

**Different Working Arrangements, Different Roles:
Simon Fraser University Managers Creating
Equitable Workplaces Post-COVID-19**

**by
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Abstract

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic, mandating workers to work remotely, if possible. The pandemic resulted in an everlasting change to the “typical” workday structure (Infection Prevention and Control Canada, 2023). Institutions of higher education were forced to pivot quickly, enabling many staff and/or faculty to work remotely full-time and create ad hoc hybrid work arrangements for even essential higher education support service workers. In my research, I explored the perspectives of Simon Fraser University (SFU) managers who manage teams with different working arrangements post-COVID. I interviewed five SFU managers and found that the qualitative data collected from these interviews provided the following emergent themes: key components of a hybrid working arrangement, how technology advanced throughout the pandemic, and how the “ideal higher education worker norms” changed along with what staff and/or faculty expect from their workplace post-COVID.

Keywords: Hybrid working arrangement; higher education; flexibility; trust; transparency; technology; ideal worker norms; workplace expectations

Dedication

To my parents, Herb and Deborah Cowan, who never stopped believing in me and saw what I was capable of when I had my doubts.

To my husband Grant and my son Jordan, for all your love and support while I fulfilled one of my dreams.

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Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, my work life involved commuting from Abbotsford to Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Burnaby campus five days a week. An hour and a half commute each way; three hours per day, roughly fifteen hours a week assuming there were no unexpected traffic events. I now think, "How did I do that for so many years?" The answer is, I did it because it was what was expected; it was "the norm". According to Sang et al. (2015), higher education institutions have established "ideal worker norms," which involve staff and/or faculty members working exceptionally long hours and demonstrating intense dedication, often at the expense of external commitments. Many individuals who fit this "ideal worker" mold in higher education feared that not working long hours or appearing less dedicated than their peers could jeopardize their careers or even lead to job loss. Many organizations within higher education expect the "ideal worker" to put their work role ahead of their family or personal life at all times (Kossek et al., 2010).

According to Lendák-Kabók (2022), higher education has an old bureaucratic organizational structure that is very masculine-orientated and supports the characteristics of the "ideal worker". However, they also state that flexible working arrangements in higher education are particularly advantageous for female staff and/or faculty, enabling them to balance full-time parenting with their professional responsibilities. Moreover, those who utilize these flexible arrangements often find themselves needing to make up for missed work by putting in additional hours outside the traditional workday, leading to increased workloads and reduced sleep (Lendák-Kabók, 2022).

From my experience as an SFU staff member and a member of the Administrative & Professional Staff Association (APSA), the "ideal worker" expectations in place before the COVID-19 pandemic were similar. Senior leadership required us to be on campus five days a week to support students and guests. As Sang et al. (2015) mention, the culture of long working hours spent at work within higher education, whether in the office or the classroom, influences the normative pressure of what success should look like.

In 2016, I discussed the option of remote work with my supervisor, as this was a benefit available to all APSA staff members at SFU. Despite this, between 2016 and March 2020, I was only able to work from home on rare occasions, such as when editing direct reports' job descriptions. This task required uninterrupted concentration, which was difficult to achieve in the office. Remote work for such tasks had to be pre-approved by my supervisor.

I sensed mixed signals regarding remote work, as it was often viewed unfavorably by the senior leadership team for not aligning with the "ideal worker norms" in higher education. Furthermore, SFU's APSA AD 10.13 Policies guidebook (2007) indicates the following: "He/she will exercise discretion about the time and location of work performed in support of the established job objective" (p. I-64). Despite being considered an APSA benefit, it often took significant effort to justify to my supervisor the reasons why I was requesting to work remotely, and there was a perception among other staff members that remote work was non-productive. As a result, even though it was a benefit, I was rarely permitted to work remotely.

Senior leadership expected me to adhere to the "ideal worker norms" between 2016 and March 2020, which required me to commute ninety kilometers to and from the office five days a week. This added three hours to my eight-hour workday. Additionally, I was expected to be on-call to address any guest or group booking issues that arose after regular office hours or over the weekend. This took a toll on my mental and physical health, as I spent excessive time at work and in my car, neglecting my well-being. After an eight-hour workday, I was often too exhausted to go to the gym or even take a walk to unwind from the stress.

The environmental impact of commuting daily was also significant. On average per year, my commute emitted 4,356.9 kilograms of CO₂ (Saxifrage, 2019). Moreover, the long hours at work prevented me from participating in my son's school activities, such as dropping him off or picking him up from school and engaging with his teachers and classmates' parents. This lack of connection made me feel isolated and unable to provide the parental support my son needed as he entered elementary school. Many full-time working parents faced similar challenges in balancing family life with professional obligations due to the lack of workplace flexibility, adversely affecting their health and well-being.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic in March 2020 and mandated remote work whenever possible, it brought about a lasting change to the “typical” workday. Institutions of higher education, including SFU, were compelled to pivot quickly. This allowed many staff and/or faculty to transition to full-time remote work and create ad hoc hybrid work arrangements, even for essential support service workers within higher education, such as those in SFU’s Residence and Housing Department.

