



How Hybrid Work Affects Career Advancement

BY DAVID CASE





Hybrid and remote work options remain popular, but an AMA/MCE survey has found discrepancies in how men and women are benefiting from these work arrangements and the effects on team building.

The office has changed.

Several years after the pandemic emptied offices around the world, and about 300 years after the construction of the first “modern” purpose-built office building, desks remain stubbornly vacant, hovering around 50% occupancy of pre-COVID levels in major U.S. cities.

Despite high-profile efforts by companies such as Amazon and JPMorgan Chase to push return-to-the office policies, occupancy rates have barely budged in a year. The rise of hybrid and remote options represents a precipitous shift, affecting many millions of workers and significantly changing office culture. Most white-collar workers are staying close to home for at least part of the week, interacting digitally from dens, bedrooms, and coffee shops. Perhaps never again will it be normal for most people to commute five days a week.

Instead, organizations are engaged in a dialogue with their employees about when, where, and under what circumstances they fulfill their responsibilities. The notions of being in the same office, the same country, or even what it means to be an employee are being challenged. Rather than meeting in

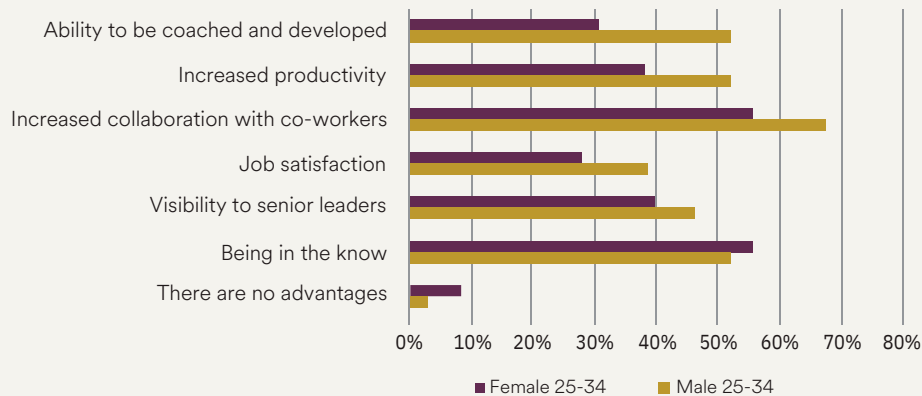
conference rooms and chatting by the coffee machine, the digital cloud has now become the connector for many. On the other hand, attending in-person meetings, having lunch with co-workers, or stopping by a leader's office helps build relationships for those who are working in the office.

These changes are having a profound impact, one that organizations need to manage and adapt to. To get a better sense of the effects—particularly on women, but on workplace dynamics more generally—the American Management Association (AMA) and the Management Centre Europe (MCE) conducted a wide-ranging survey of 1,000 U.S. knowledge workers.

Respondents split roughly into thirds when reporting that they work in an office five days a week, three or four days, or two or fewer days, and there was a negligible difference between respondents and their supervisors. Surprisingly, for such a radical change, we received a lot of positive news.

The results of the survey are summarized in the whitepaper *How Hybrid Work Affects Career Advancement with Disparities Based on Gender and Age*, available from AMA/MCE.

Advantages of Working in the Office for Early-Career Male vs. Female



In addition, the findings were presented and discussed at the recent briefing *Success in a Hybrid World: What It Takes to Advance Your Talent*, held in New York City and hosted by the AMA/MCE Women's Leadership Center. The briefing specifically highlighted survey data that reflected the impact of hybrid work on career advancement for women, with an expert panel moderating an in-depth discussion among guests from a wide range of industries sharing their own experiences with hybrid work.

AMA/MCE found that hybrid work enjoys broad support among women and men, across every age group and with senior and junior employees alike. Hybrid is especially valued by mid-career women, who shoulder an excess burden of caring for children and aging parents, as many family and household duties still fall on them.

