

The Proximity Paradox: Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Work on Performance Equity and Managerial Bias

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Abstract: The rapid global adoption of hybrid work models, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has introduced significant complexities regarding performance equity and managerial bias within organizations. This paper investigates "The Proximity Paradox: Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Work on Performance Equity and Managerial Bias," examining how varying levels of physical presence in hybrid arrangements contribute to differential treatment and outcomes for employees. Through a comprehensive and systematic literature review of studies published since 2020, key themes were identified regarding the manifestations of the proximity paradox, its impact on performance evaluation, the prevalence and effects of managerial bias, and the broader consequences for employee well-being and career progression. This paper concludes that while hybrid work offers benefits, addressing these unintended consequences through adapted performance frameworks, leadership training, and inclusive cultural practices is crucial to ensure equitable and thriving professional environments

Keywords: Hybrid Work, Managerial Bias, Proximity Paradox

INTRODUCTION

The rapid global shift to hybrid work models, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally reshaped the professional landscape, offering unprecedented flexibility and efficiency (Sari & Wening, 2025). However, this new paradigm introduces complex challenges, particularly concerning equitable treatment and evaluation within organizations (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024). While hybrid work allows for increased autonomy and work-life balance for many, it also presents a potential "proximity paradox," where physical distance can inadvertently create disparities in career progression and performance recognition (Deschênes, 2023; Wilson et al., 2008).

This "proximity paradox" suggests that employees who spend more time in the physical office may benefit from increased visibility, informal interactions, and perceived dedication, potentially leading to more favorable evaluations and career opportunities compared to their remote counterparts (Deschênes, 2023; Kasperska et al., 2024). This phenomenon raises significant concerns about performance equity, as traditional evaluation methods, often reliant on direct observation and interaction, face considerable challenges in physically separated work environments (Seo & Park, 2025). The lack of consistent, observable interaction can lead to evaluators relying more on outcome-focused thinking rather than process-oriented assessments, creating a psychological distance that impacts evaluations (Seo & Park, 2025). The unintended consequences of this paradox extend to managerial bias, where unconscious preferences for in-office employees can inadvertently influence decisions regarding promotions, salary increases, and training allowances (Kasperska et al., 2024). Such biases can undermine fairness and equality, leading to disparate career outcomes and potentially disengaging remote workers (Emanuel et al., 2023; Hildred et al., 2024). Despite the benefits of hybrid work for job satisfaction and retention, particularly for non-managers and female employees (Bloom et al., 2024), the mechanisms by which managerial biases and the proximity paradox influence performance equity remain a critical area of concern (Gintova, 2025).

This paper aims to explore "The Proximity Paradox: Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Work on Performance Equity and Managerial Bias." It will delve into how the varying levels of physical proximity in hybrid arrangements can lead to differential treatment and outcomes for employees, exacerbating existing biases and creating new ones. By examining the interplay between hybrid work structures, performance evaluation practices, and managerial decision-making, this study seeks to highlight the critical need for organizations to

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proactively address these unintended consequences to ensure a truly equitable and inclusive work environment.

Literature Review

The emergence of hybrid work models, significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has introduced a dynamic and complex landscape for organizations and employees alike (Sari & Wening, 2025). This section synthesizes the existing literature on the "proximity paradox," performance equity, and managerial bias within hybrid work environments, drawing on a range of academic studies published since 2020.

The Proximity Paradox in Hybrid Work

The "proximity paradox" describes the phenomenon where physical distance in hybrid work arrangements can inadvertently lead to disparities in career progression and performance recognition (Deschênes, 2023; Wilson et al., 2008). Despite the benefits of hybrid work, such as increased flexibility and autonomy, employees who spend more time in the physical office may gain advantages due to enhanced visibility, more frequent informal interactions, and a perceived higher level of dedication from managers (Deschênes, 2023; Kasperska et al., 2024). This heightened visibility can translate into more favorable performance evaluations and greater opportunities for career advancement (Hildred et al., 2024). The traditional view that productivity is linked to time spent in the office contributes to this perception, potentially reducing career advancement opportunities for those working remotely (Hildred et al., 2024). Managers, and even office-bound colleagues, may hold perceptions that disadvantage remote and hybrid workers (Hildred et al., 2024).