As a staff member in this department, I directly experienced the impact of this shift on our department’s daily structure. The pandemic effectively introduced a hybrid work arrangement for most of our staff. This sudden change eliminated the longstanding cultural and technological barriers that had previously hindered widespread adoption of hybrid work, despite the existing technology available to support remote work, as detailed by Farque (2023).

To comprehend the current hybrid working arrangement in higher education post-COVID-19, it was essential to understand the pre-COVID-19 expectations, acknowledge the transition period, and recognize how workplace expectations evolved to include the need for hybrid working arrangements. My research aimed to identify what SFU managers consider to be the key elements of a hybrid working arrangement for their teams in the post-COVID-19 era.

Literature Review

I reviewed ten publications on remote work, hybrid workplaces and teams, flexible working arrangements, workplace relationships, and the impacts of COVID-19 on organizational structures. These sources included journal articles, web-based articles from Forbes.com and the Harvard Business Review, and several chapters from Farque’s (2023) book on hybrid work and teams. I noticed that research on finding the optimal balance for hybrid working arrangements was limited and there was much more yet to be explored. As I collected information on existing studies and discussions, it became evident that remote work comes with both disadvantages and advantages. Some disadvantages included conflict between professional and family roles, loneliness, and proximity bias. Identified advantages included the environmental impact of not having to commute to work daily, improved work-life balance, and increased work productivity.

Ultimately, hybrid working arrangements where employees worked both on- and off-site, became a permanent fixture. Therefore, identifying the optimal balance and understanding the essential components for establishing and maintaining such arrangements was crucial. Higher education institutions needed to focus on strategies to keep staff and/or faculty connected with their teams and the institution, whether they were working remotely or onsite.

Disadvantages of Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In their study, Couch et al. (2020) identified that remote work policies affected women differently than men. Many women experience conflicts between their professional, family, and social roles when working remotely. These conflicts significantly impacted their emotions, with many women feeling inadequate in both their professional and family roles (Couch et al., 2020). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women often felt they were not dedicating enough time to their “paid” job, jeopardizing their professional careers. Simultaneously, their families perceived them as too occupied and felt neglected, leading to feelings of guilt as women struggled to balance their “unpaid” family responsibilities (Couch et al., 2020).

Reading this article validated my experiences during remote work in the pandemic. I constantly felt stretched thin between my professional responsibilities and family obligations, often feeling like I was working non-stop. To manage, I had to divide my days and continue working evenings and weekends to keep up with my “paid” job. This approach eventually took a toll on me, and I began to experience increasing burnout. This was exacerbated by the fact that my entire family was at home due to pandemic restrictions, and clear boundaries between work and personal life were difficult to establish.

Loneliness also became an issue for many individuals who felt the effects of prolonged isolation during the pandemic (Ernst et al., 2022). Farque (2023) explained that the primary challenges stemming from remote work included heightened feelings of isolation, a lack of social connection, and concerns about missing out. These issues contributed to increased levels of stress and anxiety, workplace burnout, and a sense of

exclusion from the organization. Consequently, employee engagement decreased, and job satisfaction levels declined.

As restrictions began to ease and organizations introduced hybrid working arrangements, managing employees became a delicate balancing act. For me, this meant evaluating how best to meet the operational needs of our department while accommodating the personal lives of my direct reports. I considered various factors: determining the number of days per week my team and I could work remotely, identifying tasks suitable for remote work, and ensuring adequate in-office coverage to maintain business operations. This balancing act continues to be a challenge, particularly as my direct reports have varying workplace expectations following their acceptance of SFU's hybrid working arrangement agreement in the Spring of 2022.

Farque (2023) highlights that a major drawback of the hybrid workplace is the reduced sense of belonging. It became challenging for staff members who no longer saw each other regularly due to differing hybrid work schedules and reduced interactions in the office. Some employees felt that hybrid working arrangements led to "proximity bias," where those who worked in the office had more opportunities to connect with supervisors and access career development. (Farque, 2023). This bias negatively affected hybrid workers' feelings of belonging, prompting supervisors to consider innovative ways to keep their hybrid staff connected (Farque, 2023).

To keep in touch with my hybrid team, I conducted daily check-ins with each member. These check-ins occurred face-to-face when I was in the office, or through phone calls, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom meetings when working remotely. During these sessions, I ensured everyone was prepared for the day and reassured them of my support, whether I was in the office or working remotely from home.

Advantages of Remote Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stern (2020) noted that student researchers from Vancouver Island University (VIU) measured a significant decrease in air pollution levels during March 2020 as a result of reduced car and plane traffic. They found that the air quality levels across British Columbia (BC) decreased by 30-60%. One of the student researchers, Annika Bouma, is quoted in the article as saying:

I think that COVID-19 can tell us a lot about air quality improvements as there is so much less air travel and vehicle travel occurring due to social distancing. With the reduction we could possibly see how this affects our air quality and using the information to help improve air quality in the future (Stern, 2020, p. 8).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had calculated that my daily commute to the office five days a week resulted in an average annual CO₂ emission of 4,356.9 kilograms (Saxifrage, 2019). When the work-from-home mandate began in March 2020 and continued until Spring 2022, my CO₂ emissions dropped to 889.92 kilograms per year because I only commuted into the office one day a week. As noted by the student researchers at VIU the reduction in car and plane traffic quickly showed a positive impact on air quality in BC (Stern, 2020). Working remotely during the pandemic reduced my carbon footprint by 80%.

