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Trust and Performance Signaling When Hybrid Employees Become Less Visible

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Abstract

Hybrid work weakens the historical overlap between being physically present, being observable, and being judged as contributing. The organizational problem arises not because reduced presence necessarily lowers performance, but because evaluators may receive fewer, different, or selectively produced cues about work. This Original Propositional Model Article develops a proposed Visibility–Trust–Signaling Model separating actual task contribution, evaluator-accessible evidence, and managerial interpretation. The model introduces observational discontinuity as a proposed mismatch between contribution and accessible evidence, performance-inference uncertainty as the resulting interpretive condition, and monitoring anxiety as anticipatory concern about judgment through incomplete, invasive, or low-control evidence. It proposes that employees respond through artifact, responsiveness, interactional-presence, and relational-endorsement signals. Prior trust, task observability, interdependence, relationship history, role demands, career stage, monitoring design, and expectation clarity are treated as boundary conditions. Signal diagnosticity is proposed to determine whether increased visibility improves evaluation calibration or creates visibility–performance decoupling, in which trace production becomes more legible than contribution. Implications concern evidence architecture, proportional monitoring, expectation-setting, relational access, and contestability rather than universal prescriptions. The model remains non-empirical and unvalidated. Its mechanisms require construct development, longitudinal employee–manager data, independent performance criteria, multilevel designs, and tests permitting null, reversed, nonlinear, and adverse relationships. It does not establish organizational effects or decision readiness. The contribution is a falsifiable vocabulary for examining how hybrid employees become visible without treating visibility as performance.

Keywords: Visibility without continuous physical presence, Trust and performance signaling, Monitoring anxiety and anticipated evaluation, Employee performance-signaling strategies, Future research, Trust

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Introduction

Hybrid work reorganizes where and when employees become observable. Its consequences cannot be reduced to a uniform contrast between office and remote locations because remote e-work affects social, professional, affective, cognitive, and psychosomatic experiences through contingent pathways [1]. The problem is therefore not physical absence alone, but the weakening of a once-routine connection among presence, incidental observation, informal interaction, and managerial inference. Employees may contribute substantially while generating few immediately visible cues, or generate abundant cues that reveal activity without establishing contribution. A theory of hybrid evaluation must distinguish work location from the evidence through which performance is interpreted.

Remote-work effectiveness depends on work design. Autonomy, social support, workload, monitoring, and self-discipline shape employees' capacity to work effectively beyond the office [2]. These conditions affect both accomplishment and how



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accomplishment becomes communicable. Autonomy may support concentration while leaving fewer process cues; intensive monitoring may increase trace availability while changing the experience and meaning of work. Hybrid visibility is produced jointly by task structure, communication practices, technologies, managerial expectations, and employee adaptation. Treating visibility as a simple quantity obscures whether accessible evidence is relevant, voluntary, proportionate, and interpretable.

Physical presence is not a necessary proxy for output. Geographic flexibility has coexisted with higher measured productivity in a setting where outputs were comparatively measurable [3]. This does not authorize a general productivity claim across occupations. It instead establishes a conceptual separation: evaluators may lose familiar observational cues while employees maintain task results. Appraisal becomes problematic when systems continue rewarding evidence suited to co-located work, such as immediate accessibility or witnessed effort, even where hybrid contribution appears through delayed, collective, relational, or difficult-to-count outcomes.

Remote work can alter the networks and media through which work becomes visible. In one large information-work setting, firm-wide remote work changed collaboration patterns and increased reliance on less synchronous communication [4]. Digital traces provide partial records, but do not necessarily capture tacit coordination, learning, helping, judgment, or contribution quality. Some cues disappear, others become persistent, and still others may be produced because employees anticipate reliance on what systems make legible. Less continuous physical presence therefore changes the cue environment rather than merely reducing it.

