

DEI MANAGEMENT FOR HYBRID WORKPLACES

2023

INTRODUCTION

Many Danish workplaces have opted for a hybrid work model, where employees take turns working from home and in the office. At the same time, the focus – both at work and throughout society – is on supporting and promoting DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion).

In a previous research project [[EAViden](#)], Managing [Hybrid Workplaces](#) (Danish title: [Ledelse af hybride arbejdspladser](#)), we uncovered some of the challenges and opportunities created by hybrid work structures. In that context, we observed tendencies of a lack of awareness regarding how the organisation of work can impact employees, including DEI-related aspects.

Subsequently, an extensive literature study revealed that a hybrid work structure offers clear advantages, in relation to factors such as recruitment and retention of employees. That said, research from foreign companies suggests that hybrid work models can intensify existing bias. The literature study uncovered a knowledge gap in the field in the Danish context and thus formed the background for the project.

Formulation of the problem

How can managers team up with employees to maintain and/or promote diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion (DEI) in a company with a hybrid work structure in Denmark?

This also includes developing concrete guidelines to maintain and/or promote DEI in companies with hybrid work structures in Denmark.

Aim

At a time when Danish companies are facing competition and economic pressure, leaning on diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion is essential to be able to benefit from different perspectives and skill sets. These needs can be met by implementing DEI strategies, but this will run into challenges posed by the complexity of hybrid work structures. This study aims to explore how managers and employees in Danish hybrid work structures can actively promote diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion.

The results of the study will contribute a context-based understanding, which will shed light on how DEI strategies can thrive in a world of hybrid working models. The study does not focus on general statements about company types and sizes, but instead seeks to understand how DEI strategies are best implemented in specific contexts and organisations.

This issue addresses a relevant challenge for Danish organisations as they transition to hybrid work models, and the results are expected to have analytical potential and to be transferable to similar contexts.

METHODS

Empirical approach

To come to relevant, new knowledge on concrete tools and models for supporting and promoting DEI in hybrid, organised Danish workplaces, after a further literature study, we made an exploratory, qualitative study to explore the interaction of DEI in hybrid workplaces in Danish organisations. We adopted a qualitative approach as it is best suited to capture nuances, perspectives and personal observations relating to DEI in hybrid forms of work.

We applied a methodological approach based on the organisations' specific experience with hybrid forms of work, and our interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide which allowed for the interviewees to express their own experiences and reflections. Overall, this methodology gave rise to an in-depth understanding of DEI and hybrid types of work in the organisations studied.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with a number of managers and employees to gain a deeper understanding of the complex conditions surrounding this topic and to focus also on the world of experience in this area.

We selected the organisations and interviewees on the basis of specific issues and methods of diversity work. We chose three companies considered to be leaders in Denmark in terms of their internal work with DEI. Given the complexity of the subject and the emotions often tied up in DEI, we decided that useful data might be best obtained at present by conducting interviews in companies which have already worked with DEI. In our opinion, there is a general lack of awareness of hybrid work structures and their consequences as well as of DEI issues. By selecting three companies that work both in hybrid models and systematically with DEI, we think that we increase the likelihood of obtaining relevant data, while being aware that it affects the validity and reliability of the study.

Empirical material

In the study, we start with qualitative studies through semi-structured interviews with managers and employees of three Danish companies: Novo Nordisk, Mærsk and Ørsted, which all have hybrid working structures and an internal focus on DEI.

Respondents: Three DEI managers, six managers and twelve employees.

The reflections on bias and method in the development of knowledge based on qualitative methods are further developed in a subsequent article.

Theory

In the preliminary analysis of the challenges faced by organisations during these processes, we operated with the theoretical framework of **Morten Ry and J. C. Ry Nielsen's extension of Leavitt's** organisational model.

Development of the theory was informed, in part, by our previous studies, which highlight the significance of *organisational culture* in the creation of well-functioning hybrid work environments – also in the context of DEI. In addition, our initial theoretical work showed that “psychological safety” plays a central role in both DEI and hybrid work and serves as a marker for evaluating inclusion and well-being in the workplace.

The model allowed us to analyse the dynamics of these different variables with relevance for DEI in hybrid workplaces. In particular, it helps us understand how organisational culture, values-based leadership and shared values among employees are influenced by how the hybrid work is mediated.

Focus points of the model

Structure:

Adaptation of the company's organisational structure to fit the hybrid work model.

Actors:

Training of managers in virtual leadership and inclusive practices to ensure they can guide and support employees in all work environments.

Technology:

Investing in technology that supports effective communication and collaboration in a virtual workplace.