Ling (2022) explained that over the past two decades, the long hours and the 24/7 culture in higher education contributed to blurring the lines between work and family life. Higher education institutions responded to the worldwide implementation of hybrid working arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, they had not yet developed family-friendly policies to support and offer better benefits aimed at reducing the stress associated with achieving work-life balance for each employee.

For me, the greatest benefit of a hybrid work arrangement was the flexibility it provided for a better work-life balance. During my remote workdays throughout the pandemic, I was able to take my son to school and pick him up, which allowed me to interact with his teachers and other parents over the two-year period. This opportunity was a significant benefit that I would not have had if it were not for the COVID-19 pandemic. Gradually, I managed to strike a balance between my professional work and my involvement as a parent at my son's school. The flexibility of remote work enabled me to establish boundaries for my professional responsibilities and family life, leading to a sense of success in both aspects.

When comparing my work productivity on my remote working days versus my days working in the office, I noticed that my productivity was higher on my remote working days. I experienced fewer distractions and interruptions, which enabled me to concentrate fully on administrative tasks that required my undivided attention. This is not to imply that I was unproductive while working in the office. However, it was a reality that

coworkers often dropped by my office unannounced for impromptu conversations. These conversations were not always brief and often consumed valuable time, which accumulated as more people stopped by.

Farque (2023) noted that working remotely increased productivity by 4.8% during the COVID-19 pandemic. A major factor was the removal of commuting time, which allowed employees to get extra sleep, thereby improving their focus and productivity during the workday. This, in turn, led to greater job satisfaction and increased efficiency in their roles (Farque, 2023).

Relevance and Importance of the Research

Too much of a good thing was not always ideal, as evidenced by full-time remote work post-COVID-19. As noted by Farque (2023), full-time remote work could lead to heightened feelings of isolation, a lack of social connection, and a fear of missing out. These factors contributed to increased levels of stress and anxiety among employees, resulting in workplace burnout and a sense of exclusion from the organization. On the other hand, employees appreciated the flexibility of remote work, which enabled them to achieve a better work-life balance.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transformation of the traditional workplace into a new hybrid model, how do managers strike the right balance? How can they provide employees with the best of both worlds: personal connections through office work and the flexibility of remote work a few days a week?

Managers had to employ creative strategies to keep employees engaged, prevent them from feeling isolated, and maintain open lines of communication (Kappel, 2021). Similar themes from other sources underscored what was necessary to create a balanced hybrid workplace and team (Baym et al., 2021; Farque, 2023; Glistrap et al., 2022), establishing these key components as a starting point was essential for successful hybrid workplaces.

Kappel (2021), outlined four key components for building workplace relationships post-COVID: overcommunicating (being open and honest and check-in often with employees either in-person or virtually), actively listening (fostering workplace relationships by genuinely listening to what employees are saying, even when it might be

difficult), building a strong workplace team to cultivate a culture of trust, and creating opportunities for social connection.

For me, trust was fundamental to building strong relationships within my team. If trust had been compromised among team members, our efficiency would have been adversely affected. Over the past couple of years, as our team transitioned to a hybrid working arrangement, I devoted considerable time to brainstorming creative ways to build trust and maintain connections with each of my direct reports. Last Spring, during the recruitment process for hiring our student staff members, my colleague and I made a point to share something personal about ourselves in each interview--that we love cats. We made candidates laugh as they thought we were joking, but after they were hired and started working with us, they quickly realized we were indeed the crazy cat ladies. I made a deliberate effort to connect with each of my direct reports on a personal level, aiming for them to feel recognized as individuals, not just employees. By nurturing positive relationships with each direct report, I was able to build trust. As a result, my team's productivity levels were high because they felt valued and appreciated.

The existing research was less clear on how managers could maintain a balanced and equitable working environment for the entire team. For instance, it is unclear how managers can prevent discontent when one employee must work in-office five days a week, while another has a hybrid arrangement and could work remotely part of the week. Therefore, additional qualitative research was needed to explore the various dynamics of hybrid teams and how managers could establish an equitable environment between two different workweek arrangements: hybrid and in-office work.

Problem Statement

What does a standard workweek look like anymore? Post-COVID-19, the workplace looked a little different. Many employees wanted the option to work remotely or have a hybrid working arrangement. When an institution like SFU was mandated to pivot and send their students, staff, and faculty home to either study or work remotely, SFU employees demonstrated that they could work remotely and remain productive. This was particularly evident in my department, SFU Residence and Housing.

Having a hybrid working arrangement post-COVID-19 had improved my mental health. My family doctor had recommended this arrangement to help reduce my workplace stress and anxiety as I prepared to return to work after a three-month stress leave.