Within-person evidence indicates that remote-work exposure and organizational trust can covary, while underscoring contextual dependence [5]. Reduced visibility should not therefore be framed as an automatic cause of distrust. This article develops an original, non-empirical propositional model in which changed cue access may create uncertainty interpreted through prior trust and evaluation arrangements. It proposes links among observational discontinuity, trust updating, anticipated evaluation, monitoring anxiety, signaling strategies, and signal diagnosticity. These relationships are conceptually plausible rather than validated, and remain bounded by task, relationship, role, career, technological, and organizational conditions.

Theoretical foundations of trust and performance signaling

Workplace trust concerns positive expectations that permit vulnerability in relation to a particular target. It can concern a supervisor, coworker, team, organization, or system, and develops through relational and multilevel processes rather than operating as a synonym for confidence or visibility [6]. In hybrid work, evaluators often interpret incomplete evidence without continuous co-presence. Yet trust may be calibrated, excessive, deficient, or attached to the wrong target. An employee may trust a supervisor's intentions while distrusting the organization's monitoring system; a manager may trust an employee's reliability while remaining uncertain about a new task. The proposed model therefore treats trust as an updating condition, not a simple outcome of remote work.

Observation is ambivalent. Transparency can assist coordination, accountability, and learning, but being observed can also induce concealment, distortion, defensive routines, and pressure to perform observability itself [7]. The relevant question is not whether more or less visibility is universally beneficial. It is whether observers obtain evidence sufficiently diagnostic of role-relevant contribution and whether employees retain reasonable control over its production, interpretation, and correction. Visibility may improve calibration where tasks have clear outputs, yet redirect effort toward demonstrable activity where contributions are collective, delayed, creative, relational, or difficult to attribute.

Digitization expands the reach and persistence of observation. Behavioral visibility arises when digital systems make actions, knowledge, preferences, and networks observable beyond immediate interaction [8]. This visibility is broader than physical presence but narrower than performance. Messages, status updates, calendar traces, repository entries, or meeting attendance may show that behavior occurred without revealing its value, quality, motive, or opportunity cost. Performance signaling is defined here as behavior or artifact production capable of shaping inferences about effort, availability, competence, contribution, or commitment. Signaling is not necessarily deceptive; it may communicate otherwise hidden work.

The proposed architecture separates actual task contribution, evaluator-accessible evidence, and managerial interpretation or action. Trust influences how ambiguous evidence is weighted; signaling influences which evidence becomes available; organizational systems determine which cues become consequential. These connections are proposed, not established as a causal sequence. Rivals include prior performance, selection, manager quality, technology proficiency, communication norms, and unequal access to visible assignments. Individual perceptions also cannot be treated as team climate or organizational practice without evidence of sharedness and cross-level processes.

Reduced visibility and uncertainty in hybrid teams

Reduced visibility means changed access to contextual, interactional, behavioral, relational, and output cues, not an employee's disappearance from organizational life. Digital collaboration tools can preserve coordination while reshaping or removing spontaneous, embodied, and contextual cues available in co-located work [9]. Employees may lose informal demonstrations of expertise and opportunities to observe how colleagues handle ambiguity. Meanwhile, scheduled meetings,

shared documents, and messaging channels make selected work persistent and searchable. Hybrid work therefore redistributes cue access: some evidence becomes scarce, some abundant, and some detached from the context needed for sound interpretation.

Leadership in virtual teams depends on communication, coordination, relationship-building, and contextual conditions rather than direct supervision alone [10]. Uncertainty is consequently partly organized, not merely encountered. Managers influence whether employees know what evidence matters, how priorities are interpreted, and when visibility is required for coordination rather than reassurance. Unclear criteria can leave employees guessing whether silence signals trust, neglect, or adverse judgment. Constant requests for updates may appear to reduce uncertainty while increasing workload and privileging highly traceable activity. No single leadership style follows, and virtual-team findings cannot be generalized automatically to every hybrid arrangement.

