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# THE EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE ON POST-PANDEMIC HYBRID WORK IN AN EMERGING MARKET

LA MIRADA DE LOS EMPLEADOS SOBRE LA MODALIDAD HÍBRIDA DE TRABAJO POST PANDEMIA EN UN MERCADO EMERGENTE

FERNANDO TROILO<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to know the opinion of employees about their current work modality, the opportunities for improvement perceived in this modality and the preferences regarding the desired work modality. To meet the objective, a quantitative approach was implemented by conducting 268 surveys of employees of private companies in the AMBA region of Argentina. The results show that, although the prevailing current modality is the hybrid one with a scheme established by the company, the modality chosen with preference is the free type without a guideline established by the organization. This points out the importance that flexibility today has in the work modality of organizations in emerging markets to attract and retain talent. Finally, areas of opportunity for improvement appear regarding the new hybrid work modalities in these types of markets, related mainly to the need to promote employees' wellness in the search for a better balance between work and personal life.

## KEY WORDS

Hybrid work, Remote work, Virtual work, Work-life balance

## RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación fue conocer la opinión de los empleados sobre su modalidad actual de trabajo, las oportunidades de mejora percibidas en esta modalidad y las preferencias en cuanto a modalidad de trabajo deseada. Para cumplir con el objetivo se implementó un abordaje cuantitativo por medio de la realización de 268 encuestas a empleados de empresas privadas en la región AMBA de Argentina. Los resultados demuestran que, si bien la modalidad actual preponderante es la híbrida con un esquema establecido por la empresa, la modalidad elegida con preferencia es la de tipo libre sin pauta establecida por la organización. Esto advierte la importancia que hoy tiene la flexibilidad en la modalidad de trabajo de los mercados emergentes para lograr atraer y fidelizar talentos. Finalmente, aparecen áreas de oportunidad de mejora sobre las nuevas modalidades híbridas de trabajo en este tipo de mercados, relacionadas principalmente con la necesidad

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de promover el bienestar de los empleados en la búsqueda de un mejor equilibrio entre la vida laboral y personal.

## **PALABRAS CLAVES**

Trabajo híbrido, Trabajo remoto, Trabajo virtual, Balance vida-trabajo

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As we already know, the Covid-19 pandemic has led organizations to reconsider traditional modes of work, predominantly governed by in-person presence. Thus, the necessity for remote work due to pandemic restrictions led to the implementation of new work modes that combine in-person and remote work, referred to as hybrid or mixed. However, some organizations chose virtuality as the predominant mode, while others favored in-person work (Fan and Moen, 2023).

Moreover, the digitization processes initiated by organizations before the pandemic, but significantly boosted by it, have made remote work modes increasingly viable and meaningful within organizations. Pärli (2022) says that these changes are part of a context that supports not only new ways of working but also new relationships between employer and employee.

This new post-pandemic work scenario raises the need to analyze its consequences for employee experience, as well as for organizations, their productivity, and sustainability. So, it's important to inquire from the perspective of individuals how they perceive these new work modes to understand their levels of satisfaction and expectations (O'Brien, et al. 2023).

As affirmed by Shodiq and Syamsudin (2019), the world underwent a radical change in early March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the disease known as Covid-19 a pandemic. The declaration of the pandemic and its global effects, particularly in Latin America and specifically in Argentina, posed a series of challenges and unprecedented issues.

According to Suarez Villacis and Bravo Leon (2022), the strict lockdown measures imposed to slow down Covid-19 transmission have resulted in a cultural shift, changing habits, relationships, and routines both in personal and work life. Companies had to either take a compulsory step or accelerate the digital transformation processes to continue their operations. This situation forced companies to implement new work forms, digital and collaborative environments for as many employees as possible. These new remote work modes are now becoming permanent for some parts of companies that have learned that productivity is achievable without the need for physical presence in company offices and face-to-face interaction among employees. According to the authors, technology was already driving company modernization before the pandemic, but Covid-19 mitigation measures expedited digital transformation decisions to find suitable tools to overcome the crisis challenges and continue growing.

Butragueño et al. (2021) state that the change in the way we worked due to Covid-19 has brought about a societal transformation, rapidly and sometimes unplanned, creating a "new work environment." This led organizations at all levels, from large companies to small and medium-sized enterprises, to shift priorities and set new goals, such as designing work ecosystems that guarantee the well-being and health of individuals. They needed to develop

business continuity plans based on the "new normal," using new technologies and adapting their processes, thus altering the previous work mode where physical presence was necessary for productivity.

