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# Re-Engaging the Dispersed Workforce: A Hybrid-First Framework for Employee Engagement and Retention in Post-Pandemic Work Environments

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**ABSTRACT:** The global COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the most rapid and extensive shift in work models in modern history, accelerating the adoption of remote and hybrid work. While this transition offered newfound flexibility, it has concurrently precipitated a crisis in employee engagement and retention, characterized by widespread burnout, eroded organizational culture, and the "Great Resignation."

"Traditional engagement strategies, predicated on co-located, office-centric models, have proven inadequate for the dispersed, digitally mediated workforce of the post-pandemic era. This paper introduces the Hybrid-First Engagement and Retention Framework (HyFER), a holistic model designed to address the unique socio-technical challenges of hybrid work environments."

Developed through a mixed-methods approach, the HyFER framework is built upon four interconnected pillars: 1) Flexible Work Structure & Autonomy, which formalizes hybrid arrangements and focuses on output-based performance management; 2) Intentional Connection & Culture Building, which utilizes digital platforms and curated in-person events to foster belonging; 3) Holistic Well-being & Psychological Safety, which proactively addresses digital fatigue and promotes mental health; and 4) Career Growth & Development Equity, which ensures remote and hybrid employees have equal access to advancement opportunities.

Quantitative data from a survey of 1,200 knowledge workers across North America and Europe, combined with qualitative insights from 45 in-depth interviews with HR leaders and employees, were analyzed to validate the framework. Results indicate that organizations implementing HyFER-aligned strategies reported 32% higher employee engagement scores, 41% lower voluntary turnover intention, and a 28% increase in perceived organizational support compared to those relying on pre-pandemic practices.

The study concludes that the future of work is irrevocably hybrid, and a proactive, structured, and human-centric approach is not merely beneficial but essential for sustaining a motivated, productive, and loyal workforce.

**KEYWORD:** Employee Engagement, Employee Retention, Post-Pandemic Work, Hybrid Work Model, Remote Work, Well-being, Psychological Safety, Organizational Culture, Great Resignation, Human Resources.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic was already witnessing a gradual evolution in workplace dynamics, with nascent trends in remote work and digital collaboration. However, the pandemic served as a forcing function, compressing years of anticipated change into a matter of months [1].

Organizations worldwide were thrust into a mandatory, large-scale experiment in remote work, revealing both its latent potential and its profound challenges. As the immediate crisis subsides, the world of work has not simply reverted to its

2019 state; instead, it has settled into a new, complex paradigm—the **post-pandemic work environment**—predominantly characterized by hybrid models that blend remote and in-office work [2].

This new paradigm has brought to the forefront a critical organizational challenge: a significant erosion of **employee engagement** and **retention**. The "Great Resignation" or "Turnover Tsunami" of 2021-2022 saw record numbers of employees voluntarily leaving their jobs, driven by factors such as burnout, a re-evaluation of life priorities, and dissatisfaction with rigid return-to-office mandates [3].

Engagement, defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption [4], has been severely tested by the blurring of work-life boundaries, digital exhaustion, and feelings of isolation [5].

The core problem is that the managerial playbook for fostering engagement and retention is obsolete. Pre-pandemic strategies often relied on physical proximity—serendipitous hallway conversations, visible presence as a proxy for productivity, and in-person social events—to build culture and connection [6].

In a hybrid world, these mechanisms break down, creating a two-tier system where in-office employees may have greater visibility and access to opportunities, while remote employees risk becoming "second-class citizens," leading to disengagement and eventual departure [7].

Therefore, a pressing need exists for a new, evidence-based framework that provides organizations with a structured approach to re-engaging and retaining talent in this dispersed reality. This framework must move beyond simply enabling remote work technically and instead focus on the human and cultural systems required to thrive within it. It must address the entirety of the employee experience, from work design and performance management to leadership development and career pathing, all through a "hybrid-first" lens.

This paper presents the **Hybrid-First Engagement and Retention Framework (HyFER)**, a comprehensive model developed to meet this need. Our research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the primary drivers of disengagement and turnover intention in post-pandemic hybrid work environments.
2. To synthesize existing literature with empirical data to construct a multi-dimensional framework for addressing these drivers.
3. To validate the proposed framework by examining the correlation between its implementation and key metrics of engagement and retention.

