Supporting Employee Well-being in Remote and Hybrid Work: Considering Workplace Technologies and Policies with a Focus on Social Factors

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New remote and hybrid work styles introduce both benefits and challenges for well-being. Benefits are increases in workers' autonomy and flexibility, and many challenges relate to communication difficulties. We propose a grand challenge to design workplaces that retain the apparent benefits of remote work styles while addressing communication and social difficulties. We approach this with an emphasis on social well-being, meaning that we are concerned with individuals' relationships with other people and with balancing individual freedom with social harmony. We describe several factors that should be considered to pursue this challenge and reflect on our hopes for the workshop.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Well-being, remote work, hybrid work

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a sea change in work styles, resulting in increases in both fully remote work and hybrid work, where employees work part of the time in the office and part of the time from somewhere else [9, 56, 66]. There are mixed results about the relationship between remote work and well-being [40, 46, 70]. Benefits for well-being include increased flexibility and autonomy over when and where employees work [5, 26, 36, 60, 67], which can improve workers' ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance [49]. On the other hand, remote work can also decrease opportunities for healthy workplace socialization, leading to isolation [5, 20, 60], a diminished sense of connection with one's colleagues [34, 49], and exacerbating mental health challenges [18, 44, 47]. Crucially, people who work remotely may experience decreased coworker support, which can negatively impact their productivity, sense of meaning, perceived stress, and health challenges [28]. Hybrid work styles have the potential to balance some of these issues, although there is still no consensus on the overall relationship between hybrid work and well-being. Hybrid work is generally viewed positively by employees [9, 56, 66] and has been positively associated with job satisfaction, collaboration, and communication [62]. On the other hand, there are still challenges related to socialization, emotional burnout, widening disparities among members of hybrid teams working in office-based versus remote formats, and gender inequality.

1.1 Grand challenge

In sum, remote and hybrid work simultaneously pose profound benefits and challenges for workers' psychological and social well-being. This leads to our grand challenge: **Designing workplaces that preserve remote work's apparent benefits for individual autonomy and flexibility, while also supporting healthy worker relationships, support networks, and collective harmony.**

2 ADDRESSING THE GRAND CHALLENGE

Our approach to this problem is oriented around the concept of social well-being. There are various definitions of social well-being, which generally orient around the quality of one's relationships with other people [7, 35, 39, 54]. Our research group has adopted a slightly different framing of the concept of social well-being compared to prior research. Specifically, our definition is not limited to the quality of one's relationship with other people but also emphasizes a balance between individual autonomy and group harmony. This approach is derived from a concept called "self-as-we" [43], which is a holistic view of the self as a multi-agent system including both an individual and the agents that support that individual's actions. In short, an individuals' social well-being is entwined with the well-being of group(s) to which they belong. This prompts us to consider workplace well-being in terms of reciprocal relationships among members of a workplace.

The HCI community is well-positioned to address this challenge, which requires a deep understanding of new and legacy communication technologies, workplace policies, and human relationships. We encourage a socio-technical approach that considers these factors as components of a complex system. In doing so, it is important to balance multiple concerns, several of which we describe below.

2.1 Fostering healthy communication

Remote work styles can contribute to social isolation [5, 27, 63], communication difficulties [32], and less feeling of connection to one's colleagues [34, 49]. A 2021 study of Microsoft employees [69] found that, after remote work, communication networks became more siloed, with less bridging communication between disparate teams. Such barriers to communication can result in distrust and negative perceptions of remote-working peers [3], particularly toward weak ties [68]. These challenges relate to the *distance matters* hypothesis [48], which states that communication effectiveness during remote work is affected by common ground, coupling of work, collaboration readiness, and collaboration technology readiness. In addition to moderating communication effectiveness, recent work [13] has suggested that several of these factors affect remote workers' well-being (common ground, collaboration readiness, and collaboration technology readiness).

One factor that seems particularly important is that remote work reduces changes for spontaneous communication [45] To that end, way that the HCI community has attempted to address this challenge by proposing systems that foster informal communication, such as a robot system that triggers conversations [37], tools that indicate availability during work [55], or systems for informal communication during conferences [50, 57]. Another approach is to encourage rituals of communication in order to facilitate shared awareness and common ground [4, 15]. These are promising steps, but communication challenges remain, and thus, future work is needed.