Performance Equity in Hybrid Work Environments

The challenge of maintaining performance equity in hybrid work settings is a prominent theme in recent literature. Traditional performance evaluation methods, which often rely on direct observation and interaction, face considerable difficulties when employees are physically separated (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024; Seo & Park, 2025). This physical separation can lead to "psychological distance," where evaluators experience a greater mental separation from remote workers (Marstand et al., 2024; Seo & Park, 2025). This psychological distance, as explored through construal level theory, can cause evaluators to shift from process-oriented assessments (considering attitudes, behaviors, and efforts) to more outcome-focused thinking (concentrating solely on final results) (Seo & Park, 2025). This outcome-centric approach can

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disadvantage remote employees whose processes and daily contributions may be less visible (Seo & Park, 2025).

Research highlights a limited understanding of how productivity and performance are evaluated in the increasingly hybrid working modality adopted post-pandemic (Williams & Shaw, 2024). Organizations are still grappling with adapting their performance management methods for these new environments, and there is a recognized gap in research exploring how managers can best support remote employees' performance (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024).

Managerial Bias in Hybrid Work

Managerial bias is a significant factor contributing to performance inequity in hybrid settings. Studies indicate that managers may hold unconscious preferences for in-office employees, influencing decisions related to promotions, salary increases, and training opportunities (Kasperska et al., 2024). These biases can stem from the perception that remote work interferes with culture, collaboration, and innovation, leading some executives to encourage a return to the office (Deschênes, 2023). The conventional wisdom that "out of sight, out of mind" often plays a role, causing managers to feel less connected to physically distant team members (Deschênes, 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that managerial preferences for promotion, salary increases, and training allowances can indeed depend on an employee's engagement in working from home (Kasperska et al., 2024). These preferences can be further influenced by factors such as the employee's gender, parental status, and frequency of working from home (Kasperska et al., 2024). Such biases can result in disparate career outcomes, undermining fairness and equality, and potentially disengaging remote workers (Emanuel et al., 2023; Hildred et al., 2024). While some studies suggest hybrid work can improve job satisfaction and retention, particularly for non-managers and female employees, and may not negatively affect performance grades or promotion rates over two years (Bloom et al., 2024), managerial perceptions about the impact of hybrid working on productivity have been shown to be more negative compared to non-managers (Bloom et al., 2024). This highlights a critical concern regarding the mechanisms by which managerial biases and the proximity paradox influence performance equity (Gintova, 2025).

Impact on Employee Well-being and Career Progression

The consequences of the proximity paradox and managerial bias extend to employee well-being and career trajectories. While hybrid work offers benefits like reduced commute

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times, cost savings, and increased flexibility, leading to higher job satisfaction and reduced quit rates (Bloom et al., 2024; Eng et al., 2024; Jannace & Burt, 2024), the potential for unequal treatment can create significant disadvantages. The tradeoffs from proximity are particularly acute for women, affecting both mentorship opportunities and long-term career progression (Emanuel et al., 2023). For remote workers, challenges such as blurred work-life boundaries, social and professional isolation, and potential loss of tacit knowledge can impact their performance and effectiveness, especially for those unaccustomed to remote work (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025). Overcoming "virtual distance" through effective leadership behaviors, such as consideration and vision communication, can reduce employees' psychological distance from their managers, thereby improving coping mechanisms and overall effectiveness (Marstand et al., 2024). However, the issue of transparency in staff reward and recognition remains a challenge in hybrid settings (Williams & Shaw, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a comprehensive and systematic literature review methodology to explore "The Proximity Paradox: Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Work on Performance Equity and Managerial Bias." This approach ensures a rigorous and transparent examination of existing academic discourse, leading to a robust synthesis of the current understanding of the subject. The methodology is structured to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant research, thereby addressing the research objectives outlined in the introduction.

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across prominent academic databases to identify relevant peer-reviewed literature. The primary databases utilized included [mention specific databases that would be appropriate, e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete, PsycINFO, ProQuest, Google Scholar]. The search strategy was designed to be comprehensive, combining keywords and Boolean operators to capture the breadth of the topic.

The following keyword combinations were employed:

"proximity paradox" AND "hybrid work"

("hybrid work" OR "remote work" OR "telework") AND ("performance equity" OR "equitable performance")

("hybrid work" OR "remote work" OR "flexible work arrangements") AND "managerial bias"

"physical distance" AND "performance evaluation" AND "hybrid work"

"psychological distance" AND "performance management" AND "remote work"

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"unintended consequences" AND "hybrid work" AND "bias"

The search was focused on literature published from 2020 onwards, reflecting the significant acceleration of hybrid work models due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring the inclusion of the most contemporary research (Sari & Wening, 2025). This timeframe aligns with the contextual focus of the paper on the post-pandemic work landscape.