Virtuality is also experienced, not only assigned by policy. Team perceived virtuality can emerge from information deficits and experienced distance, so employees under the same formal arrangement may experience different degrees of separation [11]. A manager may feel informed because dashboards and messages are abundant while employees experience weak relational access and limited understanding of decisions. Individual perceptions cannot be aggregated into a team state without demonstrating sharedness, and the relevant level may change with membership, tasks, media, and interaction patterns.

This article proposes observational discontinuity as a mismatch between performance-relevant activity and evaluator-accessible evidence. It does not mean absence, low effort, or poor performance. The mismatch may be small where outputs are timely and attributable, but larger where work is interdependent, developmental, confidential, delayed, or relational. Performance-inference uncertainty is proposed as difficulty determining contribution from available cues. Both constructs require discriminant validation against physical visibility, behavioral visibility, role ambiguity, trust, and performance. Workload, prior relationships, technology skill, managerial capability, and crisis conditions remain plausible rival explanations.

Monitoring anxiety and anticipated evaluation

Electronic performance monitoring is not one uniform exposure. Systems differ in what is monitored, why data are collected, when observation occurs, who can access records, how much control employees retain, and how information enters decisions [12]. Hybrid employees may therefore experience identical technologies differently depending on whether data support coordination, development, workload allocation, discipline, or ranking. Monitoring must also be distinguished from ordinary behavioral visibility. A digital trace can exist without evaluative use, while an employee can anticipate evaluation even without a formal monitoring system.

Monitoring reactions depend jointly on purpose, perceived control, privacy, and reactance rather than monitoring presence alone [12-14]. Acceptance is more plausible when employees understand tracking functions and perceive meaningful control, whereas surveillance can provoke resistance when it threatens freedom or privacy. This evidence does not establish that monitoring causes performance signaling or validate a single mediation pathway. It shows why trace collection cannot be interpreted independently of governance. The same record may function as feedback, intrusive scrutiny, or ambiguous future risk depending on access, persistence, consequences, and correction rights.

Anticipated evaluation is an employee's belief about what evaluators expect and how they will judge accessible evidence. It may diverge from formal policy or actual managerial expectations. Hybrid employees can infer responsiveness, camera, availability, or documentation norms from delayed replies, coworker comparison, prior appraisals, or opaque dashboard use. Monitoring acceptance and surveillance-reactance evidence makes inferred audience and control relevant conditions [13] [14]. Yet anticipated evaluation should not be inferred from visible behavior alone: frequent communication may reflect coordination, sociability, habit, customer need, or task interdependence rather than impression management.

Monitoring anxiety is an original proposed construct: anticipatory concern about judgment through incomplete, invasive, ambiguous, or low-control evidence. It is distinct from general stress, privacy concern, job insecurity, and reactance, although these experiences may overlap. The construct is proposed to connect evaluation architecture with signaling choices, not to describe an established disorder or validated scale. It may increase when criteria, trace access, or consequences are opaque, and decrease when purposes, access rights, contextual interpretation, and correction routes are clear. These propositions require construct development and temporal testing.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for trust and performance signaling when hybrid employees become less visible.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Trust and Performance Signaling When Hybrid Employees Become Less Visible.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
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Physical visibility	Embodied presence or witnessed activity	Missing incidental cues	Not trust or contribution	Context	Selective, performative	No causal rank
Behavioral/digital visibility	Digitally observable action or relations	Persistent traces	Not valid performance measurement	Evidence layer	Selective capture	Specify access and governance
Performance visibility	Evidence plausibly relevant to contribution	Activity more legible than results	Not physical or behavioral visibility	Proposed bridge	Task-specific diagnosticity	Validate independently
Actual task contribution	Outputs, coordination, learning, helping, judgment	Presence–performance substitution	Not trace volume	Separate lane	Delayed or collective	Measure apart from traces
Observational discontinuity	Proposed contribution–evidence mismatch	Inference uncertainty	Not absence or low effort	Proposed antecedent	No established measure	Test discriminant validity
Trust	Target-specific positive expectations permitting vulnerability	Interpreting incomplete evidence	Not visibility or confidence	Proposed moderator/updating state	May be miscalibrated	Specify target, level, time
Monitoring anxiety	Proposed concern about low-control evaluative evidence	Evaluation pressure	Not stress, privacy concern, or reactance alone	Proposed mediator	No validated scale	Develop and test
Anticipated evaluation	Beliefs about evaluator expectations and judgment	Pressure without explicit monitoring	May differ from actual expectations	Proposed appraisal process	Miscalibration possible	Measure both parties
Performance signaling	Visible behavior or artifacts shaping performance inference	Adaptation to uncertain evaluation	Not necessarily deception	Proposed response portfolio	Motive and cost vary	Do not infer motive
Signal diagnosticity	Capacity to distinguish contribution from activity	Evaluation calibration	Not volume or salience	Proposed moderator	Task/audience-specific	Criterion validation required
Visibility–performance decoupling	Proposed divergence between trace production and contribution	Gaming or hidden work	Not always intentional	Proposed consequence	Prevalence unknown	Longitudinal outcome tests

