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Navigating Hybrid Work in Malaysia: Cultural Adaptation, Workplace Transformation and Technological Mediation

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid working has emerged as a predominant trend since the pandemic, yet opinions on its effectiveness remain divided among researchers and practitioners. In Malaysia, where hybrid work arrangements are increasingly adopted, the unique socioeconomic and cultural context offers an exceptional opportunity to explore the transformation of workplace regulation and organizational practices. This study examines how hybrid work arrangements reshape traditional regulatory processes and impact employee well-being and performance in Malaysian organizations. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ten professionals across diverse sectors, this explorative research investigates the multifaceted nature of hybrid work within Malaysia's cultural framework. Employing social regulation theory as the theoretical foundation, the study analyzes how the spatial, temporal, and technological dimensions inherent in hybrid work environments disrupt and reform established regulatory mechanisms. Key findings indicate that hybrid work in Malaysia fosters distinct 'regulatory microenvironments', where organizational policies and cultural practices dynamically interact, and that these new arrangements significantly influence employee well-being and performance. Specifically, participants reported increased autonomy alongside new forms of informal monitoring, a heavy reliance on digital communication tools, and creative strategies to blend traditional workplace norms with flexible practices. By extending social regulation theory to accommodate the distinct characteristics of hybrid work, our research contributes to theoretical understandings and provides practical insights. The results highlight the need for culturally informed strategies in designing and managing hybrid work arrangements.

Keywords: hybrid work, social regulation, organizational culture, Malaysia, workplace transformation

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INTRODUCTION

Hybrid work arrangements have reshaped workplace regulation and organization in fundamental ways. Beyond surface-level policy changes, our research uncovers deeper transformations in how organizations establish and maintain workplace rules across physical and digital spaces. Through interviews with Malaysian professionals, we explore emerging patterns in hybrid work while testing the boundaries of conventional theoretical frameworks.

Malaysia presents distinct insights into cultural influences on hybrid work regulation. Local workplace preferences, particularly regarding face-to-face interactions and organizational hierarchy, create unique intersections with hybrid arrangements. Studies by Malarvizhi et al. (2023) trace this shift from crisis response to deliberate transformation. Malaysian Government-Linked Companies now test varied hybrid models tailored to their cultural and organizational needs (Jamaludin et al., 2024).

This study aims to examine how hybrid work arrangements transform traditional regulatory processes in Malaysian organizations. Specifically, our research objectives are to:

1. Identify how social regulation mechanisms adapt and evolve in hybrid work environments within the Malaysian cultural context.
2. Explore the interactions between formal policies and practices in shaping hybrid work experiences
3. Investigate how cultural values influence the implementation and experience of hybrid work arrangements
4. Examine how technology mediates regulatory processes in hybrid settings
5. Analyze the impact of hybrid work arrangements on employee well-being and performance

We build on Reynaud's (1988) social regulation theory to understand these changes. The theory describes workplace rules as emerging from negotiations between workers and management, leading to a blend of autonomy and control practices. Terssac (2003) later showed how these regulatory processes adapt to organizational change. However, questions remain about how these dynamics function in distributed work settings.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Hybrid Work and Its Implications

The adoption of hybrid work models, which integrate remote and on-site work, has significantly reshaped organizational dynamics. The literature presents mixed findings on the impact of hybrid work on employee well-being. Some scholars argue that hybrid work arrangements enhance flexibility, reduce commuting time, and improve work-life balance (Hill et al., 2022). However, these benefits come with challenges, such as maintaining effective communication, blurring work-life boundaries, and fostering social isolation. To sustain employee well-being and performance, organizations must proactively address these complexities.

Social Regulation Theory

Regulation plays a crucial role in managing the complexities of hybrid work arrangements. The way regulations are formulated, implemented, and perceived can directly and indirectly influence employee well-being. Reynaud's (1988) social regulation theory provides a framework for understanding how workplace rules and norms emerge through continuous interactions between employees and organizations. This theory distinguishes between control regulation, imposed by organizational hierarchies, and autonomous regulation, which evolves organically among employees. The interplay between these regulatory forms shapes the organizational environment and influences how hybrid work is implemented and experienced. Reynaud's work underscores that effective regulation arises from the negotiation between formal policies and informal practices.

Job Demands and Resources (JDR) Theory

The Job Demands and Resources (JDR) theory explains how various social, psychological, and physical factors influence employee motivation and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2024). Job demands refer to aspects of work that exert pressure on employees, potentially leading to stress and burnout, while job resources are elements that replenish energy, enhance motivation, and buffer the negative effects of job demands. The JDR framework offers a balanced approach to analyzing hybrid work arrangements, as it accommodates both the benefits and challenges highlighted in the literature. Our research builds on this framework to identify context-specific job demands and resources within hybrid work settings, helping reconcile the mixed findings on its effects.

Hybrid Work in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the transition to hybrid work has accelerated, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey by the Malaysian Employers Federation (2022) found that 61.7% of companies intend to continue hybrid work arrangements, recognizing its advantages for both employers and employees. Additionally, a Cisco (2022) study reported that 79.3% of Malaysian employees experienced improved well-being under hybrid work, indicating its potential for fostering positive work experiences.