Most SFU staff and/or faculty members had worked remotely for over two years during the pandemic, and it was a significant adjustment when we were mandated to return to campus in the Spring of 2022. The University's focus was on ensuring that staff and/or faculty were available to address students' needs in person. I believe this continues to be a challenge in higher education, as staff and/or faculty have adapted to remote work and are now expected to meet students' needs both in-person and virtually.

Currently, based on the job tasks outlined in their job descriptions, some SFU employees are eligible for a hybrid work arrangement, while others do not qualify for remote work and are required to work in the office five days a week. The implementation of a hybrid work arrangement in higher education necessitates further research to explore and identify the key components necessary to create an equitable working environment for staff and/or faculty members with different work arrangements.

Methodology

I employed a qualitative research approach to explore and understand the themes emerging from interviews and individual stories related to my research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). I gathered qualitative data by conducting five interviews with SFU managers overseeing teams with diverse work arrangements, with the goal of uncovering how they had established an equitable working environment in the post-COVID era.

Research Question

My research question was "How do SFU managers in the post-COVID environment create an equitable workplace when people who directly report to them have different work arrangements?"

Researcher Role

I have been the Manager of Guest Accommodations in SFU's Residence and Housing Department for the past six years. In my team, some staff members are eligible to have a hybrid working arrangement while others are not. My colleague and I, who are members of the Administrative & Professional Staff Association (APSA), have the option to work remotely two days a week. However, my continuing contract Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) staff members and four summer student staff members are required to work in the office five days a week due to the front-facing daily tasks outlined in their job descriptions. CUPE and student staff roles are typically entry-level clerical positions, and the majority of their daily front-facing (in-person) job tasks require them to be in-office full-time.

For example, our Housing Services Assistants (CUPE role) who work at the Residence and Housing front desk are required to be in-office full time. Their main job tasks are to assist all residents and guests by answering questions in-person, over the phone, or through email correspondence. The Residence and Housing front desk operates 24/7, necessitating staff members to be present to assist with issues such as resident lockouts, mail pick-up, or checking in guests staying in our Short Stay Accommodation rooms.

Summer Guest Accommodations Assistants (a student staff role), are also required to work in the office full-time. They served as the primary point of contact for all our summer group bookings, handling tasks such as conducting daily room inspections before and after group arrivals, preparing room keys, and corresponding with group coordinators. These duties necessitated their physical presence in the office, as they could not be performed remotely.

As I manage APSA, CUPE, and student staff members, it was important to me to research and learn how other SFU managers created an equitable workplace environment for their teams with a variety of working arrangements post-COVID.

Research Participants

From September 2020 to June 2021, I participated in the Leadership Foundation Cohort Program organized by SFU Human Resources. During this program, I built relationships with other SFU managers. We remained in contact, and I had selected five SFU managers, who oversaw teams with mixed work arrangements (hybrid and full-time in-office) post-COVID to participate in my research project. I emailed five SFU managers to see if they would be interested in participating in my research project (see Appendix A for my recruitment email). I obtained their contact information through their department's public website. Once the participants had agreed to contribute to my research project, I provided them with additional information, including when the interview would occur, the expected duration, where it would be conducted, the purpose of my research, and asked them to review my Interview Consent Form (see Appendix B). Table 1 outlines the demographics of my participants.

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Pseudonyms	Education Level	Number of years in a Leadership role	Gender	Number of Children
Sarah	M Ed.	14 years	Female	2
Jake	MBA	2 years	Male	1
Emily	M Ed.	12 years	Female	0
Olivia	Bachelor's Degree	9 years	Female	2
Zac	Bachelor's Degree	8 years	Male	0

Data Collection

During March and April 2024, I conducted five interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol (Weiss, 1995). This protocol helped guide and keep each interview on track while allowing participants to lead the conversation (see Appendix C for my interview questions). Creswell & Creswell (2023) recommended selecting a natural setting where the participant had experienced the issue under study. Therefore, I gave each participant the option to conduct the interview either in person or through the virtual meeting app, Zoom.

I observed their behavior and body language while recording qualitative data during each interview. Most interviews were conducted via Zoom, with one in-person interview held in a meeting room at SFU's Burnaby campus within SFU Residence and

Housing. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. For the virtual interviews, I used Zoom to record and transcribe the conversations. For the in-person interview, I used the Otter.ai app for transcription and recording.

Data Analysis

After completing all of my interviews, I edited each transcript to eliminate irrelevant small talk. From there, I summarized each conversation and highlighted the themes and subthemes that had emerged from each transcript. Using the cutting and sorting method of data analysis as outlined by Ryan & Bernard (2003), I physically organized and identified themes that emerged from each transcript (see Appendix D for my coding trees). Based on the results, I developed a chronological storyline detailing how SFU managers have created an equitable workplace for their direct reports, despite the different working arrangements post-COVID.

By narrowing down the qualitative data into key themes and subthemes, I interpreted the data and identified certain patterns through words or phrases most frequently used across all the interviews I conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). These words or phrases allowed me to discern a specific storyline of how SFU managers created an equitable working environment for all of their direct reports in a post-COVID working environment.