Following He et al. (2020), organizations are facing a significant challenge due to the social distancing measures resulting from the pandemic. Labor relationships, dynamics within organizations, and key processes in human talent management are changing, leading to the devaluation of rigid structures. Castellano et al. (2017) note that advances in information technology have accelerated changes in how work is conceived, allowing for a more flexible way of working, accessing real-time information from any device and location.

As Bennett and McWhorter (2021) express, some organizational strategies consider accelerating digital transformation as a trigger for remote work and workplace changes. Millions of people started working from home to prevent contagion while maintaining business continuity, thus participating in the era of virtual development.

Buitrago Botero (2020) points out that telecommuting emerged as a new work mode due to the pandemic. This mode involves people working from their homes or remote locations using information and communication technologies. Berruti et al. (2022) argue that remote and virtual work drove innovation in companies, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. They mention companies that quickly adopted tools and technologies to facilitate remote work, enabling greater collaboration, flexibility, and efficiency. The pandemic has also provided opportunities to reconsider how companies operate and engage with employees and customers. A study by González-González et al. (2022) analyzes Spanish companies' intentions to continue using telecommuting after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it can have a positive impact on business performance.

In the view of Castellano et al. (2017), telecommuting offers many advantages, such as increased productivity, cost savings, work-life balance, reduced stress levels, and absenteeism, and increased schedule flexibility, among others. For teleworkers, there's the benefit of flexibility not only in choosing their workspace but also in determining when they are most productive, along with the money and time saved on commuting.

However, telecommuting also presents challenges for organizations considering its adoption. Coordination difficulties arise, and the absence of direct supervision alters coordination, communication, and feedback. There's an increased risk of information loss or theft, and vulnerability of technological equipment to malicious software attacks. Moreover, greater access to technology is required for effective telecommuting, demanding more, faster, and better equipment and software.

On the other hand, the freedom that comes with remote work entails a responsibility to manage it correctly, as pointed out by Tapasco-Alzate and Giraldo-García (2020). Social isolation, loneliness, and control tools can lead telecommuters to experience excessive stress. When there's no rigid work schedule and well-defined spaces for specific tasks, and when technology allows constant work connection, the risk of always being available to the organization arises, as highlighted by Tapasco-Alzate and Giraldo-García (2018).

Regarding hybrid work, García Viña (2021) states that implementing a hybrid model, which combines in-person and remote work, involves specific phases. Firstly, analyzing and clearly defining the company's needs when considering this new model, its advantages and disadvantages, and the population it will affect. Secondly, quantifying the costs of

implementing this type of work, considering the cost-benefit relationship regarding the efficiency that can be achieved. Thirdly, it's essential to understand the employees' positions concerning this potential organizational change. Fourthly, informal discussions with worker representatives should occur to gauge their opinion and design an initial proposal with greater viability and consensus possibilities. Finally, analyzing other aspects resulting from remote work implementation, especially if there can be modifications in the initial employment terms.

As stated by Tosca-Vidal (2022), companies are seeking a new work model that aligns with the use of new information and communication technologies and the requested work flexibility. On the other hand, analyzing the hybrid model within the organization is crucial due to the benefits it brings to employees and the cost reduction for employers. Currently, remote work and the hybrid work model are the new employment modes that are necessary for an organization to remain competitive in its sector. This entails investments in technology, tools, and personnel training. The digital era requires companies and individuals to develop continually to remain competitive. Physical employee presence is no longer necessary for work; with the continuous advancement of the internet, employees need to stay updated and skilled in handling information technologies.

Hilberath et al. (2020) describe remote work and how organizations can optimize a hybrid work model that combines office and remote work. They highlight the challenges organizations face when implementing remote work, including reduced interpersonal interactions, loss of organizational culture, and the need to balance employee well-being and productivity. The authors also assert that remote work has proven effective during the pandemic but presents challenges regarding equity and mental health. Companies must work towards leveling the playing field, providing customized solutions, and encouraging shared norms to support remote work and reduce burnout and stress. They should also explore ways to maintain corporate culture and team collaboration in a virtual environment. These actions can maximize employee engagement, well-being, and productivity.