Note: Cited entries are evidence-bounded; uncited integrations and relationships are original proposed synthesis. No row represents a validated causal pathway, effect magnitude, threshold, or prescription.

Employee performance-signaling strategies

Performance signaling comprises visible behaviors or artifacts that can shape inferences about effort, availability, competence, contribution, or commitment. It is broader than deception and narrower than all communication. Employees combine impression-management tactics in distinct profiles associated with different experiences of inauthenticity and behavior [15]. In hybrid settings, the relevant issue is not whether employees manage impressions, but whether changed access to evidence makes some signals unusually consequential. Ordinary coordination, professional courtesy, and genuine relationship maintenance remain rival explanations, so motive cannot be inferred from observable behavior alone.

The proposed signaling portfolio contains four non-exhaustive categories. Artifact signals make work legible through documents, updates, completed tasks, or recorded milestones. Responsiveness signals communicate availability through rapid replies and platform activity; receivers may overestimate how quickly senders expect answers to non-urgent messages, making responsiveness a potentially miscalibrated availability signal [16]. Interactional-presence signals include meeting attendance, camera use, and visible participation. Relational-endorsement signals arise when coworkers, clients, or supervisors acknowledge expertise or contribution. Each category may transmit useful information, yet its diagnosticity depends on task relevance, audience, timing, and opportunity to produce the signal.

Signal production also carries costs. Camera use can increase fatigue and relate to reduced engagement and voice, showing that visible presence is not cost-free [17]. Frequent updates can fragment attention, rapid responsiveness can extend availability norms, and endorsement signals may favor employees with stronger networks. The model therefore proposes that monitoring anxiety may increase signaling intensity or shift employees toward cues they believe evaluators privilege. This pathway may be absent, reversed, or nonlinear. Signals may improve coordination when criteria are clear, but become visibility work when they displace contribution or when employees have unequal access to legible tasks and influential audiences.

Proposed visibility–trust–signaling model

Remote work expands digital exhaust and footprints that may be repurposed for organizational inference [18]. Trace availability, however, does not establish what a trace measures. The proposed Visibility–Trust–Signaling Model separates three analytically distinct lanes: actual task contribution; evaluator-accessible evidence; and managerial interpretation and action. Enacted hybrid arrangements, task structures, role demands, communication media, and evaluation architecture influence the relationship among these lanes. A proposed observational discontinuity occurs when performance-relevant contribution is not adequately represented in accessible evidence, producing performance-inference uncertainty rather than proof of low performance.