Trustworthiness

Using open-ended interview questions allowed participants to have more control over the content of the data collected, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. According to Weiss (1995), researchers should use guiding questions to keep interviews on track, employ markers to gather additional information, and observe the participants' body language to enrich the data.

As the researcher, I was mindful of my own biases related to the research questions and ensured they did not influence the interviews. This approach aligns with best practices for trustworthy qualitative research by promoting participant autonomy, comprehensive data collection, and researcher self-awareness (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

I did not believe there were any ethical limitations to my qualitative research approach. I conducted confidential interviews with other SFU managers who had similar team dynamics and belonged to the same professional association (APSA). I did not perceive any power dynamic between myself and the other SFU managers I interviewed.

I provided each participant with a copy of my interview consent form to review before their interview. At the start of each interview, the participant had the opportunity to review the interview consent form again. If they were still interested in participating, they signed a copy of the consent form prior to the start of the interview, which was transcribed and recorded. This ensured that each participant understood the purpose of my research, how the data was collected, and how it would be used.

Each participant was given the option not to answer any of my interview questions or to withdraw from the interview at any time without question, and all recorded information would be destroyed as per their request.

Findings

During the five interviews that I conducted with fellow SFU managers, I asked several interview questions to understand how their team dynamic had changed post-COVID. After listening to their perspectives on the disadvantages and advantages of a hybrid working arrangement for their teams post-COVID, I asked questions about the key components of a hybrid working arrangement and the communication tools used to keep their teams connected. This enabled me to analyze and answer my research question: “How did SFU managers in the post-COVID environment create an equitable workplace when people who directly reported to them had different work arrangements?”

The findings that emerged during my research revealed that the advantages of a hybrid working arrangement far exceeded the disadvantages that were identified. I had identified three themes in the data: first, there were three key components to a positive hybrid working arrangement; second, advancements in technology contributed to positive hybrid work environment; and third, how “ideal higher education worker norms” had changed post-COVID. I also broke down my themes into subthemes and related issues.

Key Components of a Hybrid Working Arrangement

All five of my participants kept repeating the same words when describing a successful hybrid working arrangement for their teams. My research has shown that flexibility, trust, and transparency were key components of a successful hybrid working arrangement within higher education.

Flexibility

Flexibility is a major factor in a hybrid working arrangement. However, it had different meanings among all of my participants. Three out of my five participants had viewed flexibility as "workplace flexibility," having the option to complete their office work remotely from home or any location of their choice. In contrast, Sarah had viewed it as being able to flex her work time to attend personal appointments during the day. Sarah had expressed that she was fortunate to have a high level of workplace flexibility that allowed her to integrate her family life with her work life.

Jake had viewed workplace flexibility as the ability to have a backup plan, being able to either work remotely for personal reasons or work on campus if needed. Although both Emily and Olivia preferred to work on campus five days a week, they appreciated the ability and flexibility of being able to work remotely when they chose to.

Initially, Zac had been very reluctant to work remotely as he did not feel it would be the right fit for him and the nature of his department. However, upon the recommendation of one of his colleagues, he had started to work remotely one day a week. After a few weeks, he had seen the benefits. He had learned how flexible a remote working day could be, experiencing fewer interruptions and distractions, and finding that he could complete tasks more efficiently in a few hours compared to the three to four days it would have taken him previously. Zac had expressed, "Wow, there is something about not having to commute to work, just being able to wake up, grab a coffee, turn on my computer, and focus on getting my tasks done without being interrupted every 10 minutes."

Trust

Based on my personal experience, before the COVID-19 pandemic, universities like SFU had been very inflexible around the idea of staff and/or faculty working remotely. They believed that employees would not be productive while working remotely. When the WHO declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic in March 2020, higher education institutions like SFU had been compelled to rapidly adapt to remote work mandates for staff and/or faculty. This necessitated a swift pivot to establish effective remote working arrangements. As Emily had mentioned in her interview, "COVID really put the pedal to the metal and forced SFU to quickly put something in place." The two years of mandatory remote working during the pandemic provided employees with an opportunity to prove that they could be trusted to work remotely and still be productive. Sarah had made the following comment in her interview:

I operate from the place of trust, and the fear from upper management relating to employees not being productive while working remotely is untrue. I always assumed that my direct reports could get their work done unless they tell me otherwise. I still had deadlines, and I expected them to meet them, but I do not feel the need to be looking over their shoulder. I think the combination of flexibility, trust and transparency is what made my team successful when it came to having a hybrid working arrangement.

Transparency

All participants emphasized the importance of transparency when setting expectations about remote work, whether with their direct reports or mandated by their director. Jake had expressed that his director had set the remote working expectations for the entire department and that he had echoed the same expectations with his direct reports. Jake also mentioned that his director had been very transparent with their time; they had expressed when they had personal appointments or if there were events that they would be attending. The entire team had seen how transparent their director was, and the director had expected the same from the rest of the team. As Jake had explained:

It was an understanding of trust and that everything was going to come out in the wash. What I meant by this was, that there were days that we worked overtime, a couple of hours here and there, so the time was made up. So, yeah, go ahead and take a couple of hours off to go to a [personal] appointment, that kind of thing. There was no tracking [of time] or anything like that, it was just an honor system.