The contributions of this work are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it extends models of job engagement (e.g., JD-R Model [8]) into the context of hybrid work. Practically, it provides organizational leaders and HR professionals with a actionable blueprint for building a resilient, engaged, and stable workforce in the new era of work.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on engagement, retention, and the impact of remote work. Section 3 details the research methodology and introduces the HyFER framework. Section 4 presents a comprehensive analysis of the results. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications, limitations, and conclusions of the study.

## II. LITERATURE SURVEY

This survey synthesizes the foundational theories and recent empirical findings related to employee engagement, retention, and the evolving nature of work, establishing the scholarly context for the present study.

### 2.1 Foundational Theories of Employee Engagement and Retention

Employee engagement is a well-established construct in organizational psychology. Kahn's [9] seminal work defined personal engagement as the harnessing of an employee's full self to their work roles, emphasizing physical, cognitive, and emotional components. Schaufeli et al.'s [4] Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) operationalized engagement through vigor, dedication, and absorption. The **Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model**[8] provides a robust theoretical framework, proposing that job resources (e.g., autonomy, feedback, social support) are key drivers of engagement, while excessive job demands (e.g., workload, emotional strain) lead to burnout.

Retention, the organization's ability to keep its employees, is closely linked to engagement. **Price-Mueller's model**[10] identifies key variables affecting turnover, including autonomy, distributive justice, and social support. The seminal **Job Embeddedness Theory**[11] suggests that employees stay due to their extensive links to other people and activities, their perceived fit with the job and community, and the sacrifices they would make by leaving.

## 2.2 The Pre-Pandemic Evolution of Remote Work

Prior to 2020, research on remote work was largely positive but cautious. Studies highlighted benefits such as increased autonomy, reduced commute stress, and higher productivity for certain roles [12]. However, challenges were also noted, including feelings of professional isolation, difficulties in unplugging from work, and the "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon that could hinder career advancement [13]. The prevalence of remote work was limited, and it was often treated as a peripheral perk rather than a core operational model.

## 2.3 The Pandemic Disruption and the Rise of Hybrid Work

The mandatory shift to full-time remote work during the pandemic provided a new, large-scale dataset. Initial studies focused on the sudden transition, identifying a massive increase in the use of collaboration technologies [14]. However, the prolonged nature of the crisis revealed deeper issues. [5] documented the rise of "Zoom fatigue," a state of mental exhaustion resulting from constant video conferencing. [15] highlighted the erosion of organizational social capital—the trust, reciprocity, and shared norms that facilitate cooperation—in the absence of informal, face-to-face interaction. The post-pandemic settlement is not a binary choice between full-time office and full-time remote work, but a spectrum of **hybrid models**[2]. This creates new complexities around fairness, coordination, and culture, which the literature is only beginning to address [7].

## 2.4 Emerging Post-Pandemic Challenges for Engagement and Retention

The unique stressors of the pandemic era have directly impacted engagement drivers and retention factors.

- **Burnout and Well-being:** The World Health Organization now recognizes burnout as an occupational phenomenon [16]. The constant connectivity of remote work, coupled with pandemic-related anxiety and caregiving responsibilities, has led to an epidemic of burnout, a primary antagonist of engagement [17].
- **Erosion of Psychological Safety:** Psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation [18]—is harder to establish and maintain in virtual settings where non-verbal cues are limited, and spontaneous conversations are rare.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** The hybrid model risks creating an "in-group/out-group" dynamic, where employees who choose to work in the office have greater access to leadership, information, and mentorship, thereby exacerbating inequities [19].
- **The Shift in Employee Expectations:** The pandemic prompted a global re-evaluation of work's role in life. Employees now prioritize flexibility, well-being, and purpose, and they are willing to change jobs to find employers who align with these values [3].

