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Who Benefits From Flexibility and Informal Control in Hybrid Work?

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Abstract

Hybrid work is often framed as a question of employee preference, productivity, or the optimal number of days spent on-site. This framing obscures a more difficult organizational problem: flexibility is distributed through jobs, managerial relationships, team norms, control systems, and career processes that do not affect all employees equally. This Critical Viewpoint Article examines who benefits from hybrid flexibility when formal permission coexists with informal control. It argues that the consequences of hybrid work cannot be understood by treating remote or on-site presence as intrinsically advantageous. Instead, career exposure, managerial discretion, flexibility stigma, work-intensification pressures, occupational access, and coordination dependencies jointly shape whether flexibility functions as meaningful autonomy, constrained accommodation, or transferred responsibility. The article develops the proposed Equitable Flexibility Governance Framework, an original conceptual synthesis organized around access parity, evaluation parity, transparent discretion and control, boundary protection, interaction parity, and distributional accountability. These principles are normative design propositions rather than validated interventions. They are intended to clarify where organizational choices require evidence, contestability, and attention to unequal consequences. The argument also emphasizes countervailing evidence: hybrid and geographically flexible arrangements can support retention, satisfaction, employment continuity, and productivity in some contexts, while remote work may reduce certain interpersonal disadvantages. The framework therefore rejects universal prescriptions. Its propositions require longitudinal, multilevel, experimental, network, and qualitative testing across occupations, social groups, managerial systems, and institutional settings.

Keywords: Flexibility for whom?, Career risk under uneven presence, Informal control and managerial discretion, Inequality reproduction through flexible work, Benefits, Flexibility

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Introduction

Hybrid work is commonly discussed as though flexibility were a single organizational resource that employees either possess or lack. Yet flexibility encompasses different arrangements over employment, schedule, and location, and these arrangements create different possibilities for autonomy, security, visibility, and bargaining power [1]. A critical question therefore precedes any claim about whether hybrid work “works”: which employees can obtain, use, and sustain which forms of flexibility, under what organizational conditions? Treating flexibility as a generic benefit risks concealing unequal access, heterogeneous work demands, and the possibility that formal choice may coexist with informal expectations about presence, responsiveness, commitment, and availability. It can also obscure an important distributional issue: the employee who gains discretion over location may not be the same employee who gains discretion over workload, evaluation, meeting time, or career opportunity. Flexibility should therefore be analyzed as an allocation of options and constraints rather than as a unitary employment perk.



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Hybrid work is also not reducible to a binary contrast between office and home. Virtual work varies by the degree of geographic dispersion and reliance on communication technologies, producing different coordination, identification, and relational conditions [2]. This matters because two employees who are both formally “hybrid” may experience materially different work systems. One may have stable autonomy, predictable contact with managers, and credible performance criteria; another may depend on discretionary exceptions, asynchronous communication, and visibility-sensitive evaluation. The central problem is therefore not simply location. It is the organizational architecture through which location, time, evaluation, and control acquire consequences. A days-per-week metric can describe attendance while saying little about who can alter schedules, who must justify exceptions, whose absence is noticed, or whose contribution remains legible when interaction moves across channels.

Work-design evidence reinforces this multidimensional view. Remote work can provide autonomy while also creating challenges around workload, monitoring, communication, social isolation, and self-regulation, and these positive and negative pathways may operate simultaneously as remote-work intensity changes [3, 4]. The implication is not that hybrid work contains an inherent contradiction, but that “flexibility” describes a bundle of conditions whose consequences depend on how tasks, authority, support, and boundaries are configured. This article therefore distinguishes formal policy from enacted practice, autonomy from responsibility transfer, and technological capability from legitimate authority.

Evidence also cautions against assuming that physical presence is necessary for organizational effectiveness. In a randomized hybrid-work study at Trip.com, hybrid working reduced attrition and improved satisfaction without detectable damage to performance or promotion outcomes in the studied workforce [5]. A natural experiment involving US patent examiners likewise found productivity benefits from greater geographic flexibility in a highly structured occupational setting [6]. These findings are important because they limit the critical argument: an analysis of inequality and informal control should not become a presumption that flexibility is inefficient, career-damaging, or organizationally inferior.