Vision, goals, values:

Updating the company's mission statement and values to reflect the commitment to diversity and inclusion in both physical and virtual environments.

Reward systems:

Establishing reward systems that recognise and compensate employees for their contributions to DEI, regardless of place of work.

Physical space:

Design of office spaces and virtual meeting rooms that are inclusive and accessible to all employees.

Culture:

To foster an inclusive culture by educating employees on DEI and encouraging dialogue on issues such as bias and inclusion.

By applying the model, we analysed the DEI challenges faced by organisations in a hybrid workplace (and then developed practical reflections on how to ensure that both office and remote workers have equal access to opportunities and feel included and valued).

These elements laid the groundwork for the development of a framework of questions and of a method for literature studies.

Concept development

DEI and hybrid workplaces form part of a complex discipline with many different positions and directions, which made it important to develop a conceptual model on which to base the project.

Based on, among others, Muhr Sara Louise, Ottsen Lundsgaard Christina: *Bias bevidst ledelse* (2021), Poornima Luthra: *Diversifying Diversity* (2021) and Lily Zheng: *Deconstructing DEI - Doing the Work and Doing it Right* (2020), we define the concepts as follows (the concepts are further developed throughout the article):

DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion): DEI refers to a broad perspective on diversity, equal opportunity and inclusion. DEI focuses on systems and structures, including concepts such as bias-awareness and psychological safety.

Hybrid work: We define a hybrid workplace as a workplace where work is independent of time and place, supported by synchronous and asynchronous work as well as the possibility of working in or out of the office. Hybrid work involves flexibility and mobility, often with technology as a key component.

PROJECT RESULTS

Within a hybrid model, there are opportunities to promote as well as to inhibit DEI. In general, it seems that:

- Forming relationships and breaking down boundaries becomes more difficult when we meet primarily online, instead of in person.
- Our positive and negative stereotypes are at risk of being reinforced.
- Online meetings can promote the well-being and performance of some employees, while challenging and inhibiting others.

- Language barriers are reinforced when communication takes place online or in writing.
- Some employee groups' needs for domestic duties, for example, are more accepted by colleagues, managers and society than those of other groups — this can create a sense of injustice and inequality and inhibit DEI. At the same time, the hybrid model makes it possible, for example, to meet different needs and thereby support more equal opportunities.
- It can complicate the process of knowledge sharing, and it can inhibit equal opportunity for tasks, reward and influence.
- Being inclusive at hybrid meetings is a challenge.
- Psychological safety and attachment to the workplace may be challenged. Hybrid work models may also challenge our sense of inclusion. They can also pose a challenge to DEI, since feeling included most often makes us at ease and therefore more prepared to accommodate diversity.
- If psychological safety is not fully present and the sense of inclusion is weak, this can subsequently impact the risk appetite in both managers and employees.
- The hybrid structure can make it easier for some groups/person types to position themselves than for others.
- Proximity bias, the tendency for management to favour employees that they see often, can also keep DEI from making progress in hybrid workplaces.

Overall, the empiricism of the project suggests that, in a Danish context, there is generally a lack of awareness of what the hybrid work model does in terms of inhibiting and promoting DEI. If not addressed in the long term, this lack of awareness may hold DEI back in hybrid workplaces and, ultimately, intensify dynamics pushing organisations in opposing directions.

SHARING OF PROJECT FINDINGS

The project's findings are shared through articles, videos, presentations and educational materials.

Eaviden [\[link\]](#)

Peer-reviewed article

Findings and methodological reflections are being submitted as article for peer-reviewed paper in Qualitative Studies in 2024.

<https://tidsskrift.dk/qual>

This article will put a particular focus will be on the intersection between psychological safety and mediation as key elements in developing well-functioning hybrid workplaces from a DEI perspective.

In connection with this article, the interaction between theory and empiricism is further analysed, and additional literature review is developed.

Communication efforts in 2024

- The project described on the Cphbusiness website - [\[link\]](#)
- Article xx [\[Link\]](#)
- Article on Cphbusiness.dk: *“Ten examples of what we should pay attention to when looking to promote DEI in hybrid workplaces”* — [\[link\]](#)
- Video in our content marketing universe: *“Create psychological safety in the hybrid set-up — that can promote DEI”* — [\[link\]](#)
- Video in the content marketing universe: *“Hold more inclusive hybrid and online meetings”*
- Two videos in the content marketing universe: *“What opportunities does the hybrid workplace offer in relation to DEI and how do we exploit them”* — [\[link\]](#)
- Webinar [\[link\]](#)