project. However, this process is not only led by researchers. Also important is the sharing of knowledge between participating organizations, as well as joint learning and possible co-development between practitioners and researchers in the spirit of interactive research.

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