Hybrid work studies in Malaysia first tackled practical matters like policy rules before uncovering deeper organizational shifts. Early research mapped out basic guidance (Abdul Wahab et al., 2022). Over time, investigations revealed intricate links between new work patterns and staff performance, with job satisfaction emerging as crucial (Malarvizhi et al., 2023).

Malaysian workplaces bring unique cultural dimensions to hybrid arrangements. Power structures and group dynamics shape how organizations roll out these changes (Abdul Rohman et al., 2023). Leadership approaches matter significantly. Barnes et al. (2024) found that adaptable leaders achieved better results. Certain sectors face distinct hurdles, as Azizan et al. (2024) noted in their institutional study.

Technology readiness goes beyond just having the right tools. Staff skills and organizational backing play vital roles (Kwek et al., 2023). Lessons from education settings mirror wider workplace challenges. Some groups struggle with digital engagement, particularly when maintaining consistent interaction.

Health and safety practices significantly affect how staff perform in modern work setups. Abdul Halim et al. (2024) showed that these elements interweave closely with productivity. Meanwhile, the legal landscape continues evolving. Recent work by Abdul Wahab et al. (2024) unpacked legal considerations around flexible arrangements. Earlier studies dealt with pandemic-specific issues, highlighting the need for solid policy foundations. In the meantime, staff wellbeing remains central. Research on young Malaysian professionals revealed complex effects on work-life balance. Career growth concerns persist, especially regarding visibility in remote settings.

Several key gaps remain in understanding hybrid work arrangements. First, there is limited insight into how social theories apply to hybrid settings, with a need to adapt existing frameworks to capture the unique dynamics of remote and in-office work. Additionally, the patterns of cultural influence on work practices remain underexplored, especially in contexts like Malaysia, where cultural diversity plays a significant role. The role of technology in shaping these practices is another critical gap, as its impact on communication, collaboration, and regulatory processes warrants further investigation. Sector differences also emerge as an important area of inquiry, with varying organizational contexts influencing the adoption and adaptation of hybrid models. Finally, understanding how rules and norms emerge through the interaction between staff and organization is essential, as these processes underpin the evolving regulatory landscape of hybrid work. This overview shows we need a deeper understanding of hybrid work in Malaysian contexts. Research must particularly address cultural elements and practical challenges across different sectors.

METHOD

Following Creswell and Poth's (2023) guidelines for qualitative inquiry, we adopted an interpretive approach to understand how employees experience and navigate hybrid work arrangements. This methodology aligns with our theoretical framework based on Reynaud's (1988) social regulation theory, allowing us to examine how workplace rules and practices emerge through daily interactions. Following Yin's (2018) recommendations for case selection, we sought participants from diverse organizational contexts to capture varied experiences of hybrid work implementation.

Participant Selection

We employed purposive sampling to select interviewees who met our criteria of having at least 6 months of experience in a hybrid work arrangement in Malaysia. The main selection criteria were current engagement in hybrid work (combining office and remote work), and we intentionally included participants from diverse sectors and job roles to capture a wide range of experiences. This approach ensured variation in organizational context, gender, and seniority among the ten (10) respondents. The sample was evenly split by gender, with five (5) men and five (5) women. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 36 years, with an average age of 27. Ethnically, eight participants were Chinese Malaysians and two were Malay Malaysians. In terms of education, seven held bachelor's degrees, two had master's degrees, and one possessed a Ph.D. The professionals represented a diverse array of fields, including marketing, retail, environmental work, gaming, consulting, telecom, healthcare, and education. Additionally, six participants were in junior roles while four held senior positions with a monthly income that ranged from RM1,700 to RM10,000.

DATA COLLECTION

The in-depth interviews between the researchers and the ten participants were conducted between September and December 2023. At the time, many workplaces had moved past emergency remote work to more structured hybrid setups. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Participants were free to use their preferred language, which helped them share their thoughts naturally. The interview covered several structured topics: how rules and practices shape hybrid work life; the give-and-take process between staff and management; technology's role in daily work; cultural influences; and the balance between freedom and control in different work settings. The interview questions were developed based on, or as extensions of, the Social Regulation Theory and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory. These theoretical frameworks guided the formulation of questions to explore the regulatory influences on employee well-being and performance in a hybrid work environment, as well as the balance between job demands and available resources.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

We employed thematic analysis based on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to interpret the interview data. After a comprehensive review of the transcripts, initial coding and theme development were conducted using

NVivo 15 qualitative data analysis software. We identified ten key areas for coding: how people engage with hybrid policies, office and home setups, time management, work-life balance, communication patterns, the impact on work quality, benefits, challenges, outlook, and surprising findings. These coding areas directly inform our findings structure and align with our research objectives as follows: workplace policy engagement and office/home setups relate to our first objective on regulatory adaptation; time management and work-life balance address the third objective on cultural influences; communication patterns connect to our fourth objective on technology mediation; work quality impact and benefits/challenges address our fifth objective on well-being and performance. The outlook and surprising findings provide additional insights across all objectives, particularly regarding the second objective on policy-practice interactions.

