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Sense of belonging in hybrid work settings

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ABSTRACT

Despite a wealth of research on flexible work, the understanding of the social and relational implications of hybrid work—a type of flexible work that combines remote and onsite work—is limited. This qualitative study investigates how individuals experience belonging in the hybrid working context. We present findings from 32 interviews conducted at two time-points between 2020 and 2022 with 16 expert employees. Our analysis reveals particular aspects of hybrid work that are related to working remotely (Control over work and personal time; Remote working skills; Virtual communication practices) and working onsite (Human connection; Information exchange; Relevance of onsite work). Based on our research, we theorize how the physical asynchrony attached to working remotely (i.e., alone, usually at home) and the physical synchrony attached to working onsite (i.e., alongside others) may contribute to employees' sense of belonging in hybrid work. We also debate potential early signs of work loneliness, and what might constitute satisfactory work relationships in hybrid work. We encourage future research on psychological needs satisfaction in hybrid work settings and recommend that organizations deploy hybrid working models that support connection.

1. Introduction

Hybrid work, as a combination of remote and onsite work, is changing the experience of belonging at work. Flexible working arrangements, such as remote work, allow for effective asynchronous working (Glaveski, 2021), but the remote working environment significantly impacts the employee's social system. Social isolation is recognized as one of the main challenges for remote workers. When the physical and psychological distance between people increases, the interactions between people change their form and can even break off altogether (Becker, Belkin, Tuskey, & Conroy, 2022; Kangas, Pensar, & Rousi, 2023). The implementation of hybrid working models enables meeting other people without the physical distance associated with remote work. However, physical asynchrony is a reality. People tend to go to the office at different times, and foreseeing when colleagues could be met face-to-face, or even via digital communication tools, may be difficult. Thus, hybrid work introduces a new balancing act between employee isolation and working alongside others.

Transitioning to hybrid working models while fostering employee belonging is a timely and significant organizational issue (Gibson, Gilson, Griffith, & O'Neill, 2023). A global consultancy report indicates that 80 % of organizations have implemented work policies that allow their employees to carry out hybrid or remote work (Deloitte, 2022). As a contrasting example, in 2024, Amazon gave a top-down mandate to eliminate remote work (Jassy, 2024), taking a stricter approach than many other companies that continue

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to offer flexibility. Typically, expert work like service production, technical support and development can be done remotely, and already before the COVID-19 pandemic, working independently outside the traditional office environment was common in specific employee groups such as gig workers (Duggan, Sherman, Carbery, & McDonnell, 2020), freelancers (Wijngaarden, 2022), and teleworkers in the service sector (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Recently, however, the world of work has seen a swift and drastic change in the ways people work, as many employees had never worked remotely when the pandemic hit (Newman & Ford, 2021). Currently, millions of people across the globe working in remote and hybrid work settings are not only rethinking ways to organize their daily work activities and adjust to the changing requirements of work, but also figuring out how to interact with others in a meaningful way (Demerouti, 2023; Gagné et al., 2022).

Increased flexibility and the attainment of new competencies enabled by digital communication technology may have come as a gift during the intensive remote working period imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gagné et al., 2022; Lange & Kayser, 2022). While improved work-life balance motivates many employees to embrace remote work, recent research recognizes that remotely working employees can feel alone and experience a need for more social interaction (e.g., Thulin, Vilhelmson, & Brundin, 2023; for a review see Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano, & Michailidis, 2019). Workplace relationships are important in satisfying the human need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and their quality can, at best, lead to flourishing (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Hu & Subramony, 2022), and at worst, to loneliness (Wright & Silard, 2021) at work. Despite a wealth of research on remote and flexible work during the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic times (for a review see McPhail, Chan, May, & Wilkinson, 2023), the current understanding of hybrid work, its asynchronous nature and long-term implications for people is still emerging. With limited research available on social and relational issues in post-pandemic hybrid work (see Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2023), it is crucial to address how organizations can actively promote connection rather than loneliness among their personnel (Gagné et al., 2022), while preserving the flexibility inherent in a work environment that fosters trust and autonomy (Wieczorek, 2024).

Therefore, we set out to investigate how individuals experience belonging in the hybrid work context. We present findings from interviews (32 in total) conducted at two time-points, 1.5 years apart in 2020–2022, with 16 expert employees. We define an “expert employee” as someone with specialized skills and expertise in a particular field (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007; Jännäri, Poutanen, & Kovalainen, 2018). Viewing hybrid work as an evolving phenomenon that requires adaptation from employees (Alfes, Avgoustaki, Beauregard, Cañibano, & Muratbekova-Touron, 2022), our longitudinal approach unveils the participants experiences over a longer duration of time, revealing particular aspects of working remotely and working onsite. Consequently, this study elucidates what kind of development might underpin today’s flexible working arrangements in a transition from forced, crisis-driven remote working towards the “new normal” of effective hybrid working models.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Flexible working arrangements in modern workplaces – Autonomous and efficient?

Remote and hybrid work is fueled by employers offering digitally-enabled work-from-anywhere solutions and employees seeking flexible working arrangements, a trend that began even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Kelly et al., 2020; Spilker & Breaugh, 2021). Bailey and Kurland (2002) refer to “telework” which has its origins in the 1970s (Nilles, 1975) as work completed away from the office, while “virtual work” entails the use of modern communication technology. According to Kelliher and Anderson (2010), the term “flexible work” covers a range of work arrangements such as reduced and non-standard hours, and remote working. The concept of “hybrid work” emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, initiated by the need to adapt work arrangements to remote and onsite settings simultaneously. Vartiainen (2024, p. 139) defines hybrid work as “any type of work arrangement where a worker operates in a sustainable manner alone or with others, as agreed upon by the worker and organization, based on the latter’s purpose, the former’s needs and tasks, and the context, with flexibility regarding the time and place of the work – on the employer’s premises or default location or remotely at home, other locations or on the road – using digital technologies such as laptops, mobile phones and the Internet.”

Emphasized by several commentators (e.g., Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Kelly et al., 2020; Vartiainen, 2024), flexible working arrangements are usually implemented to accommodate employees’ needs. Particularly, research suggests that remote working promotes job satisfaction due to the greater flexibility and mastery of work-life balance enabled by working at home (Becker et al., 2022; Brunelle & Fortin, 2021; Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Golden, Veiga, & Simsek, 2006). Empirical research shows that remote workers perceive higher levels of autonomy compared to those who do not work remotely (Brunelle & Fortin, 2021; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Research conducted after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that soon after a forced move to remote work, autonomy was perceived as being at a high level among remote employees (mean value for job control 4.0 in Becker et al., 2022; job autonomy in Mäkelä, Pensar, Kemppinen, & Kangas, 2023 $M = 3.83$ – both studies utilizing a scale of 1–5). Intriguingly, there is evidence that perceived work autonomy decreased the longer forced remote working lasted (Mäkelä et al., 2023). Other than that, however, there is little empirical knowledge about different and perhaps conflicting experiences of increased freedom in flexible work.

A shift to working remotely has introduced an unforeseen demand to accomplish work tasks from a physical distance from others, and often independently of other people’s schedules, locations or preferences. This may have an impact on employees’ experiences of competence and efficiency (Ferreira, Pereira, Bianchi, & da Silva, 2021), as well as their work-life balance. For example, according to Kelliher and Anderson (2010), flexible work arrangements can lead to work intensification that makes people work harder because of a reduction of social interaction and demands from co-workers. Employees working in remote settings need self-management skills that help them motivate themselves, manage their workload, and organize and complete their work tasks independently (Tramontano, Grant, & Clarke, 2021; for a review see Charalampous et al., 2019). In addition, they should acquire digital skills so as to be able to use digital tools and platforms effectively (Gagné et al., 2022; Tramontano et al., 2021). For example, a study by Schmitt et al. (2021) reported technology-based work performance as below the mid-point of their scale (M = 3.13 on a scale of 1–7), which may indicate that either the available technology had not been utilized well enough to aid productivity, or a lack of skills to use it efficiently. Research conducted during and after the pandemic indicates that remote employees' satisfaction with the need for competence may still have been at an acceptable level, with reported mean values for self-rated performance (scale of 1–5) of 3.80 (Blahopoulou, Ortiz-Bonnin, Montañez-Juan, Torrens Espinosa, & García-Buades, 2022) and 3.41 (Liu, Wan, & Fan, 2021). All in all, the shift to remote work has created a demand for employees to accomplish tasks from a distance, which has influenced their sense of competence and efficiency as they have acquired new skills. However, there is a lack of empirical studies that would advance the understanding of how remote and hybrid employees adopt collective social competencies that take time to develop, such as virtual team working skills (Yang et al., 2022).

2.2. Sense of belonging in flexible work arrangements

All people share fundamental psychological needs for belongingness, love, and care (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The quality of interpersonal relationships shapes people's overall sense of fulfillment and happiness. In the work domain, the human need for belonging is fulfilled when the individual feels connected, respected, trusted, and socially supported in the work community, has a sense of membership, and experiences connectedness in relation to peers and supervisors at work. Satisfactory workplace relationships exist when there is an equilibrium between the expected and actual quality and quantity of relationships individuals have at work (Wright & Silard, 2021). According to Colbert et al. (2016), high-quality work relationships not only provide instrumental benefits like task assistance or career advancement, but opportunities for connecting with others in the form of positive emotions, friendship or companionship, and caring for and assisting others.

A perceived lack of belonging at work can, on the contrary, cause dissatisfaction (Wright & Silard, 2021). Loneliness in the workplace is characterized by the psychological distress employees experience due to a deficiency between their expectations for workplace relationships and the actual relationships they have with other people in the work context. Thus, negative emotions stemming from a feeling of exclusion at the workplace may lead to work loneliness whereas a perception of relational fulfillment is likely to lead to satisfactory relationships (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Wright & Silard, 2021). Prior research further suggests that loneliness (a subjective phenomenon) at work caused by dissatisfaction with the interpersonal need for belonging may be connected to factual aloneness and social isolation (an objective phenomenon) (Wright & Silard, 2021).