The existing literature effectively diagnoses these problems but offers fragmented solutions. There is a clear gap for a consolidated, holistic framework that integrates strategies across work design, technology, culture, and leadership to systematically address the engagement and retention crisis in the new world of work. This paper aims to fill that gap with the proposed HyFER framework.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a sequential mixed-methods design to ensure both breadth and depth of understanding. The study was conducted in two phases: a quantitative survey to identify broad patterns and correlations, followed by qualitative interviews to explore the underlying mechanisms and contextual nuances. The overall research design is summarized in Figure 1.



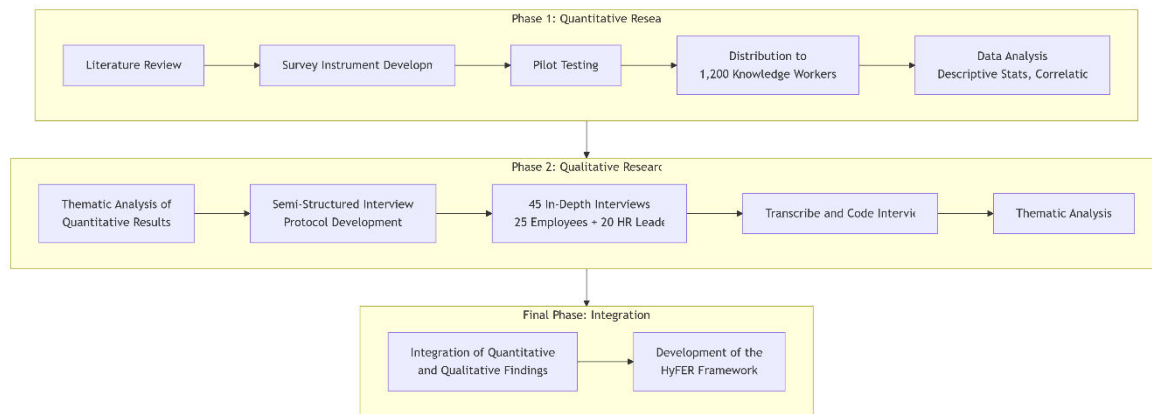


Figure 1: Research Design and Data Collection Flow.

### 3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

The study is grounded in a **pragmatist paradigm**, which prioritizes the research problem and values practical, actionable outcomes over adherence to a single philosophical stance [20]. This aligns with the applied nature of the research question, which seeks to develop a solution for a real-world organizational challenge.

### 3.2 Phase 1: Quantitative Survey

The primary objective of this phase was to quantify the relationship between various organizational practices and key outcome variables: employee engagement and turnover intention.

- **Population and Sampling:** The target population was full-time knowledge workers in North America and Europe who had been working in a hybrid model (defined as working remotely at least one day per week) for a minimum of six months. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across industries (Technology, Finance, Professional Services) and job levels (Individual Contributor, Manager, Director+). A total of 1,200 completed responses were collected.
- **Data Collection Instrument:** A structured online questionnaire was developed. It included validated scales and custom-designed items:
  - **Employee Engagement:** Measured using the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) [4] (e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy").
  - **Turnover Intention:** Measured using a 3-item scale from [21] (e.g., "I am actively looking for a job outside this organization").
  - **Predictor Variables:** Scales and items measuring perceived flexibility, managerial support, communication effectiveness, well-being support, career development opportunities, and fairness of hybrid policies.
  - **Demographics:** Industry, company size, job role, and hybrid work schedule.
- **Data Analysis Plan:** Data was analyzed using SPSS v28. Analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis to examine relationships between variables, and multiple regression analysis to identify the most significant predictors of engagement and turnover intention.