Perceptions of digitally mediated decisions vary with decision type, fairness, trust, and emotion [19]. Accordingly, uncertainty is proposed to be interpreted through prior calibrated trust, relationship history, and beliefs about evaluative legitimacy. Anticipated evaluation may then generate monitoring anxiety, which may affect whether employees choose artifact, responsiveness, interactional-presence, or relational-endorsement signals. These links are proposed rather than established mediators. Trust could reduce anxiety by supporting favorable interpretation, increase complacency, or become irrelevant where outputs are independently verifiable. Conversely, low trust may reflect earlier performance or relationship problems rather than reduced visibility.

Digital traces can become contested evaluation and control infrastructures rather than neutral records [18–20]. The model proposes signal diagnosticity as the capacity of accessible evidence to differentiate role-relevant contribution from activity. High-diagnosticity signals may improve calibration; low-diagnosticity but salient signals may produce proposed visibility–performance decoupling. Employees may then adapt to what is rewarded, while evaluation and opportunity allocation feed back into later trust and signaling. Technology can change how constructs are expressed and measured, so every digital indicator requires independent validity testing rather than inherited legitimacy [21].

The model also separates levels of analysis. An employee's monitoring anxiety is an individual state; trust between employee and supervisor is dyadic; shared expectations may become a team property only when convergence is demonstrated; and evaluation architecture is organizational. A digital indicator can operate differently across these levels, and technological mediation may alter both construct expression and the validity of its measurement [21]. The proposed feedback loop therefore does not assume that individual signaling automatically changes team norms or organizational systems. Aggregation, diffusion, and institutionalization require independent evidence, while formal policy must be distinguished from enacted managerial practice and from employees' interpretations of that practice.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for visibility–trust–signaling model, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