This Critical Viewpoint Article instead asks how benefits and burdens are allocated when formal flexibility is filtered through career systems, managerial discretion, team interdependence, occupational structures, and informal norms. Its principal proposed contribution is the Equitable Flexibility Governance Framework, an original synthesis that treats equitable flexibility as a governance problem rather than a location policy. The framework links six proposed principles—access parity, evaluation parity, transparent discretion and control, boundary protection, interaction parity, and distributional accountability—to evidence-supported concerns developed below. These principles are not validated causal mechanisms or universal prescriptions. They organize questions that organizations and researchers must answer before treating nominal flexibility as substantively equitable.

Career risk under uneven presence

The proposed construct of career risk under uneven presence refers to the conditional possibility that differences in physical or digitally mediated presence affect access to evaluative attention, relationship opportunities, information, sponsorship, or career-relevant judgments. The definition is deliberately narrower than the popular idea of a universal “proximity bias.” Evidence on telecommuting and objective career success does not support a simple claim that remote participation necessarily damages careers; outcomes vary with telecommuting intensity, how normative telecommuting is within the organization, and the amount of face-to-face contact employees maintain [7]. Presence should therefore be treated as a contextual input to career processes, not as a proxy for contribution.

Flexibility stigma provides one mechanism through which uneven presence may acquire career meaning. UK evidence shows that workers can associate flexible working with lower commitment or productivity and perceive negative promotion consequences, with important gendered dimensions [8]. Such perceptions matter because career systems are partly interpretive: supervisors and coworkers form judgments about availability, ambition, reliability, and fit. Yet perceived stigma does not prove that every flexible worker is denied advancement, nor does it establish that managers consciously punish remote employees.

The social meaning of flexibility is also institutionally contingent. Cross-national evidence across Europe indicates that flexibility stigma varies across national contexts and is associated with differences in work-life culture, gender norms, family policy, and collective-bargaining environments [9]. This variation weakens any universal model in which remote work has a fixed reputational meaning. The same schedule can signal trusted autonomy in one context and weak commitment in another. Organizational analysis must therefore separate the formal availability of hybrid work from the interpretive climate surrounding its use and individual-level judgments from organizational-level inference.

Counterevidence further complicates a simple visibility-disadvantage narrative. Research comparing remote and on-site work among professional women found lower reported everyday gender discrimination in remote settings for some groups, suggesting that reduced physical exposure may sometimes limit interpersonal cues and interactions through which discrimination occurs [10]. This does not establish that remote work improves women’s careers overall. It shows that physical presence can itself create risks and that career equity cannot be inferred from office contact alone.

Flexible work can also preserve labor-market attachment during major life transitions. Longitudinal evidence from the United Kingdom indicates that access to and use of flexitime and teleworking can support women's continued employment after childbirth [11]. Employment continuity, however, is not equivalent to equal promotion, pay progression, influence, or access to developmental assignments. The proposed interpretation is therefore conditional: uneven presence may create career risk when organizational systems convert visibility or physical availability into career-relevant advantage, while flexibility may simultaneously reduce other career constraints. The available evidence supports neither a universal proximity penalty nor a universal remote-work advantage.

Informal control and managerial discretion

Formal hybrid policies specify who may work where and when, but they rarely exhaust how flexibility is enacted. For this viewpoint, informal control is a proposed analytic label for partially codified or relational practices through which expectations, exceptions, monitoring, evaluation, responsiveness, and access to flexibility are shaped in day-to-day work. Evidence from a financial-services setting found that greater teleworking intensity among teleworkers was associated with stronger emphasis on output controls [12]. The finding does not show that output control is inherently coercive. It demonstrates that location flexibility may be accompanied by shifts in what managers monitor and how accountability is organized.