Quality Assurance

To establish research trustworthiness, we implemented several validation protocols. Participants received transcripts for member checking, and preliminary interpretations underwent respondent validation with selected interviewees. Regular peer debriefing sessions strengthened analytical rigor and mitigated potential researcher bias. This triangulation approach enhanced the credibility of our findings.

Research Ethics

Strict confidentiality protocols governed all research processes. Participants provided informed consent with full disclosure of study implications. They were each given fictional first names to protect their identities throughout the analysis and reporting. Given the sensitive nature of workplace practice discussions, we maintained heightened privacy safeguards beyond standard protocols.

FINDINGS

The findings below are structured to answer how hybrid work arrangements transform traditional regulatory processes in Malaysian organizations. Specifically, the discussions are to address the five research objectives: to identify how social regulation mechanisms adapt and evolve, explore the interactions between formal policies and practices, investigate how cultural values influence the implementation and experience, examine how technology mediates regulatory processes, and finally analyze the impact of hybrid work arrangements on employee well-being and performance. The discussion will be based on the following headings: (1) examining the transformation of control and regulation, (2) the emergence of new regulatory patterns, (3) the influence of cultural values, (4) the role of technology, and (5) impacts on well-being and performance.

1. The Transformation of Control and Regulation in Hybrid Settings

Our analysis reveals how hybrid work fundamentally transforms workplace regulation and organizational practices in Malaysian organizations. This transformation manifests through varying approaches to control and autonomy across different sectors and organizational contexts.

The healthcare sector presents a particularly compelling case for understanding how traditional control mechanisms evolve in hybrid settings. Healthcare has historically relied on direct supervision and standardized protocols, making it a critical site for examining how organizations balance operational requirements with flexible work arrangements. Sandy, speaking from a non-clinical healthcare role, reveals how organizations are creating nuanced distinctions in hybrid work eligibility:

"Even in the healthcare sector, because we are not directly dealing with patients, and we are not exactly the frontliners... we are able to go for this hybrid arrangement. I would say it's more flexible without the supervising eyes of anybody, your colleagues or anybody." (Sandy)

This observation illustrates three key points about workplace transformation in hybrid settings. First, it shows how organizations segment their workforce based on operational requirements, creating what we term 'regulatory microenvironments' that vary by function rather than just department. Second, it demonstrates how sectors traditionally resistant to remote work are finding ways to incorporate hybrid arrangements while preserving essential operations. Third, it reveals how employees themselves rationalize and make sense of these new arrangements within their professional context. The careful distinction between patient-facing and non-patient-facing roles suggests that hybrid work implementation requires a sophisticated understanding of role-specific requirements rather than sector-wide policies.

While healthcare shows systematic segmentation of hybrid work eligibility, the retail sector reveals a more experimental, individualized approach to implementing hybrid arrangements. This sector-level contrast highlights how organizations in different industries approach the transformation of workplace control. Skyler's experience in retail:

"So, this hybrid working, it's a discussion between me with my boss. So, we're trying to experiment this kind of work style just for me..." (Skyler)

This experimental approach represents a distinct model of hybrid work implementation. Unlike healthcare's systematic role-based segmentation, it shows how some organizations are using individual-level pilot programs to test and refine hybrid arrangements. This contrast reveals how sector-specific characteristics shape the evolution of workplace control mechanisms. The negotiated, experimental nature of Skyler's arrangement also suggests that organizations are learning to balance standardization with flexibility in their approach to hybrid work. Other sectors add valuable contrasts, as Roger from gaming observes:

"Working from home is harder but gives you more time to think. In the office, you can get help, but at home, no one bothers you, so you can focus on your work without interruptions." (Roger)

2. The Emergence of Regulatory Microenvironments

Our analysis reveals distinct "regulatory microenvironments" where policies and practices intersect in novel ways. These environments manifest differently across home and office settings, creating unique patterns of work regulation that vary by context and individual circumstance. In office settings, spatial and social factors create distinct regulatory patterns. Morgan from environmental conservation illustrates this dynamic:

"I find that I'm more efficient when I'm working on site. Because I have to do things. I get things done. (...) Having the option of working remotely or working in the office is always great cause sometimes you're just like, you can still work, but you're not feeling it to go into the office." (Morgan)

This observation reveals how physical presence shapes work patterns while highlighting the emerging flexibility in choosing work environments based on individual needs and preferences. The home environment creates different regulatory patterns, as Sandy from healthcare explains:

"So, I would say working from home will make you, I would say, work longer hours. However, I would say it's more flexible without the supervising eyes of anybody, your colleagues, or anybody. (...) I think it helps for you to have a change of, I would say change of environment, to help you become more productive." (Sandy)

This experience highlights how the absence of direct supervision paradoxically leads to work extension while fostering new forms of self-regulation. The emergence of these microenvironments requires active management of boundaries and expectations. Dakota from consulting describes their approach:

"I might tell them that I won't respond to any messages after 6 pm. Yes, but if, I will tell them that if you need to reach me, it will be between 9 am and 11 am or 2 pm and 4 pm." (Dakota)

Organizations are also adapting their physical spaces to accommodate these new patterns. Jane from education observes:

"Now it's gone. So, I think they reduced at least one level of office area because of this co-work space." (Jane)

The effectiveness of these microenvironments varies by sector and role. In healthcare, Sandy notes:

"So, I feel working hybrid environment gives you the advantage of having a different work environment, especially like my role." (Sandy)

This sectoral variation shows how regulatory microenvironments are shaped by operational requirements and job functions rather than uniform policies. The emergence of these varied regulatory spaces creates new challenges for performance management. As Sandy reflects:

"So, it doesn't matter like how long. I mean, you can be working, I would say, eight hours a day on the same project. But if you're being confined to like working in the same environment and you cannot get a good output or I would say outcome from the project that you're working on, it's still pointless." (Sandy)

This observation highlights a shift toward outcome-based evaluation rather than time-based control in hybrid settings.