Lorca and Belli (2023) focus on the questions that have arisen in the new era of hybrid work, such as new forms of leadership and emotional well-being. They identify two main poles regarding leadership aspects, characteristics, and attitudes: responsibility and organization, and feeling valued. Each pole is defined by attitudes and behaviors that are positively valued in a leader, and they have points of connection. Together, this helps understand the leader's role in directing and organizing workgroups and how they can influence the promotion of a healthy work environment, which is essential for team members' satisfaction and well-being.

Remote work, if chosen as a fully remote work mode, also presents several challenges. According to Mahipalan and Sheena (2015), organizations must contribute to creating a meaningful workplace for employees, instilling a sense of belonging, and aligning the objectives of both parties. This same idea is put forth by Zafari, Hartner-Tiefenthaler, and Koeszegi (2019), who emphasize the alignment between the components of job autonomy, sense of belonging, and job satisfaction as the main challenge. Increasing employee autonomy through flexible work agreements is likely to improve their sense of belonging and, consequently, the alignment of organizational and employee goals.

Tomasina and Pisani (2022) develop the pros and cons of telecommuting for the workforce. Positive aspects include reduced commuting times, the ability to reconcile work and domestic activities, the inclusion of workers with disabilities, temporal flexibility, and a certain degree of autonomy. Negative aspects include family issues due to shared use of resources and technological equipment, mixing work and family life leading to tension and stress, lack of demarcation of working hours, resulting in increased workload, and reduced social life. Factors such as workspace design, lighting, noise level, computer equipment, and furniture influence the comfort and well-being of remote workers. Remote work can affect health, primarily mental and physical health. Remote work can lead to sedentary behavior since working from home reduces the worker's mobility, eliminating daily activities that used to occur when working in an office.

Peiró and Soler (2020) emphasize the need for remote work to be properly planned and structured within the company's labor system, detailing responsibilities, and establishing collaboration and coordination procedures. Adequate technology support is essential for remote work to be executed correctly. Leadership and management should be adapted to this work mode; for instance, performance evaluation should focus more on achieving objectives rather than time worked. The company should also consider necessary conditions for the new workspace and its suitability, considering various options like working from home or co-working spaces. Lastly, the company should assess employee training for this new work mode and encourage an interest in learning and openness to innovation.

Campos (2021) discusses the right to digital disconnection in telecommuting. He asserts that the right to digital disconnection for remote workers has become a key issue in the digital era, where security and health guarantees need to be strengthened by implementing new limits, changing mindsets, and establishing specific regulations. Furthermore, Fernández-Lozano (2023) discusses telecommuting and the boundaries between work and life during the pandemic, i.e., the quest for a balance between work and family. Fatigue plays a role in this relationship. Spending several hours in front of a computer affects attention to family and children and can strain relationships. Concentration difficulties in work due to family responsibilities at home are also common.

Given the recent incorporation of hybrid work in organizations, the topic presents great opportunities for study, such as the case of Argentina, where the present study is the first of its kind, opening at the local level a path to generating knowledge about hybridity in the work environment.

## **2. METHOD**

The methodological strategy involved a quantitative approach, with an exploratory-descriptive scope, through surveys directed at employees of private companies in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA) of Argentina. This region consists of the common urban zone formed by the City of Buenos Aires and 40 municipalities in the Province of Buenos Aires. This region was selected as it represents 35% of the national population and concentrates the country's private employment, an approximate total of 2.700.000 employees formally registered in the private sector, being the most densely populated geographical area and historically forming the central nucleus of the Argentine urban

system. The study population consisted of individuals located in AMBA and employed in private companies.

The sample, a non-probabilistic type, consisted of 268 responses from employees at all levels of positions. The survey was conducted between November 2022 and April 2023. Given the large size of the population, it was decided to form a convenience sample, sending the invitation to participate to an email base of employees from different private companies and publishing the invitation on the LinkedIn network. Table 1 displays the sample and participants' profiles according to various demographic variables.