Managerial discretion is especially important because access to flexibility often depends on judgments that cannot be fully specified in policy. Dyadic evidence shows that upward influence tactics and mutual forms of respect were associated with supervisors' performance ratings and the extent of flexible working arrangements granted to employees [13]. This does not establish favoritism or intentional discrimination. It does show that relational processes can influence how formal arrangements become actual opportunities. Discretion can be necessary when jobs, health contingencies, caregiving demands, or project cycles differ, but the same adaptiveness creates a governance question: which reasons count, who can negotiate exceptions successfully, and whether comparable cases receive comparably reasoned treatment.

Remote work can also change the position of managers within control systems. Qualitative research in a multinational mining organization found that remote work contributed to the de-institutionalization and reconfiguration of a managerial control regime, altering how line managers themselves were monitored and expected to comply [14]. This resists a simplistic division between controlling managers and controlled employees. Hybrid arrangements can redistribute control vertically and laterally, changing who must document work, demonstrate availability, or translate organizational expectations into local practice.

Digital systems add another layer. Research on algorithmic control identifies organizational capabilities to restrict, recommend, record, rate, replace, and reward workers through data-driven systems [15]. These capabilities can support coordination and evaluation, but technological capability should not be confused with legitimate authority. A system may make monitoring technically possible without establishing that the monitored indicator is a valid measure of contribution or that the resulting managerial action is procedurally fair.

The original critical synthesis proposed here is that flexibility and control should not be treated as endpoints on a single continuum. Employees can simultaneously possess location autonomy and face intensified output expectations, responsiveness norms, or digitally mediated scrutiny. Conversely, managerial discretion can enable necessary accommodation rather than merely constrain employees. The governance problem is to distinguish adaptive discretion from opaque gatekeeping and legitimate accountability from control practices that mistake traceable activity for performance. The evidence establishes possible mechanisms and organizational processes, not that hybrid work inevitably produces surveillance, favoritism, or illegitimate managerial authority.

Inequality reproduction through flexible work

The proposed construct of inequality reproduction through flexible work refers to a temporal process in which recurrent differences in access, legitimacy, workload, discretion, or career opportunity become patterned across occupational or social groups. UK evidence indicates that associations between flexible working and unpaid overtime differ by gender, parental status, occupation, and type of arrangement [16]. Such heterogeneity means that greater schedule or location discretion cannot automatically be interpreted as greater substantive control. Flexibility may coexist with additional availability expectations or unpaid effort for some workers while reducing constraints for others. Reproduction is therefore not inferred from a single unequal outcome; it is a proposed interpretation requiring evidence of persistence, patterned allocation, and recurrent organizational processes.

Work design can also shape whose remote participation appears legitimate. Qualitative research in information-technology settings shows that post-bureaucratic work arrangements can generate unintended gender inequality when local expectations about availability, interaction, and appropriate ways of working make remote participation differently acceptable for women and men [17]. The implication is not that decentralized or agile work design necessarily produces gender inequality. Rather, seemingly neutral arrangements can acquire gendered effects when informal norms determine who may deviate from physical-presence expectations without reputational cost.

At the same time, flexibility can produce equality-enhancing outcomes. Longitudinal German evidence suggests that flexible working-time arrangements can narrow women's working-hour gaps relative to men, while also being associated with increases in overtime and childcare time [18]. This coexistence is analytically important. An arrangement can improve one dimension of labor-market equality while increasing another burden. Evaluating flexible work therefore requires multiple outcomes and time horizons rather than a single judgment about whether flexibility is beneficial or harmful.

Access itself is structurally distributed. Research using German occupational data found that workers in female-dominated occupations had lower access to flexible working-time arrangements [19]. This pattern shifts attention from individual preference to occupational opportunity structures. A worker cannot "choose" flexibility that a job, sector, or occupational regime does not realistically provide. Nor can unequal access be attributed solely to individual managers when task structures, bargaining power, occupational status, and organizational conventions may also matter.