But AMA/MCE also uncovered evidence of unsettling discrepancies. Notably, we found meaningful differences between how men and women are benefiting from the new, more fluid work arrangement, and in how they regard the office. Among the biggest concerns we uncovered:

- Far more young men than women said they were advancing by working from the office.
- Men are significantly more likely to derive key benefits from in-office work.
- Collaboration and rapport building have suffered setbacks.
- Although training is booming, many organizations are falling behind in preparing managers for the workplace shift and training ambitious employees.

To this point, Kelly Botti, president and chief executive officer of TruMark Financial Credit Union, commented at the New York briefing that the pandemic made clear that many managers are just managing and not leading their people, saying, "Leadership isn't about you, it's about them."

Organizations that fail to manage such discrepancies could jeopardize the progress they have made in promoting equity and could find themselves at a competitive disadvantage.

Men recognize more advantages of working in an office than women

Some of our most striking findings pertain to the critical differences between how men and women perceive office-based work. This is particularly true for early-career men, who generally spend more time in the office than women.

Fifty-two percent of men aged 25 to 34 work from the office at least four days a week, compared to 46% of their female counterparts, and fewer work two or fewer days from home (28% of men vs. 37% of women).

When asked about the advantages of working in the office, early-career men were more likely than women of the same age to report greater visibility to senior leaders (46% for men vs. 40% for women) and substantially more likely to say it improved their job satisfaction (39% vs. 28%), productivity (52% vs. 38%), and ability to collaborate with co-workers (67% vs. 56%).

Most poignantly, early-career men widely believe that they are getting ahead by working in the office: 52% said it improved

their ability to be coached and developed, compared to just 30% of women in the same age group.

There are different ways to interpret this 22-percentage-point discrepancy. One possibility is that women don't believe they need to go to the office to advance. In companies with intentional mentoring initiatives or well-developed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, this may be the case. In the context of historic biases, however, a more likely interpretation is that young women are simply not getting the same advancement opportunities—either in or out of the office—and that systemic gender inequity will persist for yet another generation unless organizations proactively address it.

Given the broad advantages cited by early-career men in the workplace, the most likely conclusion is that the office tends to be an inherently male playing field, more palatable to men and therefore favouring their success. They feel less motivated when working remotely. Men generally feel more at ease in offices, more productive, and more connected and are better able to advance their careers.

This suggests that although women prize workplace flexibility (as we discuss below), the office may be acting as a springboard for young men, helping them advance more quickly. This could be exacerbating the “broken rung” effect, in which fewer women become leaders because they are disproportionately overlooked for critical early-career promotions, from entry level to manager.

Some, but not all, of the stark differences between how early-career men and women viewed the advantages of working in the office persisted for older workers. Men aged 35 to 44 said that working from the office provided significantly greater visibility to senior leaders

(50% vs. 37%) and enhanced job satisfaction (40% vs. 27%).

If organizations are going to continue hybrid work—and there are compelling reasons for them to do so, as we discuss below—they need to do a better job of balancing coaching and development across genders. They need to ensure that women are equally comfortable and recognized in the workplace.

This same theme was echoed in the New York briefing. According to one of the expert panellists at the event, Pamela Booker, head of education, Fragrance & Beauty for Chanel, “We had to amp up our ability to listen to our employees. Ask questions and listen closely to them to see what they need.”

The bottom line: If men prefer the office, and it offers them greater advancement opportunities, organizations that favour office work could alienate women and be dominated by men. This would result in backsliding on DEI and keep more men at the top of the corporate ladder.