Emily had explained that there was a department expectation that all staff were required to work on campus on a particular day of the week. She felt that having a set day where everyone was in the office allowed for social connection among the entire department and facilitated staff meetings and celebrations. The department had expected all eligible staff members in a hybrid working arrangement to refrain from scheduling their two remote working days on Mondays and Fridays. Supervisors were tasked with distributing the remote work days among their team members to ensure adequate office coverage to support the front-facing staff who were ineligible for a hybrid working arrangement. Providing these clear expectations about remote work demonstrated transparency for all staff members and potential new hires.

During my interview with Zac, he expressed a belief that transparency had improved his leadership style through clear communication. He felt that because of the pandemic and all the uncertainty that had been brought forward, he had made a conscious effort to increase his efforts to connect and had been more transparent with his team. Through transparency, he had been able to have open conversations with his team and had explained the “whys” behind the many changes that had occurred. Instead of implementing changes without an explanation, which previously caused the team to make many assumptions and feel like, “Oh my goodness, management is doing this,” leading to mistrust of their supervisor at that time (Zac).

Advancement in Technology

The second theme that emerged from my interviews was the advancement of technology, particularly compared to what had been available before the pandemic. Sarah had explained that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff and/or faculty had not been provided with the right tools (such as Microsoft Teams) to work collaboratively and efficiently while working remotely. The previous tools were said to be clunky and did not make it easy for staff and/or faculty to connect while working remotely. Sarah felt this lack of appropriate tools might have been one of the reasons why senior leadership did not accept working remotely at that time. She went on to express that over the past four years, working remotely looked a lot different because of the tools that had been provided, such as Microsoft Teams for instant messaging, sharing team files and documents, and virtual phone calls. Zoom, in particular, was a good example of this acceptance and use of technology. Before Covid-19, Zoom had been used periodically

for webinars or meetings of scattered tech-savvy participants on personal accounts. After March 2020 and a steep learning curve, Zoom became an essential tool for most staff. Soon, institutional accounts were introduced, and many staff spent the majority of their day in Zoom-based meetings, whether or not they were working remotely.

During my interview with Olivia, she pointed out that cybersecurity became a major concern, leading SFU's Information Technology (IT) Service department to implement Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA) for all SFU personal and department role accounts. This added feature helped staff and/or faculty to access their accounts from any device, anywhere. At the start of the pandemic, SFU IT Services had been busy shifting databases to remote servers so that department staff could complete records remotely. Olivia mentioned, "It was [definitely] challenging at the beginning, learning how to do things remotely, but now we don't even have to think about it". Staff really learned how to adapt to change quickly during the pandemic, and now it has become a working norm.

Jake had expressed that early on in the pandemic, there were times when he felt there was a lack of reliance on the technology, which made it difficult to keep up with work tasks while working remotely. He provided an example of when the Virtual Private Network (VPN) had gone down and he had been unable to gain access to shared documents to complete work tasks remotely. This had caused team frustration due to delayed responses, especially when deadlines had been fast approaching. However, with the advancement and increased reliance on technology provided throughout the pandemic and updated post-pandemic, his team's productivity increased, allowing them to work collaboratively and effectively while working remotely.

Post-COVID "Ideal Higher Education Worker Norms"

I was not surprised to hear all my participants articulate that the "ideal higher education worker norms" had evolved somewhat in the past four years and that there remains a gap to be overcome to meet post-COVID employee expectations. Sarah had expressed that SFU should consider offering more flexibility for employees, as work does not need to be completed by sitting behind a desk for eight hours a day to be effective. She believes that universities need to rethink what the "ideal higher education worker norms"

could look like post-COVID and recognize that there is still a long way to go in changing the norms (Sarah).

Based on my own personal experience commuting from Abbotsford to SFU's Burnaby campus, I agreed with both Jake and Zac. They mentioned that employees were seeking more personal time and the ability to spend time with their families. Not having to commute to work five days a week provided them with the opportunity to regain that time. Olivia had explained that the main reason one of her team members had requested a hybrid working arrangement post-COVID was so that they did not have to commute in from Delta. This had been a big thing for them. Emily believed that hybrid working arrangements allowed for more flexibility and enabled staff to balance their work and personal life by spending less time commuting and more time focusing on work and family.

Overall, I believe that higher education staff and/or faculty had recognized that the "typical" work structure had evolved post-COVID. They expect more workplace flexibility, prompting institutions like SFU to reimagine the "ideal higher education worker norms" for the post-COVID era. Sarah had felt strongly that a cultural shift had been necessary within higher education institutions to achieve the right balance for both employees and employer. By integrating a mix of in-office and hybrid work, employees could experience greater happiness and better health. This allowed employees to bring their entire selves to work, and the employer retained these employees for the long term. Sarah had also recognized that higher education institutions need to be more flexible in their thinking, more adaptive to new norms, and responsive to what the new "ideal higher education worker norms" could look like long term. Emily had summed up her interview by saying, "Overall, I think hybrid working arrangements have been a benefit for both the employee and the employer. [This option] should continue to be offered to staff if possible, and if the university stops offering the hybrid option, I think people at the university would argue to keep it." The COVID pandemic forced higher education institutions to adjust their workplace structure. Employees also changed their workplace expectations. They look for employers who provide a hybrid working arrangement so that they can have a better work and personal life balance.