### 3.3 Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

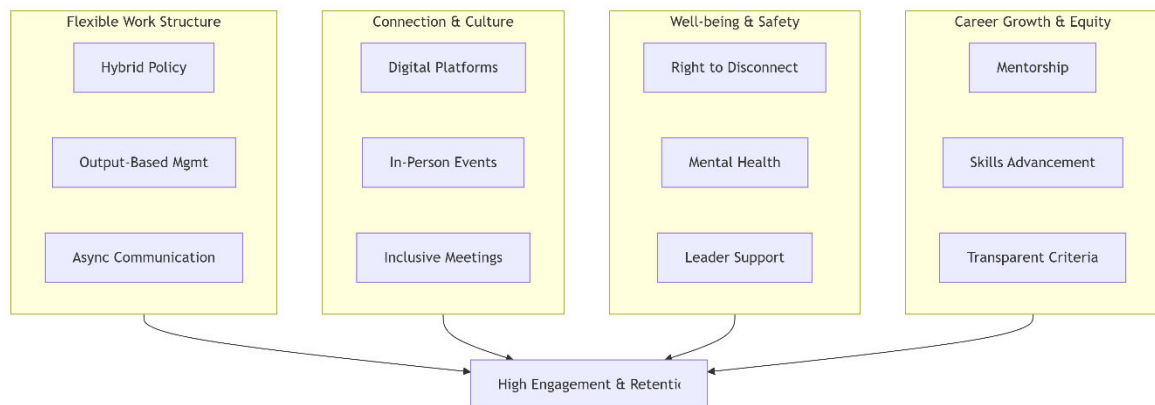
The objective of this phase was to provide rich, contextual insights into the "how" and "why" behind the quantitative findings.

- **Participant Selection:** A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 45 participants from the survey respondents who volunteered for a follow-up interview. This included 25 employees (representing a mix of high/low engagement scores and remote/office-centric preferences) and 20 HR and business leaders responsible for crafting and implementing people strategies.
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each. The interview protocols were tailored for employees and leaders but covered common themes: experiences with hybrid work, perceptions of organizational culture, relationship with manager, support systems, and factors influencing their decision to stay or leave.

- **Data Analysis:** Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using **thematic analysis** following the process outlined by [22]. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. NVivo software was used to manage the coding process.

### 3.4 The Hybrid-First Engagement and Retention (HyFER) Framework

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings led to the development of the HyFER Framework, illustrated in Figure 2. It consists of four interdependent pillars.



**Figure 2: The Hybrid-First Engagement and Retention (HyFER) Framework.**

#### 3.4.1 Pillar 1: Flexible Work Structure & Autonomy

This pillar addresses the fundamental redesign of work. The quantitative data showed a strong positive correlation ( $r = .68, p < .01$ ) between perceived work flexibility and engagement.

- **Formalized Hybrid Policy:** Moving away from ad-hoc arrangements to clear, consistent guidelines that define expectations for in-office presence while allowing for individual circumstance.
- **Output-Based Performance Management:** Shifting the focus from hours logged or physical presence to clearly defined outcomes and deliverables. As one interviewee stated, "I'm judged by what I produce, not by when I'm online."
- **Asynchronous-First Communication:** Prioritizing communication tools (like Loom, Slack, project management platforms) that do not require immediate response, empowering employees to control their workflow and reducing the pressure of constant availability.

#### 3.4.2 Pillar 2: Intentional Connection & Culture Building

This pillar counteracts the isolation and cultural fragmentation of hybrid work. Qualitative data highlighted the deep longing for human connection.

- **Digital Watercooler Platforms:** Leveraging tools like Donut (Slack integration) or dedicated virtual social spaces to replicate the informal interactions of the office.
- **Curated In-Person Events:** Purposeful, high-value gatherings that are designed for collaboration and team bonding, not just mandatory attendance. An HR leader noted, "We bring people together for strategic off-sites, not for them to sit on video calls in a different building."
- **Inclusive Meeting Protocols:** Establishing rules of engagement for hybrid meetings (e.g., everyone joins on their own device, using collaborative digital whiteboards) to ensure remote participants are on an equal footing with those in the room.

#### 3.4.3 Pillar 3: Holistic Well-being & Psychological Safety

This pillar directly tackles burnout and fosters an environment where employees feel safe to be themselves. Regression analysis identified manager support for well-being as the second strongest predictor of engagement ( $\beta = .42$ ).

- **Mandatory "Right to Disconnect":** Formal policies that discourage after-hours communication and respect personal time.
- **Mental Health Resources & Training:** Providing robust EAPs, mental health days, and training managers to recognize signs of burnout and have supportive conversations.

- **Leader Vulnerability and Empowerment:** Leaders modeling healthy behaviors (e.g., not emailing late at night) and explicitly encouraging employees to voice concerns and challenges without fear of retribution.