**Table 1.** Sample: Participants' profiles

Demographics	Percentage of Responses
Gender	Male: 46%. Female: 54%
Age	16 to 20 years: 1%. 21 to 30 years: 13%. 31 to 45 years: 42%. 46 to 55 years: 30%. Over 55 years: 14%.
Work Experience	Less than 1 year: 2%. 1 to 5 years: 6%. 6 to 10 years: 9%. 11 to 15 years: 12%. 16 to 20 years: 20%. More than 20 years: 51%.
Position	Administrative/Operative: 2%. Analyst: 20%. Manager/Coordinator/Supervisor: 22%. Manager: 30%. Director: 17%. Owner/General Manager: 9%.
Industry	Professional Services: 25%. Technology/Telecommunications: 15%. Financial: 15%. Energy: 10%. Manufacturing: 6%. Health: 5%. Other: 24%.

The instrument used in the fieldwork for data collection with each subject was a questionnaire through an online survey, using Qualtrics software. This is a cloud-based platform for creating and distributing web-based customizable surveys, widely used for academic research.

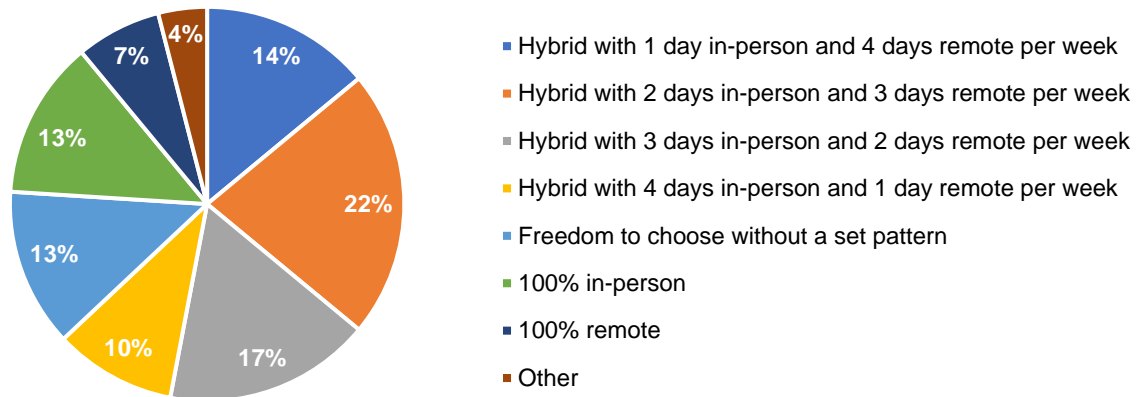
The survey encompassed the collection of demographic variables and questions or statements to gather subjects' opinions. This part of the survey consisted of a question aimed at capturing each subject's current work modality and another question aimed at eliciting their desired work modality expectation. Additionally, 16 statements were included to be rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, and 5: Strongly Agree, aiming to capture subjects' opinions regarding the perception of the impact of their current work modality on their relationship with their supervisor and colleagues, their performance, and their well-being (Table 2). These dimensions impacted by new work modalities are those mentioned as organizational aspects that must be considered by authors such as Mahipalan and Sheena (2015), Fernández-Lozano (2023), Lorca and Belli (2023). An open-ended question was also included to gather opinions about areas of improvement in their current work modality.

The data analysis procedure was conducted digitally using the same software used to collect data, being able to filter data by specific questions, report, graph, and export data. This then allowed for an analysis of each collected question or statement, looking at how the sample answered, identifying patterns, and drawing conclusions.

### 3. RESULTS

The prevailing work modality currently is the hybrid model with a structure established by the organization. This is because 63% of employees have a mixed work schedule, with a predominance of 2 days in-person and 3 days remote. Meanwhile, 13% have a fully in-person modality, 7% are entirely remote, 13% have the freedom to choose without a predefined pattern set by the organization, and 4% have some other type of modality (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Current work modality



From the percentages in each of the scale scores, for each of the 16 sentences, some factors with a greater perception of neutrality are observed. Among them, the contribution of the individual work modality to the feeling of professional fulfillment and the promotion of an effective relationship with the boss and the feedback received stand out. Also, the work modality established in general for all employees. (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Employees' perception of the impact of their current work modality on different work factors

Sentences	1	2	3	4	5
1. I am satisfied with the type of modality with which I currently work	7%	10%	10%	32%	41%
2. Enables me to effectively engage with individuals I interact with professionally	3%	5%	14%	53%	25%
3. Favors effective communication with others	3%	9%	23%	46%	19%
4. Makes me cooperate effectively with the different areas/departments of the company	3%	5%	23%	45%	24%
5. Allows for an effective relationship with my boss	3%	9%	25%	38%	25%
6. Allows my boss to give me the support I need	4%	9%	22%	42%	23%
7. Facilitates effective feedback from my supervisor	3%	12%	25%	39%	21%