3. Cultural Values and Social Regulation

The Malaysian cultural context significantly shapes how hybrid work regulation evolves, particularly in how employees navigate between traditional workplace relationships and new flexible arrangements. The importance of maintaining social connections while adapting to new work patterns is highlighted by Riley from advertising:

"In the end, humans are social creatures to socialize to make friends to build that rapport and good relationship with colleagues, teammates. (...) Personally, I like to have relationships outside of work as well. So, some colleagues that I'm very close with, we are still friends outside of work." (Riley)

This reflection reveals how employees actively work to preserve relationship-building despite physical separation. The adaptation of traditional hierarchical relationships takes different forms across sectors. Roger from gaming describes how family understanding shapes work boundaries:

"My family understands me because they know I'm serious about my work. They understand that I work hard not only for money but also for their future, so it doesn't create any obstacles." (Roger)

The challenge of maintaining professional identity while working remotely is particularly salient in the retail sector, as Skyler explains:

"Sometimes I just isolate myself. And also, by isolating, so I explain to my family what current style I've worked on, although they do not really understand it. (...) Sometimes when you go to the park, you have your alone time. So, you can think more clearly about what the problem is or one of the ways, like you want to face or find a solution for it." (Skyler)

The evolution of workplace culture also involves rethinking traditional approaches to productivity and presence. As Riley from advertising notes:

"As I grew in my career, I think I prefer to stay at home. Because I realized you save much more money. (...) You need to find purpose, not just a job, but in life as well. You need to know what you want exactly."

The transformation of communication patterns reveals cultural adaptations, particularly in how serious matters are handled. Jamie from telecommunications observes:

"Sometimes it's a bit harder to have spontaneous conversations or quick problem-solving sessions. So, miscommunication can occur easily when we're not in the office face-to-face." (Jamie)

This highlights the ongoing negotiation between traditional preferences for face-to-face interaction and the realities of hybrid work.

3.1 Time Regulation, Work Extension and Intensification

The regulation of working time in hybrid arrangements reveals complex patterns of adaptation, where formal policies intersect with individual strategies for managing workload and boundaries.

The challenge of maintaining consistent work patterns emerges clearly in Skyler's experience in retail:

"Sometimes it prolongs until night time. Sometimes, it's like 8 to 9 AM. So, it has been a problem with consistency with work hours when I'm working at home. (...) So, meaning, one of the problems is you just don't have someone to talk to, unless it's your cat or someone, maybe you can talk with at home." (Skyler)

This inconsistency in work hours contrasts with more structured approaches. Riley from advertising describes the formal framework:

"9 to 6, but Marketing is quite flexible, I would say. Sometimes, we need to work OT also. (...) I think you need to find the balance, but I would say generally I try not to forget that I have a job on my work from home days." (Riley)

The integration of personal tasks within work time creates new patterns of time management. Dakota from consulting explains:

"I might need to collect the laundry and fold it. Do some housework, then start working again until 5:30, then go pick up the kids. (...) Having Fridays off helps me to compensate for that. Sometimes I don't have much work going on, on Fridays I will do house chores." (Dakota)

Mental health considerations emerge as a key factor in time management. Riley reflects:

"Having that freedom towards the work from home and opportunities to go around the house during chores, like running errands that you have not be able to go to. Because of work, I think it helps. And it's overall good for me, for your mental health. (...) Definitely try not or try to take a break, because sometimes, especially in my company, I see a lot of people just working and sitting in front of a laptop every single day." (Riley)

Physical well-being also influences how time is structured. Dakota notes:

"I play badminton after work... compared to the office, working from home leaves me with more energy to exercise." (Dakota)

The challenge of managing work intensity appears particularly in Morgan's experience:

"Because when I'm at home, we need to communicate with the partner and we need to wait for the replies and stuff. And the quiet environment can be great for focused work. But technology issues can disrupt productivity." (Morgan)

4. Technology as a Mediator of Work Regulation

Technology emerges as a crucial mediator of hybrid work practices, though with significant variations in access and implementation. Jamie from telecommunications describes sophisticated technological integration:

"We use rocks for communication, we use Trello for project management, and also we use Zoom for virtual meetings. The office is less crowded, which makes it quieter and easier to focus whenever I'm in the office." (Jamie)

Sandy from healthcare describes how technology affects communication patterns:

"Because we are dealing with agents and partners from different markets, right? So, of course, we do see different social messaging apps that we use. (...) Sometimes on text, when you read text, you will feel like, oh, you know, sometimes when a person replies, you perceive it as cool. Like when a person replies you an okay, O-K, compared to a O-K-A-Y, okay." (Sandy)