Studies indicate that the fulfillment of the need for belonging may be at risk in remote work environments (e.g., Becker et al., 2022). Inadequate access to the social context of the physical workplace and isolation from other members of the organization are considered to be disadvantages often related to remote work (Charalampous et al., 2019). Due to a lack of social interaction with others, forming and sustaining meaningful bonds with peers, supervisors, and the work community may be more difficult in remote work (Golden & Veiga, 2005; Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013). Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive remote work was found to deplete the social support received from supervisors (e.g., Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012), although not all studies have supported such findings (see Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). However, it has been found that among remote employees, organizational social support (on a scale combining support gained from supervisors, peers, and the organization) negatively relates to social isolation (Bentley et al., 2016). Bartel, Wrzesniewski, and Wiesenfeld (2012) reported that physical isolation was linked to a lower level of remote employees' perceived respect from colleagues, and organizational identification among remote employees.

In a longitudinal study of telecommuters where data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, Spilker and Breaugh (2021) found five factors that predict feelings of isolation: not having the choice of whether to telecommute, a high need for affiliation, a short length of the supervisor-telecommuter relationship, a high proportion of weekly telecommuting of total work time, and a long distance from an onsite office. Further, they found feelings of isolation in telecommuting to be related to lower job satisfaction and job performance, urging future research on quality of interactions in remote work to better understand and manage work loneliness. Research also indicates factors that can help employees maintain their sense of belonging in remote settings: personal and professional fulfillment (Belle, Burley, & Long, 2015), technologies to maintain connections (Dery & Hafermalz, 2016), and a balance of well-being and productivity (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021).

Becker et al. (2022) bring forth that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered an overall feeling of uncertainty, and induced unexpected societal regulations and circumstances which undoubtedly disturbed the general balance and especially the social domain of life for many people. Studies conducted during the pandemic have found that perceptions of work loneliness increased with a higher frequency of remote work (Andel, Shen, & Arvan, 2021). A study by Hu and Subramony (2022) on the mitigating effects of general friendships on negative experiences of remote work stressors and professional isolation at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that work friendships could effectively offset experiences of work-related isolation.

2.3. Interacting with others in the flexible working environment

A remote and flexible working environment changes the social context of work, as it reduces physical face-to-face interactions with others. In a study by Van Zoonen, Sivunen, and Blomqvist (2023), work isolation negatively impacted both the quality and frequency of interpersonal communication, suggesting that workplace isolation potentially endangers effective communication and information-sharing in remote settings. They point out that the quality of interactions can help build and sustain collegial trust relationships that affect workplace collaboration, not the frequency or reciprocity of virtual communication per se.

In particular, research recognizes the key role of informal interactions for a sense of belonging. In remote work, informal communication could fulfill employees' need for belonging (Fay, 2011), foster a friendly workplace climate (Fay & Kline, 2011), and support task coordination, team-building, and social learning (Viererbl, Denner, & Koch, 2022). However, the opportunities for informal communication are found to be limited in remote work, with informal exchanges occurring less frequently in remote than onsite work settings (Viererbl et al., 2022).

Alongside the absence of in-person interaction with co-workers, remote work often entails an increased reliance on communication technology. In a 2021 study, Hall, Pennington, & Holmstrom, 2021 reported that in the context of communication technology usage, face-to-face contact with people outside of the home was the primary predictor of mitigating loneliness and meeting one's needs for relatedness. Along the same lines, a study by Van Zoonen and Sivunen (2022) showed that while frequent remote work increased employees' perceptions of isolation, a frequent use of various information communication tools to interact with colleagues reduced perceptions of isolation.

Regarding the timing of the use of communication technology, while asynchronous communication facilitated by virtual tools has the potential to enhance efficiency (Glaveski, 2021), it may also complicate the process of connecting with others. A study by Yang et al. (2022) suggests that a decrease in synchronous communication and an increase in asynchronous communication during remote work may make it more challenging for employees to acquire and share information across the professional networks within a company. Yang et al. (2022) reported that at the time of forced remote work, the collaboration network of workers in one multinational company became more static and siloed compared to the time before the pandemic. This finding suggests that asynchroneity in remote and hybrid work settings could hinder fostering the social interactions and increase employees' subjective feelings of isolation and loneliness at work, affecting workers' experiences of belonging at work.

Taken together, prior research has focused on characteristics of flexible working arrangements, such as heightened autonomy, the effectiveness facilitated by digital communication technology, and the resultant feelings of disconnection from co-workers. While the outcomes of flexible working arrangements for individuals and employees have been widely studied, scholarly attention towards employees' experiences of belonging in the changing social and relational context of work has been relatively limited, particularly regarding remote and onsite work within post-COVID-19 hybrid working models. This study builds on the current understanding (e.g., Spilker & Breaugh, 2021) and provides additional insight into aspects related to belonging within the evolving hybrid working context.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and overview

We conducted a two-step interview study to understand expert employees' longer-term experiences of belonging in hybrid work settings. This inductive qualitative research is grounded in the anti-positivist, interpretivist paradigm, as we focus on capturing the subjective experiences of individual interviewees rather than seeking statistical generalizations by quantification or measurement (Hill & Knox, 2021). Our choice of solely qualitative methods (rather than a mixed methods approach) is aligned with this aim. The specific research approach is a case study (Creswell & Poth, 2025). To provide an in-depth understanding of expert employees' unique perspectives, we chose thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), as our analytical method to interpret the interview data. The longitudinal approach serves to illuminate hybrid working as a dynamic, continuously evolving process rather than a one-off instance of change (Alfes et al., 2022). As Neale (2020, p. 2) highlights: "It is through time that we can begin to grasp the nature of social change and continuity, the mechanisms through which these processes unfold, and the ways in which structural forces shape the lives of individuals and groups and, in turn, are shaped by them."

3.2. Researcher description

The author team consists of researchers with specialized expertise in qualitative research methods. The authors have concentrated for several years on topics related to flexible, remote, and hybrid work, the digitalization of work life, and various aspects of occupational well-being. Our subjective practical experience of remote and hybrid working has allowed us to understand the phenomenon deeply. Our familiarity with the topic provides an "insider" perspective, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the context, norms, and terminology related to remote work (see Todres, Galvin, & Dahlberg, 2014). We also recognize the importance of maintaining critical distance to avoid over-identification with interviewees' attitudes or experiences. To acknowledge researcher positionality and minimize researcher biases, we used strategies such as peer debriefing (Spall, 1998), which involved discussing findings with an external colleague to reduce the potential influence of our own attitudes, and reflexivity (Hill & Knox, 2021), which allowed us to account for contextual nuances by transparently explaining relevant background information for readers who might be unfamiliar with the setting. Throughout the research process, we remained aware of how our positionality might shape data interpretation and strived to maintain objectivity.

In regards the roles of each author in this research, the third and fourth authors were key contributors in the design of the interview guide. The second and fourth authors conducted most interviews. In accordance with Patton's (2014) recommendations on researcher triangulation, two researchers, the first and second, coded the raw data. The entire author team actively participated in regular discussions throughout the research process, collaboratively developing the thematic structure and providing feedback, on aspects such as naming the categories.

3.3. Participants

We interviewed 16 individuals from five organizations in various industries in Finland (i.e., multiple cases; Creswell & Poth, 2025). Twelve interviewees were female, and four were male. Their ages at the time of the first interviews varied between 28 and 58 years (M: 43.9; SD: 8.4). Their experience with their employers varied between 1.5 and 22.5 years (M: 10.8; SD: 7.7). The same participants were interviewed twice, to gain longitudinal insights into their experiences.

We deployed a purposeful and criterion-based sampling procedure (Creswell & Poth, 2025; Morrow, 2005), and selected these sites and individuals for this study, because they could inform an understanding of expert employees' belonging in remote and hybrid work. The main criteria for selecting the participating organizations for our study were that they delivered services to their customers and employed numbers of individuals in expert roles related to these services, and that they had employees who were working remotely or in hybrid mode at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and as part of a team. In the service sector, expert roles such as customer service and insurance handling are typically well-suited for remote work (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Thus, we contacted several organizations, such as telecom and finance companies. As we engaged in discussions with practitioners, they shared their issues related to remote and hybrid work. The participating organizations were motivated to develop and acquire knowledge about remote and hybrid work, which also motivated the individual participants. Finland is the world leader in flexible work arrangements and work-life balance, and in general, the Finnish work culture is low in hierarchy and encourages independent working. Supervisors do not constantly monitor employees, instead dependability is expected (InfoFinland., 2025), and already for several decades before the COVID-19-pandemic, many employers have allowed a degree of flexibility for their employees with regard work schedules and working from home (Helsinki Times, 2024).

For this research, we sought to interview individuals in expert positions who had experience of prolonged remote and hybrid work during the COVID-19-pandemic, which was a drastic work life change. We asked our contacts in the organizations to identify teams and participants suitable for our research. Our sample includes experts in service production, insurance handling, accounting, technical support and development. Their expertise was defined by their individual work roles and the specialized services their organizations provide. Following Ericsson et al. (2007), who emphasized deliberate practice as key to expertise, our participants were also continuously developing their skills to perform effectively in remote and hybrid work modes. The participants were part of a work community and had relationships with leaders, co-workers, and other workplace interactions. At the time of the first interviews, the interviewees were required to work remotely due to official recommendations. At the time of the second interview, the restrictions set by governments had been gradually eased, and many companies (including the participating organizations) had started to implement

Table 1
Type of expert work of the interviewees.