8. Allows me to achieve my best performance	3%	11%	14%	42%	30%
9. Favors my work processes	3%	9%	21%	42%	25%
10. Enables me to achieve my objectives	3%	8%	15%	44%	30%
11. Allows me to apply all my knowledge and skills	3%	8%	15%	45%	29%
12. Enables me to achieve a balance with my personal life	8%	12%	13%	24%	43%
13. Enables me to effectively manage my workload	5%	13%	14%	32%	36%
14. Makes me feel emotionally and physically well	7%	8%	17%	36%	32%
15. Contributes to my feeling of professional fulfillment 59	6%	7%	28%	34%	25%
16. The work modality that my company establishes in general for all its employees favors the performance and development of the organization	5%	12%	26%	40%	17%

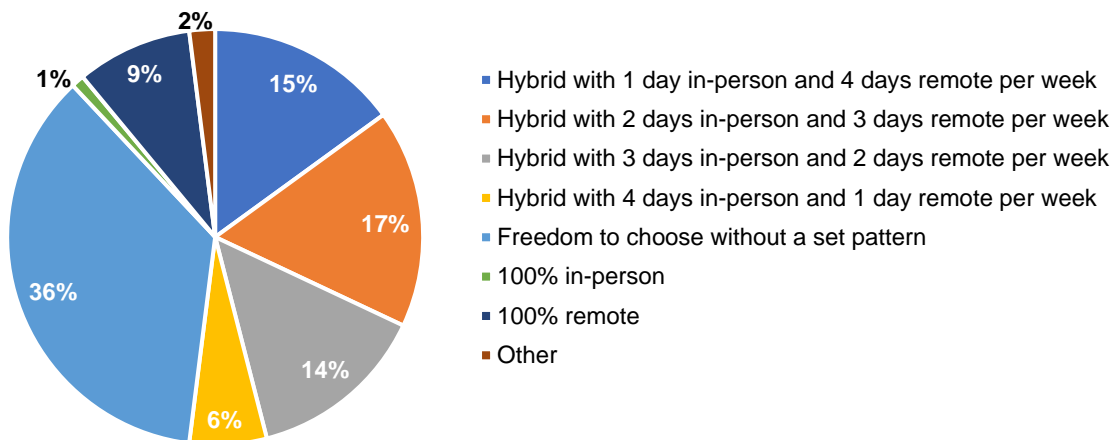
**Note:** Scale of 1 to 5, with 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4: Agree, and 5: Strongly Agree.

Among the key aspects perceived as strengths in the individual current work modality, considering strongly agree and agree averages, employees highlight the ability to effectively engage with individuals they interact with professionally, achieve their objectives, and apply all their knowledge and skills. However, employees also point out aspects perceived as opportunities for improvement, considering strongly disagree and disagree averages, such as satisfaction both with one's own current work modality and with the general modality established for all employees, with 17% of disagreement each. Notable among improvement aspects related to the current work modality are achieving a better work-life balance, with 20% of disagreement and more effectively managing workloads, with 18% of disagreement. They also consider emotional and physical well-being, with 15% of disagreement and the feedback received from their supervisors as areas for improvement, with 15% of disagreement (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Ranking of most relevant strengths and improvement opportunities perceived by employees regarding their individual current work modality

Strengths	Areas for improvement
1. Enables me to effectively engage with individuals I interact with professionally.	1. Enables me to achieve a balance with my personal life.
2. Enables me to achieve my objectives.	2. Enables me to effectively manage my workload.
3. Allows me to apply all my knowledge and skills.	3. Makes me feel emotionally and physically well.
	4. Facilitates effective feedback from my supervisor.

Regarding the preferred work modality, most of the employees would prefer not to have a predefined hybrid schedule. Thus, 36% would prefer to choose their modality freely without a predefined pattern set by the organization. In second place, with 17%, the second most preferred modality is the hybrid of 2 days in-person and 3 days remote (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Preferred work modality

The desired mode of free choice is accentuated among women, employees between 21 and 30 years old, with 6 to 10 years of work experience, at the analyst and director levels, and in the technology, telecommunications, and financial industries.