Discussion

My interviews suggested that each of these managers had thought carefully about creating an equitable workplace post-COVID. Each participant had identified that the workplace structure had changed post-COVID to provide the option of a hybrid working arrangement to those staff and/or faculty who did not have front-facing job tasks outlined in their job descriptions. The perspective of each participant about creating an equitable workplace was based on what worked best for the employee and the employer. An equitable workplace for their teams had been built on the key components identified for a successful hybrid working arrangement: flexibility, trust, and transparency. They had provided their team with the right tools to complete remote work collaboratively and efficiently and had recognized that the "ideal higher education worker norms" had begun to change.

Finding the right balance of in-office work days and remote work days for each participant's department depended on what had been determined as the best fit for the department and employees. Both Emily and Olivia had a personal preference for working in the office five days a week; however, they supported members of their team who had opted for a hybrid working arrangement, allowing them to work three days a week in the office and two days at home. Sarah's entire team had taken the opportunity for a hybrid working arrangement, working three days in-office and two days remotely, while Jake's team had three remote working days and two in-office working days per week. Due to the nature of Zac's department, they were able to have one remote working day and four in-office days per week. This indicated that there was no clear determination of how many in-office work days and remote work days made up a hybrid working arrangement across all departments and faculties in higher education institutions. The right balance was determined by the department's needs to provide adequate office or department coverage to support the students, staff, and guests of the university.

I felt that all of the participants who participated in my research project mirrored what Kappel (2021) had outlined as four key components to build workplace relationships post-COVID: overcommunicating (being open and honest and checking in often with employees either in-person or virtually), actively listening (fostering workplace relationships by truly listening to what employees are saying even though it might be

difficult), building a strong workplace team to support a culture of trust, and creating opportunities for social connection. Through the data I collected from my participants about what made a successful hybrid working arrangement, flexibility was a key factor. I saw this as closely related to Kappel's component of active listening because it involved understanding from team members what helped them best balance their work and personal lives. Kappel (2021) and all of my participants indicated that trust was a key component of a successful hybrid working arrangement, without trust, a hybrid working arrangement would not be successful. I would link transparency and overcommunication together because open and honest communication ensured that each team member was held accountable for completing their work collaboratively and efficiently. Even though I did not identify social connection as a key component in my findings, Emily included social connections in her view of transparency when it came to setting hybrid working expectations for her department.

I would like to highlight that all of my participants mentioned the importance of not having to commute on remote working days. This was a key factor for three out of the five participants, while the other two acknowledged its significance for their team members. I agreed that eliminating the commute was a major contributor to the flexibility and benefits of a hybrid working arrangement. Furthermore, I concurred with Farque (2023) who noted that employees who did not have to spend time commuting gained additional sleep, which improved their focus and increased their productivity during the workday. This also contributed to happier employees who then became more efficient at their jobs.

Although my research indicated that higher education institutions had slightly adjusted their "ideal worker norms" since the COVID-19 pandemic, there was still a significant way to go in changing the culture within higher education to fully accept the shift in staff and/or faculty expectations for a post-COVID workplace. All of my participants noted that if it had not been for the global pandemic mandating remote work, higher education institutions likely would not have embraced the idea of a hybrid working arrangement, as it did not align with the "ideal worker norms" of that time. More research is needed to explore how higher education institutions could continue evolving to meet employee workplace expectations and demonstrate that the higher education workplace could be different from its past. Staff and/or faculty now expect their work to fit into their personal lives rather than having their personal lives fit into their work (Sarah).

Conclusion

My research highlighted three key components of a successful hybrid working arrangement: flexibility, trust, and transparency. These components align with previous research by Kappel (2021). Additionally, providing the right tools for staff and/or faculty to work collaboratively and efficiently while remotely is crucial for the success of a hybrid working team. While “ideal worker norms” have slightly shifted in higher education, more work is needed to fully align the culture with the expectations of staff and/or faculty. Achieving the right balance in a hybrid working arrangement depended on the nature of each department or faculty, ensuring adequate office coverage to support the needs of students, staff, and guests on campus while addressing post-COVID workplace expectations. Employees sought a better work-life balance, and with a hybrid working arrangement, employers would benefit from having happier, healthier employees who can focus and work more productively.

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Appendix A. Recruitment Email Template

Email Send Time: 9:30 AM

Select an email send time that is between 9-11am or 1-3pm. These are the optimal times to send your email in order to have the highest chance of response.

Subject Line: Has your team dynamic change since COVID-19?

Subhead: Finding it difficult to manage your team with different working arrangements?

Email Body Text:

Hi,

I have been working on a new research study and I need your help.