Interviewee	Gender	Type of organization	Type of expert work	Mode of working		
				Prior to COVID-19 pandemic	Interview round 1	Interview round 2
1	Female	Technology	Development	Hybrid – Quarter of working time remotely	Fully remote	Hybrid – Once/week onsite
2	Male	Technology	Sales	Mostly onsite – Only occasional remote work	Hybrid – Two days/week onsite	Mostly onsite
3	Female	Insurance	Insurance handling	Hybrid – Two days/week remotely	Hybrid – Once/week onsite	Mostly remote
4	Female	Insurance	Insurance handling	Hybrid – Two days/week remotely	Fully remote	Hybrid – Occasional compulsory meetings onsite
5	Female	Technology	Accounting	Mostly onsite – Only occasional remote work	Fully remote	Hybrid – Once/week or fortnight onsite
6	Female	Software and services	Outsourcing services and finance	Hybrid – Two days/month remotely	Fully remote	Fully remote
7	Male	Technology	Product marketing	Mostly onsite – Only occasional remote work	Fully remote	Hybrid – One week/month onsite
8	Male	Technology	Marketing development	Hybrid – 1,5 days/week remotely	Fully remote	Fully remote
9	Male	Technology	Development	Hybrid – Two days/month remotely	Fully remote	Mostly onsite
10	Female	Insurance	Development and analysis	Mostly onsite – Only occasional remote work	Hybrid – Once/week onsite	Hybrid – Once/week onsite
11	Female	Technology	Financial management and reporting	Hybrid – Two days/month remotely	Hybrid – Once/week onsite	Hybrid – Once/week onsite
12	Female	Software and services	Outsourcing services and finance	Mostly onsite – Only occasional remote work	Fully remote	Hybrid – Once/week onsite
13	Female	Technology	Development	Onsite	Fully remote	Hybrid – Once/week onsite
14	Female	Telecommunications	Customer service	Hybrid – 2-3 days per week remotely	Fully remote	Fully remote
15	Female	Telecommunications	Customer service	Hybrid – A few remote days/month	Hybrid – 1-2 days/week remote	Hybrid – 1-2 days/week remote
16	Female	Software and services	Outsourcing services and finance	Hybrid – Two days/week remotely	Fully remote	Fully remote

hybrid working models. At this stage, the participants had relative freedom regarding both work schedule and location flexibility. Participants provided information about their prior remote work experience before the pandemic and data collection (see Table 1). Nine participants provided details on how long remote work experience they had had prior to the pandemic: two had over 15 years, three had 2–6 years, and four had very little experience; information from other participants was not available.

Hill and Knox (2021) highlight that in qualitative studies it is important that the recruited participants can speak articulately about their experiences. They further explain that in qualitative research, reliance on small samples of participants is typical, as it allows for in-depth analysis: "Assuming that the sample is relatively homogenous (i.e., similar on relevant variables), the data are likely to be saturated (i.e., reach a point where minimal further information is gained by adding participants) with a sample of 13 to 15." (2021, p. 9). As we collected and analysed the data, we noticed that the same ideas and themes kept surfacing in participant interviews. Therefore, we are confident that the selected numbers of participating organizations and interviewees provided us an opportunity to identify relevant themes and conduct a deep analysis without diluting the level of detail that a case study approach can provide (Creswell & Poth, 2025).

Following the principles of research ethics, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation in the research was voluntary.

3.4. Data collection

The first interview round took place in late 2020-early 2021, at the stage of COVID-19-related remote working. The second interview round took place in April–May 2022, at the stage when organizations across the globe began to plan and implement their hybrid working strategies more systematically. The findings of the first interview round and the changing context led us to conduct another round of interviews 1.5 years after the first round.

In the first interview round, the starting point was to understand the experts' experiences of adapting to forced and prolonged remote working. We asked interviewees to reflect on their experiences broadly, including their social interactions and work relationships (see Table 2 for the interview guide). In the second interview round, our focus was on the experts' experiences of belonging in the evolving circumstances, which is why we planned interviews with the same people as in the first round. Our observations from the first round of interviews played a key role in determining the content and focus of the second interview round; The first interview round revealed that while the expert employees experienced heightened work autonomy in remote work and a speedy ramp-up of remote working competencies when COVID-19 hit, they also experienced a decline in work-related social contacts. It is known from prior studies that weak work relationships can lead to social isolation and that working remotely can cause deterioration of work relationships (Grant et al., 2013; Wright & Silard, 2021). Thus, our aim in the second interview round was to explore these themes in more depth, with belonging at work the main thematic interest. The key dimensions of the self-determination theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness: Deci & Ryan, 1985 & 2000) and insights on its application in research on remote work (e.g., Becker et al., 2022; Gagné et al., 2022) were helpful in guiding the development of the thematic interview guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for the second round of interviews.

The semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to freely describe their personal experiences, and to focus on what was meaningful for them, and we asked follow-up questions, clarifications and examples also outside the interview guide. All interviews were conducted one-on-one, remotely, in Finnish, and lasted approximately one hour.

Table 2
Interview guide.

Interview round 1
Describe your remote work environment. What factors work well? What has caused challenges?
What is the remote work culture like in your company now, and how was it before?
How has remote work affected your work motivation and engagement?
When thinking of yourself as a remote worker, how can you influence your work?
Do you feel that your work and personal life are in balance? What factors have helped or hindered this balance?
How would you describe the communication and interaction between you and your manager during remote work?
What do you need from your line manager in remote work vs. normal conditions?
When considering team operations and interaction, how has it worked during remote work?
Interview round 2
Describe your current work situation. Are you doing remote or on-site work (if hybrid, how much of each)?
How have your thoughts on remote work changed over the past two years?
What kinds of conflicts or challenges have you faced at work over the past two years?
How much control do you have over your own work?
What kind of experiences do you have of developing your skills during the periods of remote and hybrid work?
How do you know that you have succeeded or are competent?
How do you build social relationships, and community in your organization?
What kind of relationships do you have with your colleagues? How do you experience these relationships in remote and hybrid work?
How often are you in contact with other team members, and what kind of topics do you usually discuss?
In what ways have you been able to influence your own work, reflecting on the time before and during the COVID-19 related remote work?

3.5. Data preparation and analysis

The data consisting of 32 interviews was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were uploaded to the NVivo qualitative data management software. We adhered to the six-step guideline by Braun and Clarke (2006) for a systematic thematic analysis approach, to create representative themes that best capture the meaning of our observations and the depth and breadth of experiences of the participants in our sample. This iterative and reflective process involved moving back and forth between steps (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The data analysis started as the two coders (the first and second authors) familiarized themselves with the materials and read team several times (step 1, Familiarizing yourself with your data; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first and second authors independently conducted initial coding of the raw data (step 2, Generating initial codes). After both researchers had developed an understanding of the findings and documented their observations, we engaged in a dialogue about the identified codes and themes. We discussed the findings in detail and developed broader themes (step 3, Searching for themes). Each discussion provided an increasingly deeper insight into the findings as we reviewed the themes (step 4, Reviewing themes). Most analysis discussions occurred between the first and the second authors, but also the third and the fourth authors were involved in the reviewing and naming of the themes, and the development of the thematic data structure and the conceptual model in different stages of development. There were plenty of opportunities throughout the analysis phase to discuss the raw data, codes, and thematic categories, which fostered transparency among the author team about the rationale for the thematic structure developed. To assess the credibility of the thematic categories, regular discussions took place between the authors during the research process, also concerning the naming of the categories within the thematic structure (step 5, Defining and naming themes). For instance, the authors discussed factors that distinguished the categories from each other. Discussions were carried out in a respectful manner and all authors had an equal opportunity to express their perspectives. Revisiting the raw data and presenting evidence from data helped find common ground. As we reached consensus on the most dominant and meaningful themes, the first and second authors selected excerpts from the data that best captured the essence of each theme.

To effectively present our findings in the reporting phase (step 6, Producing the report), we organized the findings into a thematic data structure (see Fig. 1), as suggested by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012). It provides transparency into the abstraction process in inductive qualitative research by displaying the different levels of analysis. In the hierarchical organization of themes, the first-order concepts are more specific and closely tied to the data, while the second-order themes and theoretical dimensions are broader and more abstract, reflecting a more generalized interpretation of the dominant patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2018; Gioia et al., 2012). Tables 3 and 4 include explanations of the themes and additional quotations as evidence of patterns identified across our data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Included quotations were translated from Finnish into English at the time of writing the first full draft of the manuscript. We provide quotations from all female and male participants. The interview quotations were labeled to include the interviewee number, gender, and interview round (e.g., Interviewee 1, female, first interview round).

3.6. Rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research

A core principle in achieving qualitative rigor is to ensure trustworthiness, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest is indicated by having credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility means the researcher's familiarity with the data and adequacy of research materials to support claims and interpretations. Transferability refers to the researcher's responsibility to demonstrate connections and a degree of similarity between the current and previous research. Dependability refers to the researcher's responsibility to offer information about tracking the progress of the research process. Confirmability involves demonstrating clear connections between the research materials, interpretations, and actual reality. Moving away from these extrinsic criteria, Morrow (2005) recommends using intrinsic standards of trustworthiness more suited to constructivist and interpretive qualitative research. For instance, we applied triangulation (Patton, 2002) as a method to increase the trustworthiness of the research through the use of multiple researchers and data sources. Further, to enhance transparency and encourage discussion of the study's strengths and limitations, we systematically assessed our research choices and planned and organized the research project throughout the design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting phases (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

4. Findings

The general major theme in this analysis relevant to all interviewees is "Experiences of belonging in hybrid work". All the interviewees in this study described their experiences concerning the themes of "Control over work and personal time", "Remote working skills" and "Virtual communication practices" grouped under "Working remotely", and "Human connection", "Information exchange" and "Relevance of onsite work" grouped under "Working onsite". While these six themes and findings are considered general, there is variability in the participants' subjective experiences and the concepts and examples they brought up during the interviews. The participants in this study shared their detailed personal experiences and provided highly reflective insights across thematic categories. We convey this depth by providing thick descriptions and longer quotes where applicable. To ensure a breadth of perspectives is incorporated in our analysis, we provide a large number of quotations from all interviewees with different demographics and both time-points studied. Fig. 1 presents the thematic data structure of our empirical findings.