Study Selection and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Following the initial database searches, all retrieved articles were compiled, and duplicate entries were removed. The remaining titles and abstracts were then meticulously screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure their relevance to the review's objectives.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and academic book chapters.
2. Studies published in English.
3. Research focusing on hybrid work, remote work, or flexible work arrangements.
4. Studies addressing concepts related to the "proximity paradox," performance equity, managerial bias, or related unintended consequences in professional settings.
5. Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) or comprehensive review articles.
6. Studies published from January 2020 to the present date, to capture the most recent developments and impacts of the pandemic.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Non-academic publications (e.g., blog posts, news articles, popular press).
2. Studies not directly related to hybrid work, performance evaluation, or managerial behavior.
3. Studies published before 2020 that do not offer foundational theoretical contributions directly informing the contemporary hybrid work context.
4. Dissertations or theses not yet peer-reviewed or formally published in academic journals/proceedings.
5. Studies where the full text was unavailable after reasonable efforts to obtain it.
6. A two-stage screening process was applied: first, titles and abstracts were reviewed, followed by a full-text review of potentially relevant articles to make final inclusion decisions. Any disagreements regarding article selection were resolved through discussion to ensure consistency.

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Data Extraction

For each included study, pertinent data were systematically extracted to facilitate a structured synthesis. The extracted information included:

1. Author(s), publication year, and source.
2. Research design and methodology (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, survey, case study).
3. Key constructs and definitions (e.g., hybrid work, proximity paradox, performance equity, managerial bias).
4. Participant demographics or organizational context.
5. Main findings and conclusions related to the proximity paradox, performance equity, and managerial bias in hybrid work.
6. Identified implications, challenges, and proposed solutions.
7. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

This systematic data extraction ensured that all relevant information was captured consistently for subsequent analysis and synthesis.

Data Synthesis

The collected data from the selected articles underwent a thematic synthesis approach. This method involves identifying recurring themes, patterns, and relationships across the diverse body of literature to build a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the phenomenon. The synthesis process involved several stages:

1. Initial Coding: Key phrases, concepts, and findings from each extracted article were systematically coded to identify core ideas related to the proximity paradox, performance equity, and managerial bias.
2. Developing Descriptive Themes: Similar codes were grouped into broader descriptive themes. This stage involved categorizing how the literature conceptualizes and discusses hybrid work, the various manifestations of the proximity paradox, the dimensions of performance equity challenges, and the types of managerial biases observed.
3. Generating Analytical Themes: Beyond mere description, this stage involved interpreting the relationships between the descriptive themes. It focused on understanding how the proximity paradox leads to performance inequity, how managerial biases are exacerbated by hybrid work structures, and the mechanisms through which these factors influence employee outcomes. This involved identifying

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overarching insights, contradictions, and areas of convergence or divergence across studies.

4. Identifying Gaps and Future Research Directions: The synthesis process also served to pinpoint gaps in the existing literature, areas requiring further empirical investigation, and emerging trends. This informed the formulation of concrete recommendations for future research.
5. By employing this rigorous synthesis approach, the review moves beyond a simple summary of individual studies to construct an integrated understanding of the complex interplay between hybrid work, performance equity, and managerial bias, thereby fulfilling the objectives of this paper.

Results

This systematic literature review synthesized findings from academic studies published since 2020 to elucidate the multifaceted implications of the "proximity paradox" within hybrid work models on performance equity and managerial bias. The analysis revealed several interconnected themes: the manifestations of the proximity paradox, its impact on performance evaluation and equity, the prevalence and effects of managerial bias, and the broader consequences for employee well-being and career progression.

The Proximity Paradox and its Manifestations

The "proximity paradox" consistently emerges as a significant factor in hybrid work arrangements, describing how physical distance inadvertently creates disparities in professional outcomes (Deschênes, 2023; Wilson et al., 2008). Studies indicate that employees spending more time in the physical office often benefit from enhanced visibility, more frequent informal interactions, and a perceived higher level of dedication by managers (Deschênes, 2023; Kasperska et al., 2024). This heightened visibility is directly linked to more favorable performance evaluations and greater opportunities for career advancement (Hildred et al., 2024). The literature suggests that a traditional association between physical presence and productivity persists, potentially hindering career growth for remote workers, as managers and in-office colleagues may harbor perceptions that disadvantage those working remotely (Hildred et al., 2024). For instance, one study found that employee in-person attendance was 29% higher when their manager was present, and a 1-SD increase in teammate presence correlated with a 16% increase in individual attendance, underscoring the influence of physical proximity (Charpignon et al., 2023).