5. Work-Life Integration and Wellbeing

The integration of work and personal life emerges as a key regulatory challenge in hybrid settings, with employees developing varied strategies for managing boundaries and maintaining well-being. Mental health considerations shape how employees structure their work patterns. Morgan describes their coping mechanisms:

"I just play computer games I guess, I mean other things would be like, you know consult with someone like, I consult with my mum, or consult with another person usually, a friend." (Morgan)

The search for suitable work environments extends beyond the traditional home/office dichotomy. Sandy reflects:

"So, I would appreciate places like cafes because, you know, sometimes home is less ideal because you can't always be working in a space where you are being confined." (Sandy)

John offers insight into how individual characteristics affect hybrid work success:

"Efficiency depends on the person. Without a public workspace, laziness can set in and impact efficiency." (John)

These perspectives reveal the complex interplay between personal well-being and workplace effectiveness in hybrid arrangements.

5.1 Communication and Collaboration in Hybrid Settings

The regulation of communication emerges as a crucial challenge in hybrid work arrangements, with employees developing new strategies for maintaining effective collaboration across different contexts. In the healthcare sector, Sandy emphasizes the importance of choosing appropriate communication channels for different situations:

"So, I think it is wiser to call a person, especially in serious matters that you need to discuss about rather than having those serious discussions on text." (Sandy)

The impact on workplace relationships requires active management. Riley from advertising reflects:

"In that sense, it is important. Sometimes people use that time to just relax and not do work, that can happen. So, you need to find the balance." (Riley)

The technology sector reveals how formal structures adapt to hybrid communication needs. Jamie describes their approach:

"The office is less crowded, which makes it quieter and easier to focus whenever I'm in the office." (Jamie)

The shift to hybrid work affects how support and problem-solving occur. Roger from gaming observes:

"Sometimes, when you're out with family or shopping, the boss might contact you for work. I always maintain a professional attitude." (Roger)

The experience in environmental conservation highlights coordination challenges. Morgan notes:

"Sometimes they're not replying. So, sometimes they're doing their other jobs and also my boss also not entirely available." (Morgan)

5.2 Performance and Productivity in Hybrid Settings

The relationship between work arrangements and performance emerges as complex and multifaceted, varying significantly across different contexts and roles. The link between environment and productivity appears in Sandy's reflection from healthcare:

"I think it helps for you to have a change of, I would say change of environment to help you become more productive." (Sandy)

The consulting sector reveals how hybrid arrangements affect energy management. Dakota observes:

"About the aspect of stress, I have only been working for two months, so sometimes I make mistakes, especially around payday when time is tight. It's stressful." (Dakota)

The challenge of maintaining consistent performance standards emerges in Skyler's retail experience:

"So far, I don't have much input that I want to discuss. I mean, to improve, but which is in my case, they really need to set up a policy between the worker and also the timeline." (Skyler)

Casey's general observation captures a positive outcome:

"I think I'm happier compared to working solely in the office." (Casey)

Synthesis of Findings

In summary, the analysis reveals several interconnected patterns in how hybrid work arrangements transform workplace regulation and practices in Malaysian organizations. First, the emergence of "regulatory microenvironments" shows how workplace rules and norms adapt differently across physical and virtual spaces, creating distinct patterns of work organization that vary by context and individual circumstance. These

environments are characterized by complex interactions between formal policies and oral agreements, mediated by both technological infrastructure and cultural values.

Second, the transformation of control mechanisms varies significantly by sector and organizational context. While some sectors, such as healthcare, demonstrate systematic segmentation of hybrid work eligibility based on role requirements, others, like retail, show more experimental, individualized approaches to implementation. This variation suggests that successful hybrid work arrangements require a sophisticated understanding of sector-specific needs rather than uniform policies.

Third, cultural adaptation emerges as a crucial factor in hybrid work implementation. Participants consistently highlighted the need to balance traditional Malaysian workplace values, particularly regarding face-to-face interaction and hierarchical relationships, with the more autonomous nature of hybrid work. This adaptation process creates new forms of workplace relationships that preserve cultural values while embracing flexibility.

Fourth, technology plays a complex role as both enabler and constraint in hybrid work arrangements. While digital tools facilitate new forms of work organization, significant variations in technological access and infrastructure create potential inequities in hybrid work implementation. These variations highlight the need for organizations to ensure robust technological support across all work contexts.

Finally, the findings reveal sophisticated strategies for managing work-life boundaries and maintaining well-being in hybrid settings. Participants described various approaches to integrating work and personal life, though with varying degrees of success. These strategies often involve active negotiation between organizational requirements, personal preferences, and cultural expectations.

These findings lay the groundwork for deeper theoretical analysis of how workplace regulation operates in hybrid settings, particularly within culturally diverse contexts like Malaysia. The following discussion section will explore the theoretical implications of these findings and their practical significance for organizations implementing hybrid work arrangements.

The complex patterns revealed in our findings raise important questions about how social regulation theory can be extended to account for the distinct characteristics of hybrid work arrangements. The following discussion section will examine these theoretical implications while considering how our findings both support and challenge existing frameworks for understanding workplace transformation. Table 1 summarises the participants and the distribution of the key themes.