The participants' experiences of remote and hybrid work evolved significantly over time, as observed in the two interview phases of our longitudinal study. It became evident during the first interview round that the experts linked working remotely —mostly at home— with a sense of novelty. Most of them were forced to work from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They felt that everyone was in the same boat, having the privilege to work from home on one hand, but not having the chance to go to the office even

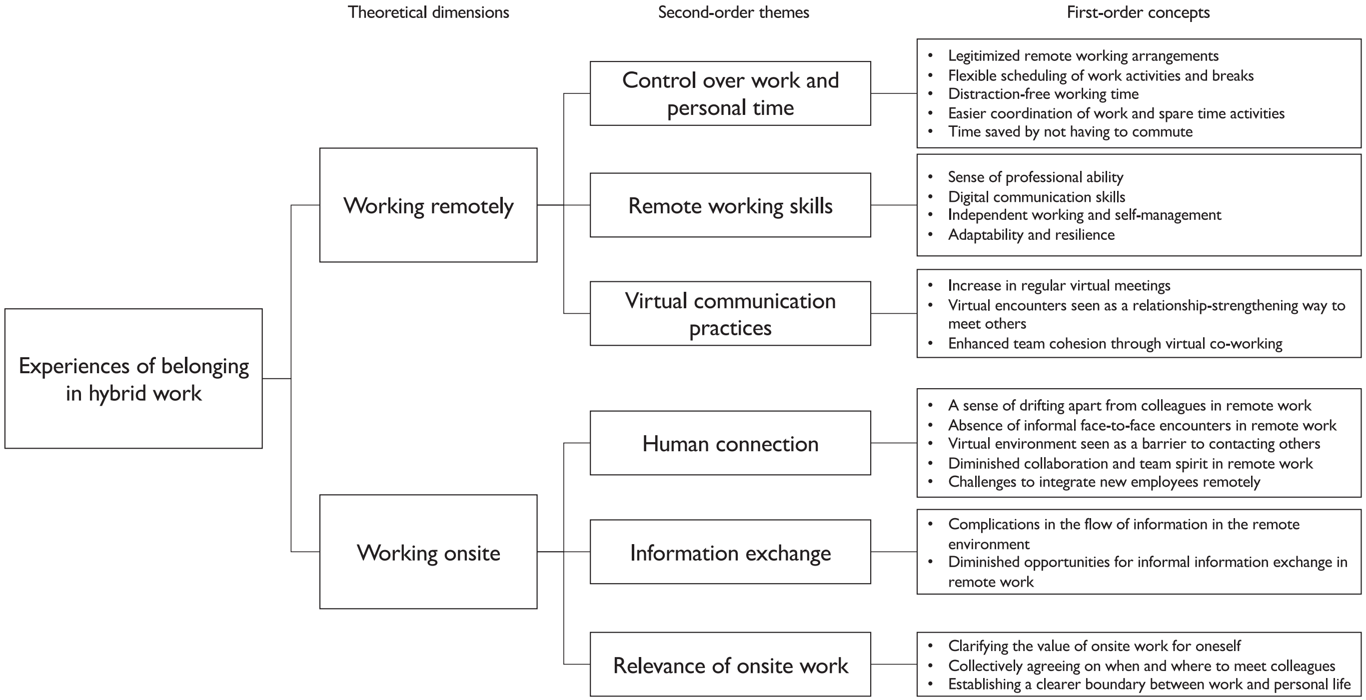

Fig. 1. Thematic data structure for experiences of belonging in hybrid work.

Table 3
Working remotely.

	Exemplary quotations
Control over work and personal time – having flexibility and autonomy enabled by remote work	
Legitimized remote working arrangements	*The difference is that before, the attitude towards remote work wasn't all that positive, but now, we have been given a free hand, and as long as the work gets done we've been encouraged to freely schedule the day so that it fits one's life. That message […] motivates and inspires […] There, trust shows well.* (Interviewee 13, female, first interview round) *People seem to aim to go to the office to work once a week.* (Interviewee 16, female, second interview round)
Flexible scheduling of work activities and breaks	*You can nicely decide on your own schedule. And we of course also have it that if you need to, you can work outside the so-called normal office hours. So, you are no longer tied to being at the office from eight to four. So, I think that is a really good side of it.* (Interviewee 12, female, second interview round) *When you go on a break, you can separate yourself from work, when you can listen to an audio book or do something totally other than work, while at the office, even if you wouldn't talk about work, you'd still be in the workplace and with colleagues, and it is unavoidable that there is talk about work or that you hear about it. That has been a positive thing, that you can take breaks which are totally unrelated to work, so you can focus on something completely different.* (Interviewee 13, female, second interview round)
Distraction-free working time	*All the interruptions. I have an office room, but in the end, I was sort of, 'no, don't come here'. So, there were like three people at the same time at my doorstep to ask things I don't even take care of here. In addition [to] the physical interruptions, [the thought] that someone was at the doorstep all the time asking something was left out. And that is a very positive thing.* (Interviewee 16, female, first interview round) *What has been motivating is of course that I am at home because I like to be here – here I have the peace to work and all that noise and hassle is missing. So here I can concentrate better, for instance, on responding to a customer.* (Interviewee 14, female, second interview round)
Easier coordination of work and spare time activities	*Combining work and family has been easier now in remote working – definitely.* (Interviewee 12, female, first interview round) *I am at least motivated by the fact that I can sleep so long, […] open my computer and be at work, dress more casually, and also at the end of the workday stop working, be at home right away and get to do my spare time things.* (Interviewee 3, female, second interview round)
Time saved by not having to commute	*Commuting takes some time in the morning and in the afternoon. It takes so much time that I was hoping that at some point we would get to a freer model with this remote working.* (Interviewee 3, female, second interview round) *That awful hurry and hassle in the mornings is being left out altogether.* (Interviewee 14, female, second interview round)
Remote working skills – having abilities needed to succeed in remote work settings	
Sense of professional ability	*I've had the chance to [undertake] varied work tasks during this [remote working] period and be involved in something I haven't done before. That has created professionalism and […] a broader skill base.* (Interviewee 9, male, second interview round). *None of us had that kind of competence before, but now it was forced […] How can you utilize these remote tools? – well, that competence has taken a step towards the better. […] I have a learned a lot and also things that are not only about remote work but about how the world has changed at the same time, and the rest of the world is also working remotely.* (Interviewee 7, male, second interview round)
Digital communication skills	*We discuss [things] a lot with customers and colleagues through Teams chat… Because it's so good, as here we can present documents or whatever needs to be shown to the other.* (Interviewee 2, male, second interview round) *I feel like it's easier to send quick thanks or such through Teams. Even though information is delivered* via *email, somehow responding to emails is a bit, you know, like: 'Do I need to respond to this and so on?' But then through Teams, there might be thumbs-ups and other stuff.* (Interviewee 10, female, second interview round)
Independent working and self-management	*At home you find things out, ask someone, and not just sit around and wonder why something doesn't work and 'I cannot do anything about it'. Taking initiative and a certain boldness to find out, or look for someone who knows. So, you have got to be curious when you work remotely, so that you find things out on your own.* (Interviewee 14, female, first interview round) *Managing my own work […] When [I] have seen that I can do it, I've started to think about it more…to optimize it. […] I like to do certain tasks in the morning which require focusing, and other tasks in the afternoon. […] I am more relaxed now that I know I do not have to be available for someone all the time when I am at home, so I can leave some things for the afternoon, knowing that I have time for them […] I am motivated when I feel that it is under my control, the scheduling, and perhaps the prioritization.* (Interviewee 13, female, second interview round)
Adaptability and resilience	*[I] have learned a lot about myself. Like, I had always considered myself to be – and this is why I used to do so little remote work – such that I need contact with others. I had thought that I was dependent on the human contact, so it's been interesting to learn and notice that [I] actually can do without it.* (Interviewee 10, female, first interview round) *Surely, as a supervisor I have been delighted that we have completed some projects even when we have been in completely remote mode. Whereas before, it has felt completely impossible to conduct really complex things fully remotely.* (Interviewee 5, female, second interview round)
Virtual communication practices – engaging with others and conveying essential information in the virtual space	
Increase in regular virtual meetings	*And we have team meetings occasionally – those which used to be in meeting rooms are now in Teams. They are good when they happen often enough. You always get new information about what's going on.* (Interviewee 2, male, second interview round) *We have weekly meetings where we go through everyone's working situation and general matters. Then, for our*

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

	Exemplary quotations
	own team we have daily, evening and morning coffee, and the supervisors have virtual coffee on one day. (Interviewee 12, female, second interview round)
Virtual encounters seen as a relationship-strengthening way to meet others	*When you are at the office and would like to talk to someone alone, it may not be so easy. If it's confidential … So in that sense, things have become quite a bit easier.* (Interviewee 7, male, first interview round)
	I feel that it is easier to say something over the computer than face-to-face, but that also makes it easier over time to say things face-to-face, when you practice in Teams. (Interviewee 3, female, second interview round)
Enhanced team cohesion through virtual co-working	*We are all in the same boat and we support each other and ask each other more things, perhaps like how is it going, this kind of thing. […] In the Spring, it really was emphasized, this [being in the] same boat. We are in the same boat.* (Interviewee 8, male, first interview round)
	Some people have wanted to set up a Whatsapp group […] with the people who do certain tasks […] And it's been really informal, like, you can share cat pictures or whatever, so it's also kind of stress-relieving, and brings joy to the day. (Interviewee 5, female, second interview round)

if they wished to do so, on the other. Many struggled at first to carry out work activities remotely and set boundaries between work and private time. At the time of the second interview round, the interviewees had had time to adapt to working remotely. At this stage, organizations allowed their employees to work remotely at least part-time. Thus, many experts felt that they were relatively free to tailor the most suitable mode of working according to their personal preferences and valued the flexibility offered. It was common that the expert employees considered both opportunities and concerns related to remote and onsite working, all of which influenced their behaviors, and ultimately, ways of working as a collective.