The proposed critical interpretation is therefore conditional: inequality may be reproduced when flexibility is formally available but unevenly usable, when some workers must exchange flexibility for visibility or advancement, or when autonomy is accompanied by greater unpaid coordination and care burdens. These are proposed relationships, not demonstrated universal pathways. Alternative explanations include task feasibility, employee selection, sectoral bargaining power, career trajectories, and differences between voluntary hybrid work and crisis-driven remote work. **Table 1** synthesizes the central analytical distinctions through which flexibility can be evaluated as an organizational arrangement involving access, career exposure, discretion, control, burden, and distributional consequences.

Table 1. Analytical Architecture for Evaluating Flexibility and Informal Control in Hybrid Work

Analytical domain	Core question	Conceptual definition	Organizational problem	Proposed relationship	Key distinction	Principal uncertainty	Interpretation boundary
Flexibility architecture	What flexibility is actually available?	Configuration of discretion over location, time, and related arrangements	A single hybrid label can conceal materially different employee control	Proposed: formal flexibility establishes the opportunity structure for later access and control processes	Formal availability $\neq$ usable flexibility	Whether similar policies generate comparable discretion	No uniform flexibility effect is assumed
Usable access	Who can exercise flexibility without disproportionate cost?	Practical capacity to use an arrangement without excessive approval, stigma, or relational risk	Formal eligibility may coexist with unequal practical access	Proposed: access depends on policy design and enacted conditions	Eligibility $\neq$ access $\neq$ use	Which differences reflect legitimate work requirements versus gatekeeping	Unequal use alone does not establish inequitable treatment
Uneven presence and career exposure	When does location acquire career significance?	Differences in physical or digital access to evaluators, information, relationships, and development	Presence can become an implicit signal of commitment or availability	Proposed: career risk emerges when presence becomes consequential beyond role requirements	Visibility $\neq$ performance	Whether presence differences translate into durable career outcomes	No universal proximity penalty is assumed
Flexibility stigma	How is flexibility socially interpreted?	Negative assumptions about commitment, ambition, reliability, or productivity associated with flexible work	Employees may anticipate reputational penalties for using formal flexibility	Proposed: stigma can weaken the substantive value of available flexibility	Social judgment $\neq$ demonstrated performance	When perceptions become consequential personnel decisions	Perceived stigma does not establish actual discrimination
Managerial discretion	Who decides how policy applies in specific cases?	Local judgment over eligibility, exceptions, schedules, expectations, and evaluation	Necessary adaptation can become opaque or inconsistent gatekeeping	Proposed: discretion is most defensible when criteria and reasoning are transparent and contestable	Adaptation $\neq$ favoritism	How much standardization is compatible with legitimate accommodation	Discretion is not inherently inequitable
Control architecture	How is accountability maintained when direct observation declines?	Formal and informal practices used to direct, monitor, evaluate, and coordinate distributed work	Location autonomy may coexist with intensified output expectations or	Proposed: flexibility changes the form of control rather than simply reducing control	Accountability $\neq$ surveillance	Which controls accurately represent contribution and remain legitimate	Technological capability does not establish legitimate authority

digital monitoring							
Boundary burden	Who absorbs the hidden costs of flexibility?	Availability, overtime, scheduling, coordination, relationship-maintenance, and care demands	Apparent autonomy may shift coordination responsibilities onto individuals	Proposed: flexibility becomes less substantive when discretion is exchanged for unrecognized burdens	Autonomy $\neq$ responsibility transfer	How burdens are distributed across employees, managers, and coworkers	Flexible work should not be presumed to intensify work universally
Structural access inequality	Which jobs and groups can obtain meaningful flexibility?	Persistent differences in flexibility opportunities associated with occupational and organizational structures	Individual preference cannot explain outcomes when options are unequally available	Proposed: structural access conditions shape who can benefit from flexibility	Preference $\neq$ opportunity structure	How much disparity reflects task feasibility, occupational power, or institutional convention	Structural disparity does not identify a single causal actor
Interaction parity	Can employees participate consequentially across modalities?	Adequate access to information, coordination, voice, relationships, and developmental interaction	Equal attendance rules may not produce equal participation or influence	Proposed: equitable hybrid work requires functional rather than identical interaction opportunities	Interaction quantity $\neq$ consequential participation	Which forms of interaction are genuinely necessary for different roles	Equal interaction volume is not required
Distributional accountability	Who gains and who bears costs over time?	Systematic examination of recurring differences in access, evaluation, control, burden, and opportunity	Average organizational outcomes can conceal unequal benefits and disadvantages	Proposed: recurring unexplained disparities should trigger review of policy and practice	Aggregate benefit $\neq$ equitable distribution	Which observed differences warrant organizational intervention	Disparity alone does not prove unjustified treatment
Equitable Flexibility Governance Framework — original proposed synthesis	How should these domains be considered together?	Proposed governance architecture connecting access parity, evaluation parity, transparent discretion and control, boundary protection, interaction parity, and distributional accountability	Fragmented policies can overlook interactions among careers, control, and unequal access	Proposed: equitable flexibility depends on alignment across multiple domains rather than one attendance rule	Conceptual framework $\neq$ validated intervention	Relative importance, sequencing, interactions, and applicability require empirical testing	Neither a validated causal model nor a universal prescription