Finally, several findings are derived from employee comments. First and foremost, the importance of flexibility in the work modality for employees' work effectiveness and talent attraction is emphasized:

"I believe that flexibility and freedom for employees would make us more effective. Giving greater freedom to choose the in-person/remote work scheme would allow us to attract better talent." (Comment A)

On the other hand, employees understand that different meaning and purpose should be assigned to in-person and virtual spaces. In other words, both spaces cannot be used in the same way:

"Having worked 100% remotely during the pandemic and achieving all objectives raises the question of why we should return to partial in-person work and what purpose it serves. How is it used? To be physically present but always in virtual meetings? How to make the most of in-person presence?" (Comment B)

A technical aspect highlighted by employees is technology, seen as an indispensable condition for the viability of hybrid work in remote situations:

"The proper use of the hybrid model depends on having efficient systems and the automation of work tools." (Comment C)

Finally, employees assign importance to the role of leaders in achieving proper team management in the hybrid work modality, emphasizing the importance of building trust, aligning criteria, working towards objectives, maintaining communication and motivation, and conveying company culture:

"There's a lack of tools for leaders to manage remote teams, build trust, and standardize the modality across all areas of the company." (Comment D) "I believe that as managers, we need to evolve towards objective-based management rather than being focused on in-person presence." (Comment E) "The first challenge is maintaining team motivation and

communication. The second is conveying company culture when you're not in regular contact with your team in person." (Comment F).

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

It is evident that hybrid work is the prevailing characteristic of the new mode of work in organizations today, and it appears that it will continue to be prominent, in the "new normal" said by Butragueño et al. (2021). Although currently, this hybrid approach is mostly implemented with some framework established by the organization, employees would prefer a mode of work in which they could freely choose when to work remotely and when to do so in person, without a predefined pattern.

This does not negate the value of in-person work; rather, it suggests that the frequency of in-person work should be chosen by employees, with consideration for its purpose. In-person work, when purposeful, still holds unique value for employees.

Regarding the sentences implemented, it is important to note that the one related to the perception of the influence of the work modality established in general for all employees on the performance and development of the organization is the sentence that not only has the highest level of neutrality in the answers but also one of those with the highest levels of disagreement. This finding reinforces the need for careful planning in the implementation of hybrid work, such as that stated by García Viña (2021) when suggesting organizations follow the five phases previously described.

While hybrid work seems to address the needs of relationship-building, goal attainment and the application of knowledge and skills, which are aspects of strengths according to the results, it does present some important opportunities for improvement. The two main ones are work-life balance and effective management of workload. Already explained by authors such as Tapasco-Alzate and Giraldo-García (2020), Tomasina and Pisani (2022), one of the main risks of hybrid work and excessive virtuality is the psychological and physical health of employees.

As mentioned by Tapasco-Alzate and Giraldo-García (2020), virtual work presents the risk of stress and permanent attention to the demands of the organization. This is a critical point for organizations to address to ensure sustainability. It is essential to listen to employees, assess business needs, and create a value proposition for the mode of work that is tailored to each organization.

Given that hybrid work presents several challenges identified by employees in terms of remote team management and collaboration, in agreement with the thoughts of Hilberath et al. (2020), Peiró and Soler (2020), organizations, and particularly HR departments and people management areas must drive cultural transformation processes aimed at creating all the necessary conditions for the success of the hybrid work mode, meeting both business expectations and the needs of the individuals driving them forward.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Since the study highlights the differences between the work modalities currently implemented by organizations and the expectations of employees, the importance of implementing mechanisms to listen to the needs, interests, and expectations of employees is

evident. This is crucial to then define work modalities that truly achieve the conditions for employee well-being.

Regarding the practical implications of the research, the results of this study particularly contribute to the understanding of the management of firms from emerging economies by providing insights into how hybrid work arrangements can be optimized to attract and retain talent. This is particularly relevant for emerging economies where organizational flexibility and innovation are key to competitive advantage.

In conclusion, this study represents an initial approach to the problem, and it is important to continue analyzing the evolution of new hybrid work modalities and explore new possible research lines, such as the impact of hybridity on employee performance, productivity, and commitment. In the future, new studies could also be enriched with additional scopes, sample types, and methodological triangulation.

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