4.1. Working remotely

The expert employees who participated in this study described aspects of remote and hybrid work that influenced their willingness to work remotely, rather than work at the office.

4.1.1. Control over work and personal time

The interviewed experts reflected on how remote work provided increased control over work and personal time. Many had hoped for broader opportunities for remote working long before the pandemic, and they were pleased about *legitimized remote working arrangements*. The interviewees discussed the past skepticism regarding whether remote work arrangements could work. The forced remote working seemed to have opened people's eyes, as this relatively short period had shown that many tasks could, against all odds, be performed outside the traditional office environment. Many viewed that showing accountability through efficient performance would build mutual trust between employers and employees. Thus, many of the experts often chose to work remotely, even though they missed seeing colleagues onsite and acknowledged that fostering collegial relationships might, in fact, require physical face-to-face contact. Working at home was a convenient choice, and at times there seemed to be a trade-off between staying comfortably at home and going to the office where they could meet other people. This example illustrates the element of physical asynchrony in remote and hybrid work settings:

> I work at home physically, I enjoy it […] Every now and then, […] it would be nice to talk with a colleague while working, but I am so self-indulgent that I can't be bothered to go to the office where I would possibly meet colleagues. […] Also, my colleagues are so accustomed to this remote working that it is difficult to get them to come to the office. (Interviewee 3, female, second interview round)

Furthermore, the legitimization of working at home and it becoming a personal choice has introduced new issues that are related to the social context of work. We encountered examples in our data of individuals who, lacking a strong sense of belonging in the work community, avoided going to the office in the hybrid working model. They reported having priorly felt lonely at work, and even recounted instances of categorical and subtle exclusion of colleagues from informal gatherings such as lunching. Interestingly, they also felt less lonely when they knew that everyone else was at home alone, too, at the time of the pandemic. When given the freedom of choice, they opted out of the office environment. To illustrate, one expert said that working remotely and away from the social context of the workplace had weakened their perception of loneliness:

> At home I don't perceive myself to be lonely, but [did] at the office… There were these groups of people, and even though all of us got along well, we talked and so on, but anyway, there everyone has their own friends, and I was always the one who was left alone. (Interviewee 14, female, second interview round)

The interviewed experts generally found that working remotely, they could freely craft their workday through *flexible scheduling of work activities and breaks*. This was commonly perceived as a positive outcome of the COVID-19-related circumstances, as this individual described:

> There's more freedom, and you can set the pace better. Sometimes you can take a few hours' break in the middle of the day if you feel like it. You do your own things, then [give the time] back at another point. (Interviewee 8, male, second interview round)

Table 4
Working onsite.

Theme and sub-theme	Exemplary quotations
Human connection – recognizing the importance of in-person interaction with colleagues	
A sense drifting apart from colleagues in remote work	*I am such a social person that my mind started to crack when I had to be at home. […] There are many people who still enjoy not having to come in [to the office] […] I came back very gladly, because now I can meet others daily, not only the cats and my wife.* (Interviewee 9, male, second interview round) *Spare time and those friends do not compensate if you feel like you are alone at work with something, or if you are missing support […], or if you feel that you are a little alone making a big decision […] Surely you need that contact at work, too – someone to talk with.* (Interviewee 5, female, second interview round)
Absence of informal face-to-face encounters in remote work	*Keeping in contact cannot be that we're in Teams and we go through things. I miss other kinds of interaction at the workplace, not only these compulsory meetings. Surely it is easier to approach a colleague when you know them.* (Interviewee 12, female, second interview round) *When we were in the office, you got energy from, like, being there together, and the best humor came when people started to be a little tired. We talk about the so-called closing-of-accounts humor, so in a way, there isn't… that's been kind of missing in the last couple of years.* (Interviewee 11, female, second interview round)
Virtual environment seen as a barrier to contacting others	*Team coffees are not the best, because it is voluntary. If there are people who do not consider it important to discuss some spare time stuff with the team […] then of course, it is (unfortunately) not possible to make that bond with certain people.* (Interviewee 3, female, second interview round) *I strongly believe and trust in body language and tone of voice, and all that. Using those tools in this [Teams] world has been quite difficult or impossible… And also how you read the other person, like do they understand the seriousness of the matter and so on.* (Interviewee 16, female, second interview round)
Diminished collaboration and team spirit in remote work	*Perhaps you notice this kind of 'siloing' in the air. In the sense that there are really no spots where you can always meet and so on.* (Interviewee 7, male, second interview round) *Now, as we return to the offices, those people who have been at home, even though they might live just a kilometer away, they've been quite far away, nevertheless, through Teams. You're there behind the screen or behind the phone, behind the speakers. So, I think that collaboration and community will definitely improve now.* (Interviewee 9, male, second interview round)
Challenges to integrate new employees remotely	*It has been difficult for the new people. I respect those who have started during the pandemic […] I don't know how much supervisors have supported them, but it's been challenging to try to get the work done without support from the network.* (Interviewee 1, female, second interview round) *Surely in remote times, it is challenging in a way to build a community, especially when new people join the team. Like, how you integrate them is one challenge.* (Interviewee 12, female, second interview round)
Information exchange – recognizing the challenges in the flow of information and reduced opportunities for informal sharing in remote work settings	
Complications in the flow of information in the remote environment	*You may get comments like"Has something happened here or have I just been left out of this?" or"Do I have all the information?". Maybe some uncertainty about the flow of information, like do I get all the information that I should get […] It's not a conflict, but something that creates uncertainty.* (Interviewee 5, female, second interview round) *There have been situations when someone has felt that they've missed some information. […] You just haven't thought that this information that you have might be needed by someone else too.* (Interviewee 11, female, second interview round)
Diminished opportunities for informal information exchange in remote work	*Before, you could talk about things in passing or during a coffee break. So, in this way another person could get some important information about the work, but now this informal information exchange has decreased.* (Interviewee 11, female, first interview round) *I think that the hybrid model that is now starting will bring back this kind of chit-chatting mode for people, because then you can share tacit knowledge in the corridors, too. You don't only focus on the formal thing in a meeting but can also use other ways to share knowledge.* (Interviewee 9, male, second interview round)
Relevance of onsite work – recognizing when being physically present in the workplace is beneficial	
Clarifying the value of onsite work for oneself	*It kind of depends on the content of the workday as well, like, last week, there was one whole day dedicated to planning, so then I thought it's nicer to be in the office space, where there are meeting rooms and where you can move around a bit more in general.* (Interviewee 10, female, first interview round) *The work we do, it's customer service work, so it's also social work. Somehow, I feel that if I'm always just at home staring at a white wall, I'll completely drift apart.* (Interviewee 15, female, second interview round)
Collectively agreeing on when and where to meet colleagues	*Teams get to decide for themselves how they do their work. I think, before it was more of a top-down approach, like "hey, this is how it should be done, and this is how it should be." So now, those responsibilities are shifting more towards the employees and the teams. So, everyone considers in their own way, what value does it add, whether we have a meeting. Because these workdays are mostly full of meetings. So what value does it add, whether we actually physically go somewhere or do it like this? And which one is smarter, which one is more efficient? … maybe the point is that I don't believe it's going to come from top to bottom anymore, but it's going to come from bottom to top. That "hey, this is how we operate best," because there's so much experience with this now.* (Interviewee 8, male, second interview round) *We have those specific days when we need to come to the office for team meetings and those working hours with the supervisor, so then we have to be there in person.* (Interviewee 4, female, second interview round)
Establishing a clearer boundary between work and personal life	*I wouldn't let go of it at all. I just felt that I should do something more, now that I had the computer at home, as I should probably do this and that. So, it was more difficult to detach from work and it was kind of stressful, indeed.* (Interviewee 13, female, first interview round) *I've changed it so that I'm mostly here in the office […] After going like this for a couple of years, I pretty quickly, when remote work started, thought that I prefer being at the workplace. It helps maintain a bit of a separation between work and spare time.* (Interviewee 2, male, second interview round)

Experts placed high value on *distraction-free working time.* Especially those who had worked in an open office environment in the past found that the home environment promoted focused and productive working. Hassle, noise, and interruptions were the main external distractors, and represented reasons to work at home instead of the office, particularly so with tasks that could be carried out independently. As this expert said, many seemed to weigh up the benefits of the home office (which represented peace and quiet) and the onsite office (which represented social contacts):

> I used to work remotely only little, so [I] needed human contact. I thought I was dependent on the physical [human] contact, and it's been interesting to learn that […] it's not necessary […] Somehow the day [at home] is more peaceful. […] when you don't have to jump and squirrel around. (Interviewee 10, female, first interview round)

Furthermore, the interviewed experts perceived that working remotely enabled an *easier coordination of work and spare time activities*, which was viewed to support a good work-life balance. Transitioning to spare time activities was smoother, and childcare, hobbies, meeting friends, and household chores could seamlessly be fitted into the day, and taking the dog out in the middle of the day was re-charging, as this expert described:

> It is so easy in the mornings […] you have time to make coffee and take the dog out quickly, then open the computer, still in pajamas for the first two hours if you don't have any meetings. […] It's easy to take the dog out at lunchtime, too, you get some fresh air, and if it's quiet you can do laundry and so on. (Interviewee 14, female, second interview round)

Finally, experts brought up that *time was saved by not having to commute*. Many interviewees emphasized that it was not just more time they gained, but that the absence of commuting released energy that could be spent in a more meaningful way, as this expert highlighted:

> I can sleep longer when time doesn't go on commuting, so I have more energy in my free time, like going outdoors and spending that time with family.
>
> (Interviewee 4, female, first interview round)

4.1.2. Remote working skills

The interviewed expert employees learned new professional skills and broadened their ability to perform in novel settings due to the sudden shift to first remote work, and then hybrid work. The increased use of digital communication technology enabled effective remote and virtual working which does not require physical contact with others, and some interviewees said that they had been offered interesting new opportunities. As experts adapted to working remotely, developed new skills needed in remote work and gained confidence in one's remote working skills, their *sense of professional ability* strengthened, which this expert commented on:

> In principle I am motivated in this remote mode, somehow, by having gained this new kind of respect towards my own work, like how this kind of big change has been dealt with. (Interviewee 13, female, first interview round)

Many interviewees reported having adopted better *digital communication skills* suitable for working in diverse digital environments. These involved not only the use of new applications and collaboration platforms but understanding the virtual meeting etiquette and giving instant feedback through tools like chat and emojis. The virtual working environment introduced entirely new social competencies, such as interpreting others in the virtual environment, as this expert described:

> In Teams, people must have the ability to interpret others more than before. […] In the physical office] it was easy to see people's mental states and if they were worried or frustrated […] But now […] It's easy to hide behind Teams. If you have a bad day, it can go unnoticed. I feel that having the ability to interpret people–even if sometimes wrongly–has developed. (Interviewee 11, female, second interview round)

Experts also viewed that their *independent working and self-management* skills improved in remote and hybrid work. Working from home seemed to entail the expectation that individuals could resolve their IT and connectivity issues, seek information and obtain instructions. Working from home also involved independent problem-solving, as this expert explained:

> As a remote worker, you have to take responsibility for your own work and learn. […] You cannot expect anyone to tell you the right solutions. […] In office settings, it's easy to ask your neighbor […] but when you are at home, *you* really must take the trouble. (Interviewee 15, female, second interview round)

As experts adjusted to working remotely, they developed *adaptability and resilience*. Many interviewees struggled at first, but as time went on, reported a positive change. This expert, for instance, conveyed a degree of surprise at their ability to succeed in remote work:

> It's this kind of special orientation to work – like the will to show that I will endure, really, and I can do the job even when I am not at the office.
>
> (Interviewee 14, female, first interview round)

4.1.3. Virtual communication practices

The larger shift to remote work prompted new virtual ways to communicate and obtain information. The experts described having witnessed an *increase in regular formal meetings* that appeared as a countermeasure, as companies attempted to convey and ensure essential information sharing, despite the physical distance. As an example, this interviewee said there were new virtual forums designed to replace what usually goes on in the physical workplace:

> Before [COVID-19] we had [personnel info] once every quarter, now it's every other week, 45 min at a time. There we go through organization-level successes [...] So it's been a lot more active, we have a better understanding about where we are–good and bad. (Interviewee 7, male, second interview round)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, new virtual groups and gatherings were organized to improve information flow and to foster a sense of community. Some expert interviewees viewed *virtual encounters as a relationship-strengthening way to meet others*, as the virtual working environment offered a satisfactory alternative to meaningful face-to-face. They mentioned aspects such as asking for help, approaching different people more easily, and contacting people across team or unit boundaries. Some also said that the virtual environment guaranteed an intimate space to engage in one-on-one or group interactions, as this example exemplifies:

> At the office, we would not have talked as much. [...] The discussion has been intimate. It is different than in a busy office. [...] People have learned that you can joke in Teams meetings, too. [...] [They] started to give of themselves, and we have other things to share than just business [...] Someone's child sits in their lap, everyone has introduced their pets... (Interviewee 16, female, second interview round)

Furthermore, experts reported that remote working *enhanced team cohesion through virtual co-working*. Some found that the team members had more chances to meet each other virtually during the remote working period than before, and felt it had brought them closer together. The virtual environment also enabled new ways to communicate with co-workers in other teams or in other locations. Thus, remote work presented a valuable opportunity to build mutual trust among teams by supporting others. "Sharing the same boat" encouraged collaboration and a will to overcome the challenges the remote setting had imposed on them as a team, as underlined by this example:

> The team has fused together even more [...] We have achieved some objectives that we thought would be insurmountable in the remote times. They have really supported each other very well. (Interviewee 5, female, second interview round)

See Table 3 for an overview of the experiences of working remotely and additional examples.

4.2. *Working onsite*

The expert employees who participated in this study described aspects of remote and hybrid work that influenced their willingness to work at the office, rather than work remotely.

4.2.1. *Human connection*

In the context of remote work, many interviewees talked about a *sense of drifting apart from colleagues* which was not primarily related to work tasks, but rather described as becoming alienated from others in the work community. Many who had worked with the same colleagues for a long time missed the companionship they had developed through in-person collaboration when working in the traditional office environment. The longing for old workplace friendships intensified their desire to feel connected again, which boosted their motivations to return to working onsite. It also became evident from their accounts that work loneliness and not having a sense of camaraderie went hand in hand with problems with coping. The prospect of continued physical isolation and sheer loneliness was frightening to many, as one expert said:

> From the mental health perspective, it is the most challenging situation on earth that we people are alone here, in some... space. When you start to dwell on something... that if anything will break your mind. (Interviewee 8, male, first interview round)

Interestingly, the interviewees shared that in remote work settings, interactions and time with family members or friends from outside the context of work filled their need for belonging to some degree, but could not replace meaningful social interaction with work colleagues. They could experience dissatisfaction with the quality of work relationships even when they did not experience loneliness in their private lives, as exemplified by this quotation:

> I refresh myself by chatting with friends here [at the office]. I would like to see people face-to-face. [...] This work is social. So, I feel that if I just stayed at home [...] I would become isolated altogether. And then I would only be in the company of my spouse and kids, and really, that wouldn't work. No. (Interviewee 15, female, second interview round)

Specifically, the expert interviewees found the *absence of informal face-to-face encounters with colleagues* to be especially negative. In their accounts, scheduled virtual meetings were not enough, as many found that these did not offer genuine presence. Many also missed the unplanned instances at the physical workplace when they could meet other people informally and share laughs and non-work-related matters with each other. Occasionally, the bonding between people seemed to happen in the nuances and micro-moments of interaction, and the virtue of physical presence entailed humor in situations, which were largely missing when working from home:

> The feeling of belonging comes when you meet someone in the restroom and exchange a few words. It's an extremely pleasant feeling when you meet someone, and you just talk about something. It can be totally spontaneous, and with someone you don't even know. I get energy when I meet someone who jokes about something, it's normal interaction. [...] At home it doesn't happen. (Interviewee 6, female, second interview round)

Interviewees talked about the *virtual environment as a barrier to contacting others*. As the social context changed, new issues appeared that stemmed from the unfamiliarity of using digital tools that were new to many. Some reported they were worried about interrupting others, and unsure about whom to approach for help and when that would be appropriate. Overall, staying in touch with colleagues was not the same as before, as this expert described:

> We had gotten used to being in contact all the time. So, in the beginning [of the pandemic] we were like: How are we going to get these things done now? Can I now contact people via Teams with everything? Am I interrupting? and so on. Like, things you would have normally just dealt with as you pass by. (Interviewee 11, female, first interview round)

While communication may have improved over time with the use of handy digital tools, conversely, many individuals appeared to have a greater reluctance to seek assistance from colleagues in the virtual environment. Some were concerned about the risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreting others when relying solely on virtual means of communication. Others found it difficult to virtually contact co-workers who they did not know beforehand, as this expert said:

> Occasionally I feel that there's a big obstacle in taking care of work-related matters, even with someone you don't know very well. So, it's not like you'd have to talk about personal matters, but if you knew people a little better, it would be easier. (Interviewee 12, female, second interview round)

The interviewees also spoke about *diminished collaboration and team spirit in remote work*. Even though there were organized meetings, many said that it was more difficult to collaborate and maintain a 'we-spirit' among one's own team remotely:

> One team member just said that in two years, they've had nothing in common with other team members, apart from the weekly meetings we have. (Interviewee 1, female, second interview round)

Thus, it appeared that formal meetings could not satisfy the need for connecting with others, but instead, bottom-up, more organic community building was key. More connection was hoped for with members of the work community rather than just their own team members, but in the remote environment it was perceived as even harder to achieve, and the development of silos was mentioned.

Especially, not having a solid network of high-quality social contacts at work prior to transitioning to remote working, as in the case of new employees, seemed crucial. Induction, and in particular the *challenges related to integrating new employees* was seen as an issue. Several interviewees mentioned that they felt sorry for people who had to start a new job without meeting anyone face-to-face. Many interviewees expressed their concerns about how newcomers can integrate and develop a sense of belonging in a remote environment, as this example illustrates:

> For new employees, we've emphasized that it's especially important in the early stages that we're there at the office together, so that they get to know us, the team members, and know who to ask. Because it's much easier to connect when you already know familiar faces and have gotten to know each other a bit. If a new employee were to start directly with remote work, as there have certainly been many cases over the past two years, I believe that both the knowledge transfer and people's commitment to the company suffer. When there isn't that physical presence.
>
> (Interviewee 11, female, second interview round)

4.2.2. Information exchange

While information exchange improved in some aspects in remote work, several interviewees noted that the changed interactions with others led to feelings of uncertainty because of the less efficient flow of information in remote work than that which they had been used to. *Complications in the flow of information in the remote working environment* impaired access to work- and company-related information, making experts worried about how it might affect their work quality. For example, this expert had the feeling that some important information had not reached everyone:

> Information or understanding comes pretty late […] Some information has not been received. [That] has been more frustrating than before […] But […] no one has kept anything a secret on purpose. (Interviewee 11, female, second interview round)

Experts noted that remote work involved *diminished opportunities for informal information exchange*. Spontaneous and quick questions in passing were seen as important information channels and opportunities to learn from others. This person explained how the valuable 'tacit knowledge' exchanged in informal face-to-face encounters could vanish in remote work:

> At the office, you can exchange thoughts with a colleague about a sales campaign […] They could be following [the topic] and you could get good tips from them for your own work […] But if you're at home all the time and you don't follow [the topic], you easily lose sight of what's going on.
>
> (Interviewee 15, female, first interview round)