2.2 Managing unhealthy communication

An important counterbalance to the above point is the fact that not all workplace communication is healthy. Workplace incivility, bullying, and harassment have significant negative effects on employee's well-being and job satisfaction [21, 38, 52, 52, 71, 71]. Some studies have asserted that increased online communication during work results in more of these harmful behaviours [23, 65]. However, other research has identified that remote work leads to less workplace bullying [12]. Thus, there is a need to better understand the relationships between technology, work style, and harmful communication behaviours. Such knowledge can guide efforts to protect against harmful communication.

There are opportunities for technology-based interventions, such as systems that identify and moderate "toxic" communications [6, 11, 14, 24, 31, 51] or design frictions to reduce impulsive incivility [1, 41]. While these approaches have merit, communication monitoring systems themselves can negatively impact workers' well-being [8]. Thus, technical interventions should be accompanied by supportive policies and the creation of healthy workplace communication norms. Perhaps most importantly, if and when harmful communication occurs, it is vital to create opportunities for peer support to alleviate its harms [2, 10].

2.3 Work-life boundaries and peer expectations

Although remote work is generally associated with increased autonomy and freedom, it can also result in a problematic blurring of lines between work and home. For example, a systematic review [64] reported that mandatory remote work during the pandemic had a complex effect on work-family conflict, which is negatively associated with well-being [19]. Women appeared to experience more work-family conflict than men and worse well-being impacts as a result [17, 59]. In addition to work-family conflict, remote workers may more generally struggle to redefine their home as a workspace, particularly if their home lacks a dedicated area for work [16]. Amid this blurring of boundaries, colleagues' expectations may contribute to further difficulties. The availability of tools for effectively working from home may increase expectations for constant availability [42]. Further, owing to communication barriers discussed in Section 2.1, it may be difficult for colleagues to tell whether remote workers are actually working, creating perceived demands to prove one's productivity [4].

To address this set of challenges, HCI has the potential to contribute to ways of working that enforce healthy work-home boundaries [15, 25], tools to coordinate family caregiving [58], and technologies and policies to manage colleagues' expectations [4].

2.4 Long-term orientation

The pandemic motivated a rapid increase in remote work, which in turn led to an explosion of related studies. These studies have been extremely fruitful, but it is also important to consider how the circumstances surrounding remote are rapidly changing, since our current understanding of the relationship between well-being and contemporary remote work is coloured by the particular circumstances of the pandemic. For example, concern about Coronavirus has been found to moderate the relationship between social isolation and remote work [61]. Further, owing to the suddenness of the pandemic, many workers were suddenly mandated to work remotely with insufficient preparation [33], which is likely to have exacerbated some stressful aspects of this work style. Even though there are calls to return to the office, it seems clear that remote and hybrid work are here to stay, in some form or another [29]. Consequently, it is important to update our knowledge as new work styles continue to shift and to plan ahead to address long-term impacts.

Another crucial challenge is to consider long-term effects on workers' well-being. While we are aware of several immediate benefits and challenges related to remote work, the large-scale transition to remote and hybrid work models will give rise to new challenges that are difficult to predict in the present. Prominent among these is the question of professional development. Although digital communications tools are excellent for sharing explicit knowledge, exchanging tacit knowledge and knowhow can be challenging in remote contexts [22, 53]. This kind of knowledge transfer affects successful career development, which is an essential part of long-term well-being.

Continued research can serve to update the HCI community's knowledge as new communication technologies and workplace norms emerge. In the course of this research, scholars should attend to shifting balances, since solving one set of technology-related problems may re-open previously "solved" problems or create new ones [30]. In sum, the best-practices for serving well-being in new work styles will be in constant flux, and so HCI approaches must support flexibility and adaptability.

3 CONCLUSION

We have proposed a grand challenge to address social-wellbeing in remote and hybrid work contexts. We have described several factors that we believe must be considered simultaneously in pursuit of this goal. Thus, our vision is of continually evolving HCI contributions to contemporary work, focused on technologies, policies, and norms to support individual autonomy and social harmony. At the workshop, we hope to discuss how to integrate our perspective of social well-being with various other approaches. In our view, well-being needs may vary across professional, individual, and cultural contexts, and thus there is no single set of best practices. Based on this motivation, we look forward to exchanging ideas to design healthy workplaces of the future, whilst balancing multiple, sometimes competing, challenges and goals.

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