Table note. The table is an original conceptual synthesis developed for this Critical Viewpoint Article. It consolidates distinctions and proposed relationships developed in the surrounding manuscript rather than reproducing findings from any single study. “Proposed” denotes relationships or governance interpretations requiring empirical testing. The table contains no effect sizes, rankings, thresholds, validated causal pathways, or implementation-readiness claims.

Limits of individualized choice

A dominant language of hybrid work treats flexibility as an individual preference: employees choose where or when to work, and organizations accommodate that preference when feasible. This framing is incomplete because the meaning of “choice” depends on how arrangements are authorized and enacted. Evidence comparing formal and informal flexible working arrangements shows that the two are empirically distinguishable and can be associated differently with employee attitudes and performance [20]. Formal permission therefore does not establish equivalent practical control. Informal arrangements may permit rapid adaptation, but they may also depend more heavily on local relationships; formal arrangements may create procedural clarity while remaining difficult to use in particular teams. The proposed distinction is between nominal choice and usable choice: the latter requires an option that can be exercised without disproportionate relational, evaluative, or coordination costs.

Flexible arrangements also differ according to whose objectives they primarily serve. Evidence on bundles of flexible working arrangements distinguishes employee-centred from employer-centred flexibility and shows different associations with work effort [21]. This complicates claims that greater variability automatically means greater autonomy. Employer-directed changes in hours or location may increase organizational adaptability while reducing employees’ control over predictability. Conversely, employee-centred flexibility can still transfer scheduling and coordination work to individuals. The relevant analytic question is therefore not how much flexibility exists, but who controls its timing, reversibility, and consequences.

Individual choices also operate within interdependent systems. The consequences of location choice extend beyond the chooser because coworker presence patterns and firm-wide remote work can alter team performance and collaboration networks [22, 23]. These findings should not be read as evidence that remote work intrinsically damages collaboration: the underlying studies examine particular organizational and technological conditions. They instead demonstrate that the employee is not always the correct unit for evaluating flexible-work design. Meetings, information flows, handoffs, mentoring, and availability are jointly produced. A preference that is individually rational can therefore generate coordination demands for others, just as a mandatory office norm can impose commuting or caregiving costs that remain invisible at team level.

The critical boundary follows from this interdependence. Rejecting individualized choice does not justify replacing flexibility with managerial command. Rather, the proposed governance problem is to allocate decision rights and coordination obligations explicitly. Organizations should distinguish choices whose consequences are predominantly individual from choices that materially alter shared workflows, access to information, or burdens carried by coworkers. This is a normative proposition requiring testing. It preserves employee autonomy while recognizing that flexibility can redistribute responsibilities without redistributing authority, staffing, time, or resources.