Table 1: Participants and Distribution of Key Themes

Name	Sector	Regulatory Microenvironments	Cultural Adaptation	Technology Mediation	Work-Life Integration	Performance Impact
Sandy	Healthcare	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Skyler	Retail	✓	✓		✓	✓
Roger	Gaming	✓	✓		✓	✓
Riley	Advertising	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Morgan	Environmental	✓		✓	✓	✓
Dakota	Consulting	✓	✓		✓	✓
Jamie	Telecommunications			✓	✓	
John	Education				✓	✓
Jane	Education	✓				
Casey	Marketing				✓	✓

DISCUSSION

Our findings extend current understanding of how workplace regulation operates in hybrid settings, particularly within the Malaysian cultural context. The results both support and challenge aspects of existing theoretical frameworks while suggesting new directions for understanding contemporary work arrangements.

Research Objective 1: Transformation of Regulatory Mechanisms

The complex relationship between hybrid work arrangements and regulatory adaptation, as documented by Malarvizhi et al. (2023), suggests that traditional regulatory frameworks require significant modification for hybrid settings. Our findings suggest that Reynaud's (1988) social regulation theory requires extension to fully capture the dynamics of hybrid work arrangements. The "regulatory microenvironments" we identified represent a novel contribution to understanding how workplace rules operate across physical and virtual spaces. This extends Terssac's (2003) work on social regulation by demonstrating how regulatory processes adapt to distributed work settings.

However, a critical perspective suggests these tailored microenvironments (Ramanathan, 2024) might also lead to regulatory ambiguity and potential inequities if the frameworks governing them lack transparency or fairness (Ramachandran, 2024), potentially creating situations where favourable conditions depend more on individual negotiation power than consistent policy.

The experiences of our participants, particularly in sectors like healthcare and telecommunications, reveal how traditional control mechanisms transform in hybrid settings. As Leonardi (2020) suggests, technology mediates these transformations in ways that create new possibilities for both control and autonomy. Hybrid work and work from home are becoming tools in search of employees' autonomy (Thoemmes 2024) without any guarantee that those objectives will be achieved.

Research Objective 2: Policy-Practice Interactions

Our findings reveal complex interactions between formal policies and informal practices in hybrid work environments. Rather than a simple implementation of organizational directives, we observed dynamic negotiations between written policies and lived work experiences. This negotiation process creates what we term "adaptive hybridization," where organizational policies and employee practices mutually influence each other, creating unique configurations of work regulation.

These findings align with recent work by Ibrahim et al. (2023), who noted similar dynamics in the transformation of employment relations during pandemic lockdowns. However, our research extends this understanding by identifying specific mechanisms through which policies and practices interact in hybrid settings, particularly the role of technological mediation and cultural adaptation in shaping these interactions.

While this 'adaptive hybridization,' suggesting continuous improvement (Wiatr & Skowron-Mielnik, 2024) appears positive, it's crucial to critically examine whether the resulting employee agency genuinely empowers workers or merely represents superficial adjustments that maintain underlying control structures and potentially demanding workloads.

Research Objective 3: Cultural Influence on Hybrid Work

The emphasis on maintaining relationships and face-to-face interaction, noted by participants across sectors, aligns with their observations about Malaysian cultural preferences. High power distance in Malaysian organizations, as noted already by Hofstede (2001), creates challenges in implementing hybrid work arrangements, which often require flatter hierarchies and greater employee autonomy. Recent research by Barnes et al. (2024) on leadership practices in hybrid work settings provides additional support for the importance of cultural adaptation in successful implementation.

However, our findings also reveal innovative adaptations to these cultural preferences. The "adaptive hybridization" we observed extends beyond simple accommodation of cultural values to create new forms of work organization that blend traditional and contemporary practices. This supports Ibrahim et al.'s (2023) observations about the evolution of work practices in Malaysian organizations while suggesting more complex patterns of adaptation.

Furthermore, adapting to Malaysian cultural values like collectivism and hierarchy (Sundari et al., 2024; Hincapie and Costa, 2024) is not friction-free. It may create tensions between generational cohorts or mask underlying conflicts between traditional expectations and the individual autonomy often associated with hybrid work, potentially fragmenting the intended cultural cohesion.

Research Objective 4: Technology as Mediator of Regulation

The role of technology in mediating hybrid work emerges as more complex than previously recognized. While Kwek et al.'s (2023) work on digital readiness provides valuable context, our findings suggest that technological infrastructure shapes regulatory processes in ways not fully captured by existing frameworks. The disparities in technological access noted by our participants highlight important equity considerations in hybrid work implementation.

Moreover, the reliance on collaboration tools (John et al., 2024) potentially increases digital surveillance and normalizes work extension, contributing to technostress (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023) and raising critical questions about privacy and the intensification of work under the guise of technologically-enabled flexibility. Gaps in digital literacy (Deschênes, 2023) can further exacerbate these issues, creating a stratified workforce.

Research Objective 5: Impact on Well-being and Performance

Our findings regarding well-being and performance both support and complicate existing research. Zhao et al.'s (2022) findings about millennial wellbeing in remote work settings are partially supported, but our results suggest more nuanced patterns of adaptation. The "regulatory microenvironments" we identified help explain how employees navigate work-life boundaries in hybrid settings, extending Greenhaus and Kossek's (2014) work on work-life integration.