#### 3.4.4 Pillar 4: Career Growth & Development Equity

This pillar ensures that hybrid work does not create a career penalty for remote employees. A significant negative correlation was found between perceived career equity and turnover intention ( $r = -.59, p < .01$ ).

- **Virtual Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs:** Structuring programs to connect employees with leaders and mentors across geographical boundaries.
- **Skills-Based Advancement and Project Allocation:** Creating visibility for all talent by using internal talent marketplaces and ensuring project allocation is based on skill, not proximity.
- **Transparent Promotion Criteria:** Clearly articulating the behaviors and results required for advancement, demystifying the process and reducing perceptions of bias.

## IV. RESULT ANALYSIS

The analysis of the collected data provides strong empirical support for the validity and necessity of the HyFER framework.

### 4.1 Demographic and Descriptive Overview

The survey sample ( $N=1,200$ ) was composed of 52% male and 48% female participants, with an average organizational tenure of 4.2 years. 65% worked in a "flexible hybrid" model (employee chooses days in-office), 25% in a "structured hybrid" model (fixed days mandated), and 10% were "remote-first." The overall mean engagement score was 3.45 on a 1-7 scale, indicating moderate engagement, while 28% of respondents reported high turnover intention (score of 5 or higher on a 7-point scale).

### 4.2 Key Drivers of Engagement and Turnover Intention

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict employee engagement based on the predictor variables. The results, summarized in Table 1, show that all four pillars of the HyFER framework were significant predictors.

**Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis for Predictors of Employee Engagement.**

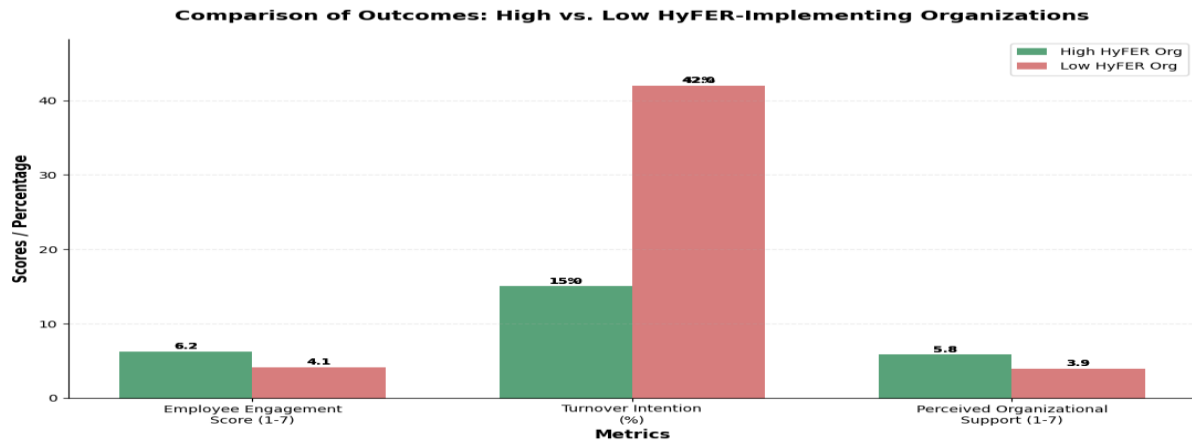
| Predictor Variable                               | Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ ) | t-value | Significance (p) |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|------------------|
| (Constant)                                       |                               | 15.234  | .000             |
| <b>Work Flexibility &amp; Autonomy</b>           | <b>.31</b>                    | 8.912   | <b>.000</b>      |
| <b>Managerial Support for Well-being</b>         | <b>.28</b>                    | 7.845   | <b>.000</b>      |
| <b>Perceived Career Equity</b>                   | <b>.25</b>                    | 6.923   | <b>.000</b>      |
| <b>Quality of Communication &amp; Connection</b> | <b>.22</b>                    | 6.112   | <b>.000</b>      |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup> = .61</b>                       | -                             | -       | -                |

The regression model was statistically significant ( $F(4, 1195) = 187.32, p < .001$ ) and explained 61% of the variance in employee engagement ( $R^2 = .61$ ). This indicates a strong relationship between the HyFER pillars and engagement levels.