Principles for equitable flexibility

A more equitable approach begins by specifying what flexibility is expected to protect. Job control and loneliness have been identified as consequential dimensions of remote-work experience, indicating that location freedom alone does not capture meaningful control [24]. Qualitative evidence further shows that inclusion can differ across work modalities and social identities, making physical or digital participation an incomplete proxy for belonging [25]. Review evidence distinguishes policy availability from access, use, boundary control, and outcomes, and emphasizes that implementation unfolds across multiple organizational levels [26]. Research on working carers likewise shows that line managers and coworkers can mediate whether informal flexibility becomes practically usable [27]. Together, these findings motivate—but do not validate—the proposed Equitable Flexibility Governance Framework.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for principles for equitable flexibility, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

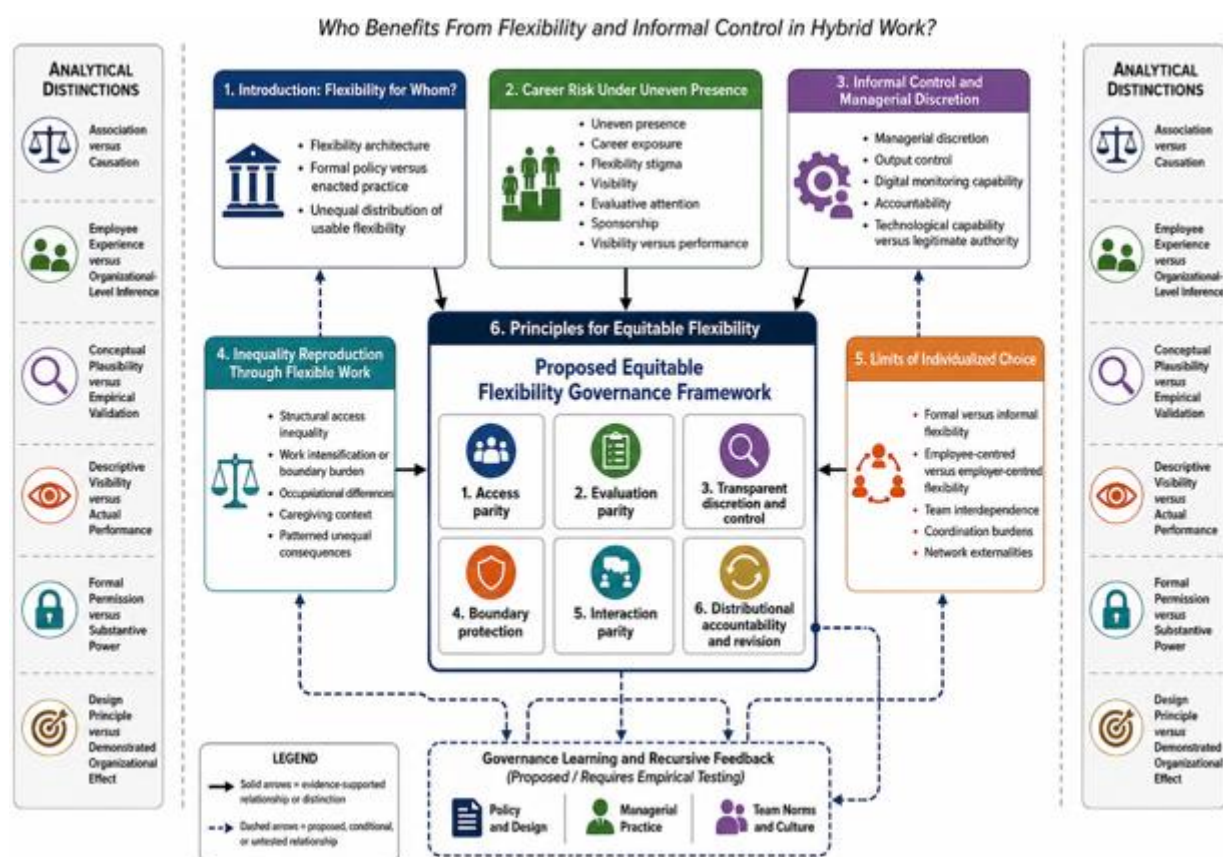


Figure 1. Principles for Equitable Flexibility

The first proposed principle is access parity. Access parity does not require identical arrangements for jobs with materially different location constraints. It requires that differences in eligibility and practical use be traceable to defensible work

requirements rather than unexplained status, occupational convention, relationship capital, or assumptions about who can be trusted away from the workplace. Because access and use are distinct, an organization could satisfy formal availability while failing substantively if employees reasonably expect penalties for exercising the option.