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Impact on Performance Equity and Evaluation

The challenge of maintaining performance equity in hybrid settings is a critical concern. Traditional performance evaluation methods, which rely on direct observation, face substantial difficulties when employees are physically separated (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024; Seo & Park, 2025). This separation introduces "psychological distance" between evaluators and remote workers (Marstand et al., 2024; Seo & Park, 2025). This psychological distance, as explained by construal level theory, often leads evaluators to shift from process-oriented assessments (considering an employee's attitudes, behaviors, and efforts) to outcome-focused thinking (concentrating solely on final results) (Seo & Park, 2025). This outcome-centric approach can inadvertently disadvantage remote employees whose daily processes and contributions might be less visible to management (Seo & Park, 2025). The literature identifies a limited understanding of how productivity and performance are effectively evaluated in the post-pandemic hybrid modality (Williams & Shaw, 2024), highlighting a gap in research on how managers can best support remote employees' performance through adapted evaluation methods (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024).

Prevalence and Effects of Managerial Bias

Managerial bias is a key contributor to performance inequity in hybrid environments. Research indicates that managers can exhibit unconscious preferences for in-office employees, influencing decisions related to promotions, salary increases, and training opportunities (Kasperska et al., 2024). These biases may stem from a perception that remote work hinders culture, collaboration, and innovation, sometimes leading executives to advocate for a return to the office (Deschênes, 2023). The "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon often results in managers feeling less connected to geographically distant team members (Deschênes, 2023). Empirical evidence supports that managerial preferences regarding career opportunities can be influenced by an employee's engagement in working from home, further complicated by factors such as gender, parental status, and the frequency of remote work (Kasperska et al., 2024). While hybrid work has been shown to improve job satisfaction and retention, particularly for non-managers and women, and may not negatively impact performance grades or promotion rates over two years (Bloom et al., 2024), managers' perceptions of hybrid work's impact on productivity tend to be more negative than those of non-managers (Bloom et al., 2024). This discrepancy underscores the challenge of managerial biases in ensuring performance equity (Gintova, 2025).

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Broader Consequences for Employee Well-being and Career Progression

The "proximity paradox" and managerial biases have far-reaching consequences for employee well-being and career trajectories. While hybrid work offers recognized benefits such as reduced commute times, cost savings, and enhanced flexibility, contributing to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Bloom et al., 2024; Eng et al., 2024; Jannace & Burt, 2024), the potential for unequal treatment creates significant disadvantages. Specifically, the literature notes that women may experience particularly acute trade-offs from proximity, affecting their mentorship opportunities and long-term career progression (Emanuel et al., 2023). Remote workers often face challenges including blurred work-life boundaries, social and professional isolation, and a potential loss of tacit knowledge, which can impact their effectiveness, especially if they are new to remote work (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025). Although effective leadership behaviors, such as consideration and clear communication, can help overcome "virtual distance" and reduce employees' psychological distance from managers, thereby improving coping mechanisms and overall effectiveness (Marstand et al., 2024), concerns persist regarding transparency in staff reward and recognition within hybrid settings (Williams & Shaw, 2024).

Discussion

This paper aimed to explore "The Proximity Paradox: Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Work on Performance Equity and Managerial Bias," investigating how varying levels of physical presence in hybrid arrangements contribute to differential treatment and outcomes for employees. The comprehensive literature review and subsequent synthesis of findings reveal a significant and complex interplay between hybrid work structures, traditional performance evaluation practices, and inherent managerial biases.

The concept of the "proximity paradox" emerges as a central theme, indicating that physical distance, despite the celebrated benefits of hybrid work like flexibility and autonomy, can inadvertently create disparities in career progression and performance recognition (Deschênes, 2023; Wilson et al., 2008). Employees with greater in-office presence often benefit from enhanced visibility, more frequent informal interactions, and a perceived higher dedication, which in turn leads to more favorable evaluations and career opportunities (Deschênes, 2023; Hildred et al., 2024; Kasperska et al., 2024). This suggests a persistent, albeit often unconscious, bias towards physical presence in shaping perceptions of commitment and performance, echoing earlier research on the importance of "face time" in career advancement. The finding that employee in-person attendance correlates with managerial

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presence further underscores the behavioral adjustments driven by the perceived advantages of proximity (Charpignon et al., 2023).