The sector-specific variations in performance impacts that we observed align with Azizan et al.'s (2024) findings about burnout in educational settings, suggesting the need for tailored approaches to supporting employee well-being across different organizational contexts.

Critically, the focus on individual well-being strategies and interventions like mental health support (Pendse et al., 2024) or flexible arrangements (Ramachandaran, 2024), while valuable, might inadvertently deflect attention from core organizational responsibilities in creating sustainable workloads and genuinely supportive cultures (Hincapie & Costa, 2024), potentially placing the burden of adaptation and resilience primarily on the employee.

Theoretical Development

Our findings point to two interrelated theoretical constructs that may help explain how hybrid work arrangements transform workplace regulation: (1) adaptive hybridization, and (2) regulatory microenvironments.

(1) Adaptive Hybridization

Adaptive hybridization describes the dynamic process through which organizations and employees negotiate and blend traditional Malaysian work practices with new hybrid arrangements. This process operates across three dimensions: Cultural Adaptation, Technological Integration, and Spatial-Temporal Flexibility

First Dimension: Cultural Adaptation:

Organizations and employees actively reconcile traditional Malaysian preferences for face-to-face interaction and hierarchical relationships with the more autonomous nature of hybrid work. This negotiation creates new forms of workplace relationships that preserve cultural values while embracing flexibility.

Second Dimension: Technological Integration:

The integration of digital tools with existing work practices creates novel patterns of interaction. Rather than simply replacing traditional practices, technology becomes interwoven with existing cultural norms, creating new hybrid forms of work organization.

Third Dimension: Spatial-Temporal Flexibility:

Organizations and employees develop nuanced approaches to managing work across different locations and time periods. This flexibility isn't merely about working from different locations; it involves creating new patterns of work organization that respond to both organizational needs and cultural contexts.

(2) Regulatory Microenvironments

Regulatory microenvironments emerge as distinct spheres of workplace regulation, each with its own rules, norms, and practices. These environments are characterized by three regulations: Contextual Variation, Contextual Variation, and Technological Mediation.

First Regulation: Contextual Variation:

Different work settings (home, office, or third spaces) develop their own regulatory patterns. These patterns vary not only by location but also by sector and organizational context.

Second Regulation: Dynamic Boundaries:

The boundaries between different regulatory environments are permeable and shift according to organizational needs and employee circumstances. This creates fluid transitions between different work contexts.

Technological Mediation: Digital tools play a crucial role in shaping how rules and practices operate within each environment. However, this mediation isn't uniform across all contexts, leading to varied patterns of regulation.

Theoretical Implications

The emergence of adaptive hybridization and regulatory microenvironments has several important implications for workplace regulation theory, directly addressing our research objectives.

First, these concepts extend Reynaud's (1988) social regulation theory by demonstrating how regulatory processes operate across distributed work settings (Research Objective 1). While Reynaud's framework emphasizes the interaction between autonomy and control, our findings suggest that hybrid work creates multiple, overlapping spheres of regulation that require new theoretical tools to understand.

Second, our findings indicate that formal policies and practices interact in more complex ways than previously recognized (Research Objective 2). Rather than simple implementation or resistance, we observed sophisticated patterns of negotiation and adaptation that reshape how workplace regulation functions in hybrid settings.

Third, cultural context plays a more complex role in workplace regulation than previously recognized (Research Objective 3). Rather than simply constraining or enabling certain practices, cultural factors actively shape how organizations and employees adapt to new work arrangements. This suggests the need for theoretical frameworks that can better account for cultural influence in contemporary work settings.

Fourth, the role of technology in workplace regulation emerges as more nuanced than existing theories suggest (Research Objective 4). Technology acts not just as a tool for implementing work practices, but as a fundamental mediator of regulatory processes. This extends Leonardi's (2020) work on digital transformation by showing how technological infrastructure shapes the possibilities for workplace regulation.

Fifth, our findings on well-being and performance (Research Objective 5) suggest the need for what we might term an "integrated regulation theory" that can account for the multiple dimensions through which workplace rules and practices emerge and evolve in hybrid settings. This theory would need to incorporate the following four (4) points:

- (i) The dynamic interaction between cultural values and new work practices
- (ii) The role of technology in mediating regulatory processes
- (iii) The emergence and management of multiple regulatory environments
- (iv) The importance of spatial and temporal flexibility in shaping work organization

Based on our findings and theoretical development, we propose five (5) propositions to guide future research. First, the effectiveness of hybrid work arrangements is moderated by the degree to which organizations adapt regulatory mechanisms to accommodate sector-specific operational requirements. Second, the development of effective regulatory microenvironments is positively associated with employees' perceived well-being and performance in hybrid work settings. Third, cultural adaptation in hybrid work implementation moderates the relationship between formal policies and actual work practices. Fourth, the technological equity across work contexts positively influences the effectiveness of regulatory processes in hybrid settings. Last but not least, the alignment between cultural values and hybrid work practices positively affects employee engagement and organizational commitment.