4.2.3. Relevance of onsite work

When the COVID-19 pandemic eased and working at the office became possible again, many organizations were willing to let their employees decide whether to work at home or at the office. As our interviews revealed, many employees viewed it as important that they could choose the option that personally suited them. People started *clarifying the value of onsite work to oneself* to determine what type of work they could do remotely, and what should be done onsite. Increasingly, experts considered when and how to meet colleagues in a meaningful way. For many, meetings such as planning days were reasons to go to the office. Some said they wanted to go to the office once a week because they enjoyed the social contact, even when it was not something they would like to be part of their workday every single day. For example, this interviewee described social contact at work as the 'sugar and salt' that enriches the work experience:

> Now that we're transitioning to the hybrid working model, we should aim to incorporate the beneficial tools or spices of connection as integral components of it. Being close to people, either at the coffee table or by the office desk, that social contact, creates a positive impression. (Interviewee 9, male, second interview round)

At the time of the second interview round, planned hybrid working models were becoming more common, as many organizations were piloting them and trying out what works best. This entailed *collectively agreeing on when and where to meet colleagues*. Experts were building up broad virtual competencies intended to guarantee effective remote working, including the ability to decide what can be done remotely, when to focus on working solo at home, and when to go to the office. Some pointed out that it did not make sense to go to the office only to find that their colleagues would be working remotely on the same day, as this example illustrates:

> We've agreed on this hybrid model where we aim to be together with our team as much as possible once a week. When we actually go to the office, we see each other, and it doesn't happen that someone is all alone there on that day. Because then it doesn't … it doesn't bring the benefit that we're looking for. (Interviewee 11, female, second interview round)

This experience highlights the aspects of asynchrony and synchrony in remote and hybrid work environments. Evidently, individuals' decisions to work remotely were affected by the choices of others. People discussed how systematic planning and coming to the physical office at the same time with others could restore the informal communication and information. The social dimension of work appeared to have become re-evaluated in transitioning from the forced remote working to planned hybrid working models. Our interviewees said that the onsite element of hybrid work offered the opportunity to connect with colleagues and synchronize their needs for belonging. Making these decisions collectively was encouraged, as exemplified by this expert:

> We have an office day once a week. Every two weeks we have a review [meeting], so those are onsite days […] And teams have been encouraged to agree on one other day when more people go to the office. […] When we are at the office with a bigger crowd, we do things together. (Interviewee 10, female, second interview round)

The interviewees often found that when working at home, it was no longer clear when work began and ended. Work invaded what used to be clearly private time and space. Interviewees described that undone work tasks 'haunted' them more when working at home. Many thought that a hybrid working model consisting of some onsite work would help them in *establishing clear boundaries between work and spare time.* This would enable them to bring their best selves to work, which was also seen to foster high-quality relationships with colleagues. By separating spare time and work, they could fully engage in both work and personal activities without feeling overwhelmed, as this interviewee explained:

> Separating spare time and work is easier now that I have got back to the office. […] The [home] environment caused a… well, not a crisis but a confusion […] I am at home but still at work. […] You could not free yourself from work in the same way as you would when you go home. (Interviewee 9, male, second interview round)

See Table 4 for an overview of the experiences of working onsite and additional examples.

5. Discussion

The constantly changing world of work led us to investigate how employees experience belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gagné et al., 2022) in the hybrid work context which is emerging (Vartiainen, 2024). How to develop well-functioning hybrid working models that support the social and relational aspects of expert work is a significant challenge for organizations in the context of workplace transformations (e.g., Gibson et al., 2023). Drawing from rich interview data from expert employees who engaged in remote and onsite work across various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, our study elaborates on an apparent paradox in working flexibly, which has previously been alluded to by several commentators, seen on one hand to enable distraction-free remote working preferred by many people, but on the other to isolate people from others (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2023; Wijngaarden, 2022). Our study provides evidence that although flexible work aligned with personal desires and the rapid acquisition of virtual working skills can be particularly rewarding, extended periods of remote work require delicate balancing when it comes to fostering workplace relationships, as diminished social interaction in remote and hybrid work can leave many employees yearning for connections with colleagues.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research advances knowledge of belonging in hybrid work settings. Its contribution to vocational behavior literature is threefold.

5.1.1. Development of a sense of belonging in hybrid work

First, building upon understandings of the dynamic and interpersonal nature of belonging at work (Becker et al., 2022; Wright & Silard, 2021), our research reveals the asynchronous and synchronous social dynamics within the hybrid workplace. We developed a conceptual model (see Fig. 2) that demonstrates the mechanism through which the physical asynchrony attached to working remotely (i.e., alone, usually at home) and the physical synchrony attached to working onsite (i.e., alongside others) may contribute to employees' sense of belonging in the hybrid workplace. Further, employees' needs to belong ("relatedness"; Deci & Ryan, 2000) may either be fulfilled or not fulfilled, potentially leading either to (the opposing, but sometimes fluctuating, experiences of; Wright & Silard, 2021) work loneliness and/or satisfactory work relationships. Our model offers a novel perspective on belonging in hybrid work environments that extends existing research surrounding vocational behavior (e.g., Spilker & Breaugh, 2021), enriching the discourse in this field. Our observations underscore that the experiences of "not belonging" in hybrid work may not necessarily stem from the remote work location itself (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2023), but rather from the asynchronous nature of the hybrid workplace that requires people to (often repeatedly) solve how to alternate between working alone and working alongside others. As flexibility increases due to company policies supportive of remote work and having access to more than one workspace, individuals have more freedom to organize their daily work and spare time activities. The concomitant attainment of new competences enables effective remote work. According to our findings, the possibility to complete work tasks independently on one's own terms in the comfort of the home appears so important for experts that it can override the need to regularly catch up with work colleagues in the hustle and bustle of the physical office environment, especially when the time and energy saved from commuting and getting ready for work can be spent with family and friends. Drawbacks of working at home related to the fading boundaries between work and spare time and occasional limited access to information needed for effective working can act as counterforces that bring people back to the office. However, other people's desires, schedules and circumstances are often portrayed as obstacles to meeting others in person, which should be addressed as organizations design and implement their hybrid working models (Gibson et al., 2023).

5.1.2. *Early signs of work loneliness in hybrid work settings*

Second, our study debates potential early signs of work loneliness in hybrid work settings, building upon prior research (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Spilker & Breaugh, 2021; Wright & Silard, 2021) that has attempted to better understand the individual, relational, and organizational factors that might lead to work loneliness. Our analysis identified various impairments in human connections at work that, if not addressed, could potentially lead to workplace loneliness. Our study thus extends prior research findings by Spilker and Breaugh (2021) by providing further specification regarding the need for affiliation as a significant predictor of work loneliness. Moreover, our study provides empirical evidence for the views that the distinct social context of work and interpersonal behavior occurring in that context may lead to and even magnify the perception of loneliness (Peng, Chen, Xia, & Ran, 2017; Wright & Silard, 2021). Based on the mechanism proposed by Wright and Silard (2021), we suggest that the subjective experiences of eroded workplace connections unveiled in our interviews could initiate a detrimental cycle. Initially, individuals may experience loneliness ("I feel lonely"), and these feelings can worsen through cognitive amplification (Wright & Silard, 2021; "I don't have any work friends here, like all others do"). Our findings show that this can eventually lead to people avoiding the office, even when there are no restrictions, because they feel that they do not belong in the work community. This understanding sheds light on the heightened risk of work loneliness in the hybrid working context, and helps scholars and practitioners alike to recognize the variations in forms of work loneliness, enabling the discovery of potential prevention strategies (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).

5.1.3. *What might constitute satisfactory work relationships in hybrid work*

Third, our study provides insight into what might constitute fulfilling work relationships (Colbert et al., 2016; Wright & Silard, 2021) in the hybrid work context. In addition to our argument that recognizing the early signs of work loneliness is a crucial initial preventative measure, our study also offers compelling evidence that underscores the significance of active agency for renewal in times of change. Our findings show that during the extended COVID-19-related remote and hybrid working period, experts discovered novel opportunities through which to nourish their work relationships that fulfill their relational expectations. Despite the prolonged crisis, expert employees seemed inclined to seek meaningful relationships to satisfy their deep need for belonging, which showed as an active creation of new kinds of virtual and non-virtual networks for sharing and deepening work relationships. While our findings indicate that establishing and fostering meaningful work relationships relies on physical face-to-face encounters, digital communication tools and practices can enable and enhance them (Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). Prior studies suggest that meaningful work relationships that promote overall human flourishing (Colbert et al., 2016; Dutton & Ragins, 2007) evoke the motivation for workplace designs that support the development of work relationships that serve various types of relational functions in the workplace. Offering a novel perspective into work relationships in the hybrid age, our findings strongly indicate that connecting with colleagues is not only about work – rather, we have shown that it is essential to be able to both air out ideas and worries with work colleagues virtually or non-virtually, and to have informal interactions with them, for instance through spending time with them outside of work. Considering friendship; as described by Colbert et al. (2016), a characteristic of flourishing work relationships is that they are dependent on intimacy and occasional glimpses into colleagues' private lives for their development. Thus, the novel means of connection we have identified, often in virtual settings, could indeed contribute to the improvement of work relationships.