The second principle is evaluation parity. Performance judgments should be capable of distinguishing contribution from descriptive visibility. This principle does not presume that face-to-face interaction is irrelevant; some work requires observation, coordination, social learning, or relationship development. It instead proposes that presence should enter evaluation only when the relevant presence contributes to a specified work requirement. Where physical visibility becomes an unexamined substitute for productivity, commitment, or promotability, flexible policy and career architecture become internally inconsistent.

Third, transparent discretion and control should make consequential flexibility decisions explainable and contestable. Managers need discretion because tasks, emergencies, team cycles, and employee circumstances vary. Yet discretion becomes difficult to evaluate when exceptions, monitoring standards, or location expectations remain tacit. The proposed principle therefore favors articulated criteria, comparable reasoning across similar cases, and channels for questioning decisions. The same logic applies to digital monitoring: technical capacity to record activity does not establish that the indicator validly represents performance or that its use is legitimate.

Fourth, boundary protection distinguishes meaningful autonomy from responsibility transfer. Flexible employees may gain location or scheduling control while absorbing additional coordination, availability, or overtime demands. Equitable design should therefore examine who performs the hidden work of synchronizing schedules, maintaining relationships, covering presence-dependent tasks, or remaining reachable across extended periods. This is not a claim that such burdens always increase under hybrid work; it is a requirement that they be made analytically visible.

Fifth, interaction parity concerns usable participation rather than equal quantities of interaction. Remote and on-site employees need credible routes to information, voice, coordination, developmental contact, and consequential influence. The relevant standard is not identical meeting exposure, because tasks and preferences differ, but whether modality systematically restricts the ability to contribute or obtain resources necessary for one's role. Finally, distributional accountability and revision asks organizations to examine recurring patterns in access, career outcomes, control burdens, and interaction, then revisit policy and practice when disparities cannot be explained by legitimate work requirements. This proposed feedback process is a governance hypothesis, not a validated intervention.

The framework is intentionally bounded. Its principles may conflict: increasing synchronous interaction can improve information access while reducing temporal autonomy; standardizing discretion can increase consistency while weakening accommodation; reducing monitoring can protect privacy while leaving ambiguous accountability. Occupational feasibility, task interdependence, remote-work intensity, managerial relationships, caregiving context, national institutions, and crisis conditions may alter which trade-offs dominate. Testing the framework therefore requires longitudinal career records, multilevel employee-team-manager designs, policy-change natural experiments, vignette or audit studies of evaluation, network analyses of interaction, and qualitative process tracing of exception decisions.

Conclusion

The central claim of this Critical Viewpoint Article is not that hybrid flexibility is inherently unequal, nor that office presence is inherently controlling. It is that flexibility is organizationally consequential because formal options are enacted through career systems, managerial discretion, occupational structures, team dependencies, and control practices. The question "flexibility for whom?" therefore requires analysis of both benefits and the conditions under which those benefits become usable.

The proposed Equitable Flexibility Governance Framework organizes this problem around access parity, evaluation parity, transparent discretion and control, boundary protection, interaction parity, and distributional accountability. These principles shift attention from attendance rules toward the distribution of decision rights, evaluative exposure, coordination burdens, and opportunities for consequential participation. They are original normative propositions, not validated causal mechanisms or implementation standards.

The evidence considered here also imposes important limits. Flexible work can support retention, employment continuity, productivity, and reduced exposure to some interpersonal disadvantages in certain settings, while other settings reveal stigma, unequal access, work intensification, control shifts, or coordination costs. These outcomes cannot be collapsed into one verdict on hybrid work. Future research must establish when the proposed relationships hold, for whom, at what level of analysis, and under which institutional and occupational conditions. Equitable flexibility should therefore be treated as an empirical and governance question that remains open to refinement, challenge, and rejection.

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