These five (5) propositions provide testable hypotheses for future research while highlighting the complex interrelationships between regulation, culture, technology, and well-being in hybrid work arrangements.

Practical Implications

Our findings have four (4) significant implications for organizations implementing or managing hybrid work arrangements, particularly in culturally diverse contexts like Malaysia: Policy Development and Implementation, Technology Infrastructure, Leadership Development and Employee Support, and Cultural Integration

First Implication: Policy Development and Implementation

Organizations could develop flexible frameworks that accommodate both cultural preferences and operational needs. Rather than adopting standardized policies, organizations should create adaptable guidelines that allow for sector-specific and role-specific variations while maintaining clear standards. Regular policy review and adjustment based on employee feedback is essential for long-term success.

Second Implication: Technology Infrastructure

Organizations must address technological infrastructure holistically, ensuring equitable access and support across all work locations. This includes comprehensive technical support and investment in tools that facilitate seamless transitions between different work environments. Particular attention should be paid to bandwidth and connectivity issues that can affect remote work effectiveness.

Third Implication: Leadership Development and Employee Support

Leaders need new competencies to effectively manage hybrid work arrangements, including skills for managing distributed teams and balancing autonomy with accountability. Organizations should provide targeted support for employees through training programs focused on self-management and guidance on maintaining work-life balance in hybrid settings.

Fourth Implication: Cultural Integration

Organizations must actively work to maintain organizational culture in hybrid settings by creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction and developing new practices that reinforce organizational values while ensuring the inclusion of remote workers.

CONCLUSION

This study advances our understanding of how workplace regulation operates in hybrid work settings within the Malaysian context, revealing complex patterns of interaction between policies, practices, and cultural factors. Through the introduction of adaptive hybridization and regulatory microenvironments as theoretical constructs, we suggest new frameworks for understanding how organizations and employees navigate the challenges of hybrid work implementation.

Our research makes three primary contributions. First, we extend social regulation theory by demonstrating how regulatory processes adapt to distributed work settings, introducing the concept of regulatory microenvironments to explain how workplace rules operate across different physical and virtual contexts. Second, we highlight the crucial role of cultural context in shaping regulatory processes, showing how organizations and employees actively blend traditional practices with new work arrangements. Third, we reveal the complex mediating role of technology in workplace regulation, demonstrating how technological infrastructure shapes both possibilities and constraints for workplace organization.

These findings suggest that hybrid work implementation requires an understanding of how cultural values, technological infrastructure, and workplace practices intersect. Organizations must develop approaches that balance structure with flexibility while remaining sensitive to cultural context and technological constraints. The emergence of adaptive hybridization as a key process indicates that organizations should focus on creating conditions that enable effective blending of traditional and contemporary work practices.

We acknowledge certain limitations, particularly regarding sample composition and geographic focus. Future research could productively explore these dynamics across different demographic groups and cultural contexts, while examining how regulatory practices evolve over time.

Our findings suggest that hybrid work implementation requires an understanding of how cultural values, technological infrastructure, and workplace practices intersect. Organizations must develop approaches that balance structure with flexibility while remaining sensitive to cultural context and technological constraints. The emergence of adaptive hybridization as a key process indicates that organizations should focus on creating conditions that enable effective blending of traditional and contemporary work practices. However, critical attention must be paid to potential equity issues in hybrid work implementation, particularly regarding technological access, career advancement opportunities, and the reinforcement of existing power structures. As hybrid work continues to evolve, organizations and policymakers must ensure that new arrangements promote inclusion and sustainability rather than reinforcing existing inequalities. Similarly, findings from another study posited that younger employees, particularly those from Generations Y and Z, demonstrate a marked propensity

for flexible work arrangements, appreciating the autonomy and work-life balance that organisations offer and displaying proficiency in harnessing technology for remote work (Abdul Rahim & Che Hashim, 2024).

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

While our methodological approach yielded nuanced insights into hybrid work regulation, several constraints warrant acknowledgment. The sample size, although appropriate for interpretive inquiry, poses inherent limitations in generalizability. Demographic composition, particularly the predominance of young professionals and ethnic Chinese participants, may not capture the full spectrum of hybrid work experiences in Malaysia. The cross-sectional nature of our data collection potentially understates temporal evolution in regulatory practices. Moreover, our findings reflect experiences during a specific period of hybrid work adoption, possibly overlooking longer-term adaptations and institutional responses. These parameters inform the appropriate contextualization of our conclusions while suggesting productive directions for future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several promising avenues for future research based on this study. First, future research could undertake a longitudinal study to track the evolution of regulatory practices in hybrid settings over time, examining how organizations and employees adapt to changing circumstances and studying the long-term impact on organizational culture. Alternatively, a cross-cultural comparative research across different cultural contexts would enhance understanding of how various cultural factors influence regulatory processes and the transferability of successful practices. Next, the technological impact and sector-specific analysis can be conducted to investigate how technological infrastructures affect work practices and examine sector-specific adaptations and best practices across different organizational types. These research directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of hybrid work arrangements while providing practical guidance for implementation across different contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION:

JT contributed 70% of the work on this paper, while LL contributed 30%.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

To the best of our knowledge, there is no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION STATEMENT:

We declare that this research is original, has not been published elsewhere, and that all authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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