My goal of this new study is to see if SFU managers are creating an equitable working environment for their direct reports who have different working arrangements post-COVID-19.

Are SFU managers finding creative ways to ensure that they are providing an equitable working environment for their teams who have different working arrangements post-COVID-19. If so, what do they feel is working and what do they feel needs to be worked on.

Would you like to help? To see if you are eligible, please read the requirements below.

Why You Should Participate:

- You hold a leadership role within SFU
- You lead staff members who work in-office full time
- You lead staff members who have a hybrid working arrangement
- You have experienced the shift in accommodating different working arrangements post-COVID- 19

Who Can Participate?

- Any SFU manager who manages a team that has a different working arrangement post-COVID-19.

If you fit these requirements and are interested in helping, please respond to this email.

Please let me know if you have any questions and I look forward in exploring this research topic with you.

Cheers,

Email signature

Appendix B. Interview Consent Form

Different Working Arrangements, Different Roles: Simon Fraser University Managers Creating Equitable Workplaces post-COVID-19

Study Number: 30002126

Thank you for considering participating in an interview about managing different working arrangements amongst your direct reports. Before you decide whether to participate, please take time to review the following information. If you have any questions or need additional information, please ask! If, after reviewing this information, you are still interested in participating, then we will go forward with the interview.

I, Jennifer Nadon, am conducting this interview as part of a research project exploring how SFU managers are creating an equitable working environment for their direct reports who have different working arrangements. I am the Manager of Guest Accommodation with SFU's Residence and Housing department, and this project is a requirement for the Masters in Educational Leadership Program at SFU. This research is being supervised by Dr. Gillian Judson, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education. I will write up the results of this research in the form of a research report, and I will present share them in the form of a public presentation at SFU during the summer of 2024.

The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences with managing direct reports who have different working arrangements and to identify what SFU managers are doing to ensure they are creating an equitable working environment for their direct reports. If you choose to participate, I will arrange a 45–50-minute interview to explore your perspective on managing a team with different working arrangements. We will abide by the latest provincial health guidelines in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we can meet in person at a meeting room within SFU's Residence and Housing or virtually via Zoom. As a participant, you will receive an SFU Guest Accommodations mug as a token of appreciation for your participation in the study.

During this interview, I will ask you to talk about the following key topics:

- Team work arrangement
- Key elements of a successful team
- Staying connected with team members
- Creating an equitable working environment
- Remote working requirements
- In-office working requirements
- Activities that build stronger workplace teams

You may choose not to answer any of my questions, and you may also end the interview at any point during the scheduled time. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone. There are no negative consequences for withdrawing your participation, and I will erase/destroy any information already collected from you.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you by participating in this research.

The interview will be recorded. Any information you share during your interview **will remain confidential**. I will ask you to choose a pseudonym for use in the research study. I will ensure that the confidentiality of all participants will be preserved by not revealing their names and identity in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. I will also shield the identity of the school itself. I will transcribe the interview myself, using that pseudonym, and the resulting transcript will not include any information that could be traced back to you. Audio-recordings, transcripts will be stored on SFU OneDrive, a secure password protected file hosting program, and the written consent forms will be stored in a locked drawer in my home office. The list matching participant information and pseudonyms will be stored separately on SFU OneDrive. Upon completion of the project, the list will be destroyed.

In reporting on my findings from this project, I will continue to keep your identity and participation confidential. I will be using the interview data to write a report for my MEd program. I will also share findings at a public presentation at SFU in July. In addition to producing the final report and presentation required of my M.Ed. program. The report will be made available upon request to those participants who would like to read it. I can provide an electronic copy via email or a paper copy to those who like one.

Once I complete all of my MEd degree requirements, I will destroy the audio recordings, and I will keep the anonymized transcripts for no more than five years after the completion of the project.

I can be reached at email and phone. If you would like to talk to my faculty supervisor, you can reach Dr. Gillian Judson at [xxx@xxx.xx]

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics (SFU) at [xxx@xxx.xx] or [778-xxx-xxxx].

Signing this consent form indicates that:

- You agree to participate in this research and to having the interview audio-recorded.
- You understand that you are free to stop participating in this research project at any time.
- You have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

Signature of Participant
(MM/DD/YYYY)

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Appendix C. Interview Questions

- Can you tell me how you started your journey of becoming a manager?
- What type of work arrangements do you have with your team?
 - Were these arrangements different before Covid? Or have they changed over the last couple of years – tell me about that change.
- What do you feel is the key to a successful team?
- How do you stay connected with your team?
- How do you ensure that everyone feels that they are working in an equitable environment?
- What qualifies a direct report to be able to work remotely?
- What requirements in a direct report's role requires them to work in-office five days a week?
- What kind of activities do you plan with your direct reports to build a strong workplace team?
- Having a mixed team working arrangement, how to you prioritize your time with all of your direct reports?
- What do you feel is a positive of having a mixed team working arrangement?
- What do you feel is a negative of having a mixed team working arrangement?
- How do you create a balanced work environment for your team?
- What are your expectations of a mixed team working arrangement?

Appendix D. Identified Themes