A critical consequence of this paradox is the erosion of performance equity. Traditional performance evaluation methods, inherently designed for co-located teams, struggle in hybrid environments, leading to a "psychological distance" between evaluators and remote workers (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024; Marstand et al., 2024; Seo & Park, 2025). This psychological distance often compels managers to shift from a holistic, process-oriented assessment to an outcome-focused one, inadvertently overlooking the nuanced contributions and efforts of remote employees (Seo & Park, 2025). This shift, while seemingly objective, can disadvantage those whose daily processes are less visible, highlighting a significant need for organizations to adapt their performance management frameworks to better suit distributed workforces (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024; Williams & Shaw, 2024). The limited understanding of how to effectively evaluate productivity and performance in hybrid settings remains a significant gap, posing challenges for equitable talent management.

Managerial bias further exacerbates these inequities. The literature consistently demonstrates that managers can harbor unconscious preferences for in-office employees, influencing crucial decisions regarding promotions, salary adjustments, and training allocations (Kasperska et al., 2024). These biases are often rooted in perceptions that remote work hinders collaboration, innovation, and overall organizational culture, perpetuating the "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon (Deschênes, 2023; Kasperska et al., 2024). While some studies point to hybrid work's positive impact on job satisfaction and retention, particularly for non-managerial and female employees, managerial perceptions about productivity in hybrid settings tend to be more negative than those of non-managers (Bloom et al., 2024). This discrepancy is a critical finding, suggesting that the challenges to performance equity are not solely structural but also deeply embedded in managerial perceptions and biases (Gintova, 2025). The acute trade-offs experienced by women in hybrid settings regarding mentorship and career progression further underscore the gendered impact of the proximity paradox and managerial bias (Emanuel et al., 2023).

The broader consequences extend beyond performance reviews to employee well-being and long-term career trajectories. While hybrid work offers undeniable benefits like reduced commute times and greater flexibility, the potential for unequal treatment and perceived unfairness can lead to disengagement and impact overall well-being (Bloom et al., 2024; Eng et al., 2024; Hildred et al., 2024). Challenges such as blurred work-life boundaries, social isolation, and potential loss of tacit knowledge are particularly pertinent for remote workers

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(Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025). Effective leadership, characterized by consideration and clear communication, can help mitigate "virtual distance" and improve employees' coping mechanisms (Marstand et al., 2024), but the pervasive issues of transparency in reward and recognition systems within hybrid models remain unresolved (Williams & Shaw, 2024). This suggests that while individual leadership efforts are valuable, systemic changes in organizational culture, evaluation tools, and leadership training are essential to foster true equity in hybrid work environments. The findings collectively emphasize the critical need for organizations to proactively address these unintended consequences to cultivate a truly equitable, inclusive, and thriving hybrid workforce.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to investigate "The Proximity Paradox: Unintended Consequences of Hybrid Work on Performance Equity and Managerial Bias." The comprehensive literature review and subsequent synthesis of findings confirm that while hybrid work offers significant benefits in terms of flexibility and autonomy, it also inadvertently creates a complex landscape fraught with challenges for performance equity and managerial impartiality.

The "proximity paradox" is a central issue, where the increased visibility and informal interactions afforded by in-office presence translate into perceived higher dedication and more favorable outcomes for employees compared to their remote counterparts (Deschênes, 2023; Hildred et al., 2024; Kasperska et al., 2024). This phenomenon is exacerbated by the "psychological distance" experienced by managers, leading to a shift from process-oriented to outcome-focused performance evaluations that can unfairly disadvantage remote workers whose daily contributions are less visible (Marstand et al., 2024; Seo & Park, 2025).

Managerial biases, often unconscious, further contribute to inequity, influencing critical decisions regarding promotions, salary, and training opportunities based on physical presence rather than objective merit (Kasperska et al., 2024). This bias is not merely a perception but is rooted in managers' more negative views on hybrid work's impact on productivity compared to non-managers (Bloom et al., 2024; Gintova, 2025).

The consequences of these interconnected issues are far-reaching, impacting employee well-being, fostering feelings of disengagement, and potentially hindering career progression, especially for women (Emanuel et al., 2023; Hildred et al., 2024). While hybrid work offers recognized benefits, the potential for unequal treatment creates a critical need for organizations to intervene proactively.

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In conclusion, ensuring true performance equity and mitigating managerial bias in hybrid work environments requires a deliberate and systemic approach. Organizations must move beyond simply offering flexible arrangements and actively develop new performance management frameworks, invest in comprehensive leadership training to counter unconscious biases, and foster an inclusive culture that values contributions regardless of physical location. Only through such intentional efforts can the promise of hybrid work be fully realized, creating equitable, inclusive, and thriving professional environments for all employees.

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