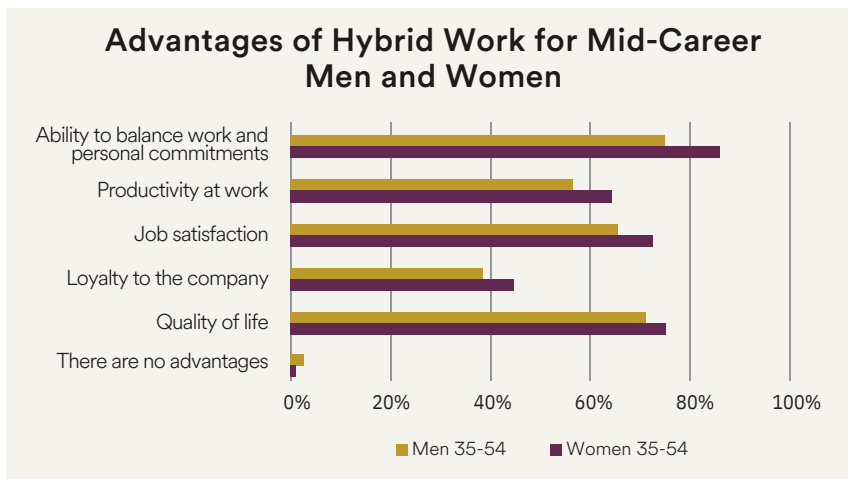
Hybrid and remote work affect team-building capabilities

Teamwork is everything in the modern economy. It's the bond that keeps organizations functioning effectively, the machine that gets work done, and the magic that turns ideas into innovations. Team building depends on the ability of employees to collaborate effectively and develop rapport with one another. Yet we found that the post-pandemic work arrangement has had an adverse impact on rapport and collaboration.

About half (51%) of respondents who work remotely at least one weekday said remote work hinders rapport building. The proportion jumped to two-thirds (67%) for those who go to an office daily. The more senior the employee,

the greater the struggle in building rapport with remote workers, with 65% of executives citing it as an issue. Men reported greater difficulty with this than women, particularly men aged 25 to 34 (67%) and 45 to 54 (57%).

In addition to rapport-building challenges, many respondents (43%) also said that remote work hinders collaboration. Like rapport building, this was more commonly an issue for men



(49%) than women (38%) and for more senior employees (65% of executives).

Of course, collaboration and rapport have changed radically since the pandemic, and yet they are integral to the effective functioning of a competitive organization. These days, employees are expected to have both traditional team-building skills and the self-direction to effectively collaborate from afar.

AMA/MCE believes that collaborative success depends on four factors:

- Developing trust, which in a hybrid environment needs to be achieved without face-to-face interaction
- Leading with influence to support teamwork with “soft power,” meaning by inspiring rather than directing
- Working fluidly across boundaries by learning colleagues’ approach to work, collaboration style, and cultural references
- Demonstrating global awareness, so that an individual can be an active, informed teammate and leader.

Our experience has shown that these skills can be developed with the proper training.

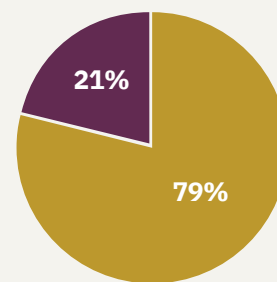
In the New York briefing, panelist Marissa Wells, associate director, leadership and learning excellence at Johnson & Johnson, commented, “We aimed to get really intentional with the skills we valued as an organization. Our key categories are effective communication, influencing with and without authority, developing yourself and developing others, and strategic leadership.”

Hybrid enjoys broad support, particularly for mid-career women

Despite the challenges previously discussed, respondents overwhelmingly cited advantages to a hybrid work environment.

A large majority said that it had improved their organization’s culture (48%) or had not changed it (36%), leaving only 15% who said it had a negative effect. Bosses are on board as well. Among respondents who work remotely at least one weekday, only 11% said their supervisor did not support hybrid work. And the vast majority of workers cited numerous benefits of hybrid work. Roughly three-quarters said it helped them balance work and personal commitments (79%), enhanced quality of life (73%), and improved job satisfaction (70%). Additionally, 6 in 10 (62%) said hybrid work made them more productive. There was strong support for hybrid work at all levels. Consistent

Lost Opportunity: Respondents Eager to Advance Who Receive Training and Development



■ Yes, I'm receiving training and development ■ No, I'm not

with other studies that found that senior employees want flexibility, executives expressed strong support for hybrid work. They were slightly more likely than average to say it improved their productivity (68% of executives vs. 62% on average) and their loyalty to the company (46% vs. 43%). Of the 1,000 respondents to our survey, only a small number (23) failed to cite any advantages to hybrid work. The support for hybrid work was so strong that organizations could benefit from carefully honing their flexible working policies to improve the employee experience and optimize recruiting and retention.