5.2. *Limitations and future research*

Despite its strengths, this research has some limitations that suggest avenues for future study. First, in this qualitative research, we identified meaningful patterns in the data to gain an in-depth understanding of issues related to belonging in hybrid work, which is a key strength of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We acknowledge that 32 interviews with 16 informants do not allow for generalization, which is not the aim of qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). We also acknowledge that the participant sample characteristics and the larger population the participants are part of (i.e., expert employees with relative freedom to choose whether to

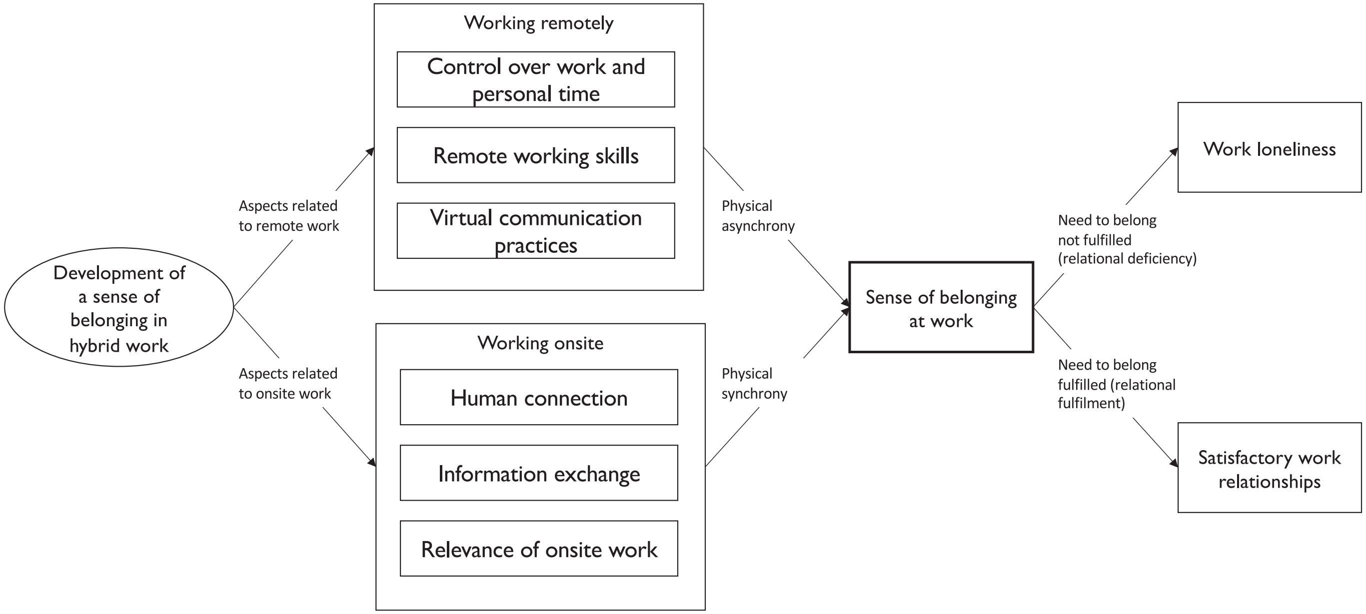

Fig. 2. Model of development of a sense of belonging in hybrid work.

work remotely or onsite) may limit the utility of the findings beyond this group of professionals. However, the knowledge gained in this research can be utilized for the development of specific hypotheses on belonging in hybrid work, and testing them in a quantitative research design (Morgan, 2015). Based on our model (Fig. 2), we propose future quantitative research to test the factor structure related to physical synchrony and asynchrony in hybrid work and how they are related on sense of belonging. Furthermore, quantitative studies should investigate if sense of belonging at work mediates the relationship between synchrony/asynchrony factors and work loneliness or satisfactory work relationships. Studies focusing on between-person factors (Spilker & Breaugh, 2021; Wright & Silard, 2021) as moderators in the context of hybrid work could provide novel insights. Additionally, since our research indicates that informal interaction between colleagues is a particularly crucial facilitator of a sense of belonging in remote and hybrid work settings, we suggest that future quantitative studies investigate the impacts of informal communication behaviors (Viererbl et al., 2022) on the sense of belonging, work relationships, and workplace climate development in hybrid work. To encourage mixed-method research (e.g., Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007) on hybrid work, research designs that integrate quantitative and qualitative data (e.g., survey, interview, narratives, journaling, observations) and multiple perspectives may be deployed to provide a comprehensive understanding of relational dynamics in the hybrid working context.

Second, we conducted interviews at two time-points. Our main aim was not to provide a systematic comparison of different conditions, but instead to qualitatively analyze the individuals' subjective experiences as active actors in the ongoing, changing processes shaping their work lives, as is typical for qualitative longitudinal research (Neale, 2020). Future research could specifically examine the long-term impacts of different kinds of hybrid working models implemented by organizations, focusing on employee well-being, productivity, and organizational culture (e.g., Gibson et al., 2023). Related, while we addressed the developmental nature of modern remote and hybrid working contexts through references to expert experiences at two time points, conducting an extensive temporal analysis was beyond the scope of this study. In the future, within-case comparisons could help identify key elements of individuals' longer-term experiences that inform and enhance the generalization of core themes shared by multiple individuals (e.g., Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). Thus, we recommend future quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research (e.g., Murray et al., 2009) to investigate remote and hybrid employees' long-term experiences of belonging at work through rigorous designs that utilize multiple data collection points. Future studies may examine changes over an extended period by interviewing hybrid employees at regular intervals.

Third, the gender distribution in our sample is predominantly female (12 female, 4 male), for which there are several reasons. Firstly, this research was conducted in a country where women make up approximately 72 % of the workforce in office and customer service work (Statistics Finland, 2022). Secondly, women in these roles may be more inclined to participate in interview studies compared to their male counterparts, or they might have been more likely to respond to invitations to participate, creating an imbalance. Attendance in interviews was voluntary, and prior research (e.g., Glass et al., 2015; Nuzzo & Deaner, 2023) indicates that women are more willing than men to participate in research. Thirdly, it is possible that the research topic resonates more with women, leading to a higher participation of female informants. Therefore, examining the role of gender in hybrid work would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Fourth, there was variation in the participants' prior remote work experience, and some participants were more used to remote work when the pandemic hit, while others were relatively new to it. The length of prior remote work experience might have influenced these individuals' adaptations, attitudes, or productivity in the current working context. Especially, participants with longer remote work histories might have developed distinct habits, preferences, or challenges compared to those who began working remotely only during the pandemic. Since we did not systematically collect information from all 16 participants on for how long experience each of them had of remote work prior to the pandemic and the first data collection, our observations are limited to those who shared their experiences. Future studies may systematically assess participants' remote work backgrounds to better understand the influences of long or short remote work histories.

Fifth, our findings revealed that the onboarding of new employees is a concern in the remote context, but our study did not focus on newcomers. Studying how new employees adapt to their new social environment (Beenen, Pichler, & Levy, 2017) in hybrid work settings would make a valuable novel contribution. Future research may investigate whether employees with short tenure and fewer work relationships are at special risk of experiencing work loneliness, and what promotes the social integration and development of a sense of belonging in newcomers in hybrid work settings (Mäkelä et al., in print).

Sixth, many of our interviewees mentioned the important role of the supervisor in remote and hybrid work, but leadership was not the focus of this study. How a leader's work has changed and how leadership may support employees' psychological need fulfillment may be explored. Belonging in the context of specific dyadic work relationships such as supervisory relationships (Peng et al., 2017) in remote and hybrid work settings should also be studied.

5.3. Practical implications

Based on our findings, we draw several practical implications relevant to human resource management professionals. First, organizational policies, HR practices, and induction programs should consider employees' basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness in flexible, remote and hybrid work arrangements (Gagné et al., 2022; Sani, Adisa, Adekoya, & Oruh, 2023). As organizations design and implement their hybrid working models, they should encourage employees to clarify the value of both remote and onsite work for themselves and support employees in establishing clearer boundaries between work and personal life. Room should be left for independent decision-making, but at the same time employees should be encouraged to regularly meet each other in-person to promote collaboration, innovation and a good hybrid organization culture (Gibson et al., 2023). Additionally, experts working in remote or hybrid teams need different skills and competencies than before, therefore any competence gaps should be identified, and training and development should be provided to fill the identified gaps. It should be noted that important meta-skills vital to autonomous work, such as self-management, develop over time and are dependent on the individual motivation develop. Further, organizations should ensure the effective flow of formal and informal information to help employees form active peer networks to exchange tacit knowledge and socialize with others (Chuang, Chiang, & Lin, 2024; Van Zoonen et al., 2023) and promote a sense of belonging.

Second, teams and work communities have significant opportunities to mitigate the risks of work loneliness and support the development of satisfactory social relationships in both remote and hybrid work settings (Spilker & Breaugh, 2021). We propose that peer support between colleagues and volitional bottom-up community building are keys to satisfactory and meaningful work relationships in hybrid working models because they serve the highest relational functions of friendship and giving to others (Colbert et al., 2016; Wright & Silard, 2021). Our study underscores the importance of making decisions on the physical work location collaboratively within teams or communities, as both physical synchrony among team members and effective use of virtual communication tools can facilitate a sense of belonging in a hybrid work environment. Management support and commitment should be provided to advance these actions.

Third, from the vocational psychology and career counseling perspective, it is important to support both career counselors and their clients in adapting to changes brought about by increased remote work and the implementation of hybrid working models. Career counselors should support individuals' agency by helping them shape their professional identities, identify career paths aligned with their preferred work mode, and identify professional development needs (Bimrose et al., 2019). They could focus, for instance, on enhancing digital communication and collaboration skills to strengthen social relationships in the multi-located and digital hybrid workplaces.

6. Conclusion

We carried out this qualitative research to investigate how expert employees experience belonging in the hybrid working context. We identified aspects of hybrid work related to working remotely (Control over work and personal time; Remote working skills; Virtual communication practices) and working onsite (Human connection; Information exchange; Relevance of onsite work). Our research suggests that the physical asynchrony attached to working remotely and the physical synchrony attached to working onsite contribute to employees' sense of belonging in hybrid work. We highlight several areas of relational dissatisfaction with remote working that may be regarded as early signs of work loneliness. On a hopeful note, our study shows that new types of both virtual and non-virtual networks can strengthen work relationships. As the "new normal" of expert work is set in hybrid working models, we encourage more nuanced research on basic psychological needs satisfaction in hybrid work settings. To conclude, organizations can prevent extreme states of relational dissatisfaction, such as work loneliness, from developing into a pandemic of its own by designing hybrid working models that, alongside increased flexibility and technology-enabled remote working competencies, promote connection.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Urrila: Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Aija Siiriäinen:** Validation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Writing - original draft. **Liisa Mäkelä:** Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Writing - original draft. **Hilpi Kangas:** Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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