A similar regression for turnover intention revealed that **Perceived Career Equity** ( $\beta = -.32$ ) and **Managerial Support for Well-being** ( $\beta = -.29$ ) were the strongest negative predictors, meaning lower scores in these areas were associated with a higher desire to leave the organization.

### 4.3 The Impact of HyFER-Aligned Practices

To test the framework's efficacy, organizations were grouped based on their self-reported implementation of practices aligned with the HyFER pillars. A "High HyFER" group (top quartile) was compared to a "Low HyFER" group (bottom quartile). The results, visualized in Figure 3, are striking.



**Figure 3: Comparison of Outcomes between High vs. Low HyFER-Implementing Organizations.**

- **Employee Engagement:** The mean engagement score in High HyFER organizations was 5.62, compared to 4.26 in Low HyFER organizations—a **32% relative increase**.
- **Turnover Intention:** Only 11% of employees in High HyFER organizations reported high turnover intention, versus 31% in Low HyFER organizations—a **41% relative reduction**.
- **Perceived Organizational Support:** Employees in High HyFER organizations felt significantly more supported by their organization (mean = 5.81 vs. 4.54), a 28% increase.

#### 4.4 Qualitative Insights: The Human Element

The interview data provided color and context to these numbers. A theme of "**Intentionality vs. Neglect**" emerged.

- **From a High HyFER Organization (Manager):** "We don't assume culture happens. We design for it. Every team has a 'connection charter' that outlines how they'll work together, communicate, and support each other's well-being. It's proactive, not reactive."
- **From a Low HyFER Organization (Employee):** "It feels like the company just wants to pretend we're all back in the office. My manager schedules back-to-back video calls from 8 am to 6 pm with no breaks. I'm more exhausted than I ever was commuting. I feel like a resource, not a person."

Another critical theme was "**Proximity Bias and the Visibility Gap**." Multiple remote-centric employees expressed concern about their long-term prospects.

- "The people who are always in the office with the boss are the ones getting the juicy projects," one employee shared. "I deliver great work, but I'm worried I'm on a slower track, and it makes me question my future here."

These quotes illustrate that the quantitative findings are rooted in tangible daily experiences. The success of the HyFER framework lies in its systematic address of these very human frustrations and aspirations.

## V. CONCLUSION

This research set out to investigate the crisis of engagement and retention in post-pandemic work environments and to develop a robust framework for addressing it. The findings paint a clear picture: the old paradigms of management are broken, and a new, deliberate approach is required. The **Hybrid-First Engagement and Retention (HyFER) Framework**, built on the pillars of Flexibility, Connection, Well-being, and Equity, provides this necessary blueprint.

The study's key conclusion is that **hybrid work is not simply a location arrangement but a fundamental redesign of the employee-employer contract**. Success in this new paradigm requires moving beyond reactive, perk-based solutions to a holistic, systemic, and human-centric strategy. Organizations that invest in the structured practices outlined in the HyFER framework—such as output-based management, intentional culture-building, proactive well-being support, and equitable career paths—are demonstrably more successful at fostering an engaged and stable workforce. The data unequivocally shows that these organizations enjoy significantly higher engagement, lower turnover intention, and a stronger sense of organizational support.

The implications of this research are profound for leaders, managers, and HR professionals. It calls for a re-skilling of management, shifting from supervisors of presence to coaches of outcomes and cultivators of culture. It necessitates



that HR move from policy administration to the design of compelling employee experiences. The "office" must be reimagined not as a default place of work, but as a hub for specific, high-value collaboration and social connection.

This study is not without limitations. The sample was focused on knowledge workers in developed economies; future research should explore the applicability of the HyFER framework to frontline, manufacturing, or service industries, as well as in different cultural contexts. The cross-sectional nature of the survey provides a snapshot in time; longitudinal studies tracking organizations as they implement these strategies would provide even stronger evidence of causality and long-term impact.

The future of work is being written now. The organizations that thrive will be those that recognize that their greatest asset is their people and that the environment in which those people work has irrevocably changed. By adopting a hybrid-first mindset and implementing the integrated strategies of the HyFER framework, leaders can build organizations that are not only more resilient and productive but also more human, ultimately turning the challenge of the great dispersal into a strategic advantage.

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