We found that hybrid work was particularly important to women aged 35 to 54. In this critical mid-career age bracket, many employees have children and/or aging parents to look after. Other recent surveys have confirmed that this burden falls disproportionately on women. An April 13, 2023 Pew Research Center study, “In a Growing Share of U.S. Marriages, Husbands and Wives Earn About the Same,” concluded that “husbands spend more time on paid work and leisure, while wives devote more time to caregiving and housework.”

Women in this age group reported in greater numbers than their male counterparts that hybrid work improves productivity (65% for women vs. 57% for men), job satisfaction (73% vs. 66%), loyalty to the company (45% vs. 39%), and quality of life (74% vs. 70%).

Most significantly, this group said that remote work improved their ability to balance work and personal commitments (87% vs. 75%). These results suggest that a thriving hybrid culture is essential to supporting workplace gender equity. While companies cannot directly affect the balance of household labor and caregiving, by implementing flexible work policies they may improve overburdened women’s ability to

remain on the career path and avoid the burnout that comes from juggling too many demands. It helps the organizations they work for as well. An October 2023 report from McKinsey & Company, “Women in the Workplace 2023,” shows that low burnout rates are critical to success. It’s important to emphasize, however, that workplace flexibility is not a panacea for the “broken rung” problem, in which too few early-career women are getting promoted to manager, compared to men.

As for working in the office, we found lukewarm support but far less enthusiasm. Ease of collaboration (63%) and “being in the know” (51%) are the only two advantages reported by a majority of respondents. Otherwise, the benefits of working from an office were underwhelming. Fewer than half said it helped with visibility to senior leaders (42%), coaching and development (36%), productivity (37%), and job satisfaction (26%). About 1 in 10 (11%) said there were no advantages.



The training gap: Many organizations need to do more to support career advancement

The new normal of flexible work has profoundly changed workers’ daily routines. Often, “commuting” now means stumbling from the breakfast table to a home office. Some may be working in their pajamas. Distractions—the refrigerator, a pet, the TV, or even bed—are close at hand. How is this affecting the drive to get ahead?

We found that ambition is alive and robust in the age of hybrid work. More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) said they have a “strong desire” to advance their career. On average, men were somewhat more driven than women (85% vs. 72%), and the desire to advance declines with age. Respondents who work two or fewer weekdays in the office were slightly less likely to want to advance.

Workers are clearly ready to get to the next level, and fortunately most organizations are doing a better job of harnessing this ambition. Slightly fewer than three-quarters of respondents (73%) said they were being provided with career-building training and development opportunities. As an international training organization, we were encouraged to see such a high proportion. This raises concerns for organizations that are not providing such opportunities: Can they remain competitive? Can their employees keep up? And can they recruit the talent they need without promising them training and development? More to the point, we found that about 1 in 5 respondents (21%) who said they had a strong desire to advance were not receiving training and development. This amounts to a lost opportunity for organizations to get more from employees and could diminish loyalty in a still-tight job market.

To promote equity and ensure that hybrid work achieves its potential, organizations will need to take steps to address this and the other challenges we uncovered. Managers and leaders play a vital role in guiding their organizations through these changes, and now more than ever, they have the responsibility of making sure their organization’s employees are being developed, coached, and provided with opportunities of advancement equally across genders and various workplace environments. It is also their responsibility to recognize, acknowledge, and adjust for changes to ensure equal access to senior leaders and equal training and mentoring opportunities regardless of workplace format—remote, hybrid, or in office.

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A world map with a light grey background. A gold oval highlights the Europe, Middle East, and Africa region. The MCE logo is placed inside this oval. Other logos are placed in their respective regions: CMC in North America, AMA in South America, Asia-Pacific, and Australia.

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