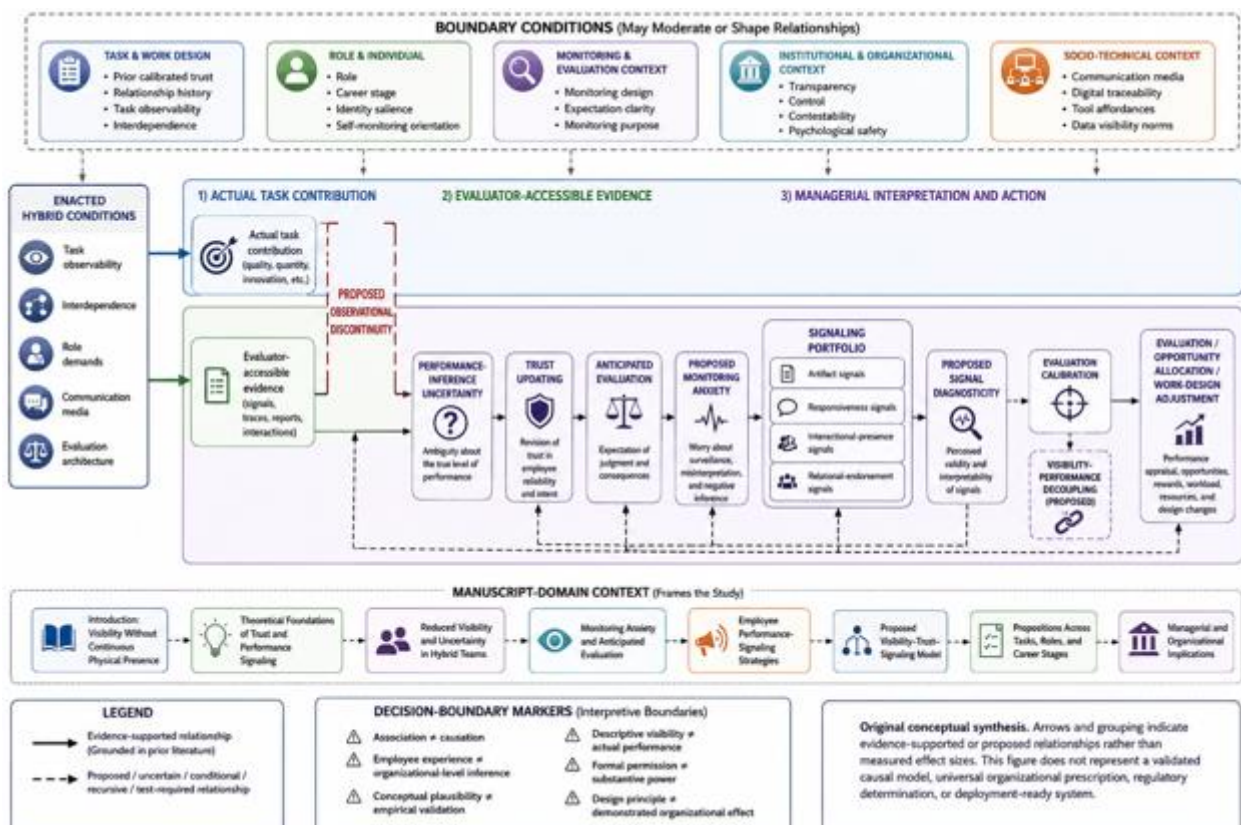


Figure 1. Visibility–Trust–Signaling Model*Propositions across tasks, roles, and career stages*

Task characteristics should condition whether visibility is useful or misleading. Telecommuting–performance relationships vary with job complexity, problem solving, interdependence, and social support [22]. The model therefore proposes P1: lower access to performance-relevant cues increases inference uncertainty, especially where tasks are difficult to observe and highly interdependent. P2: prior calibrated trust weakens the proposed path from observational discontinuity to monitoring anxiety, whereas low or miscalibrated trust may amplify it. P3: monitoring anxiety predicts greater or shifted signaling, potentially with fatigue or task-focus costs at high intensity. Each proposition should be rejected if the predicted association is null or reversed after appropriate controls.

Career and role conditions alter access to signals and audiences. Working-life disruptions differ across career stages and contextual levels [23]. The model proposes P4: artifact signals receive greater weight where outputs are timely and verifiable, whereas responsiveness or presence cues receive greater weight where outputs are delayed or ambiguous. P5: trace-based evaluation increases trace-generating behavior, and weakly diagnostic criteria increase visibility–performance decoupling. P6: clear expectations regarding availability, response time, monitoring purpose, and acceptable evidence reduce unnecessary signaling and monitoring anxiety. These propositions distinguish career stage from age, tenure, family demands, occupation, and technology proficiency.

Telecommuting has contingent relationships with objective career success, making cumulative visibility consequences plausible but not proven [24]. The model proposes P7: newcomers and earlier-career employees depend more on visible interaction and relational endorsement when reputation, networks, and sponsorship are limited. P8: repeated reliance on low-diagnostic visibility criteria accumulates into unequal opportunity allocation and stronger dependence on traceable behavior. Neither proposition claims that remote work causes career penalties. Selection, prior performance, role assignment, manager quality, and unequal access to high-visibility work remain competing explanations.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in trust and performance signaling when hybrid employees become less visible.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Trust and Performance Signaling When Hybrid Employees Become Less Visible.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Observation-gap pathway	Lower cue access	Inference uncertainty	Task observability; interdependence; trust	Uncertain managerial inference, proposed	Workload; manager quality; technology skill	Multiwave dyads plus independent performance
Trust-calibration pathway	Ambiguous evidence	Prior trust and relationship interpretation	Target; tenure; shared experience	Amplified or attenuated uncertainty, proposed	Trust propensity; organizational change	Within-person trust and cue measures
Monitoring-anxiety pathway	Low-control evaluation	Threat, privacy, and legitimacy appraisal	Purpose; transparency; contestability	Anxiety, reactance, or adaptation, proposed	General stress; job insecurity	Construct validation and field experiment
Signal-portfolio pathway	Uncertain criteria	Artifact, responsiveness, presence, or endorsement selection	Costs; norms; career stage	Signal escalation or substitution, proposed	Coordination needs; personality	Experience sampling, traces, and motive measures
Diagnosticity pathway	Reliance on visible signals	Interpretation and weighting	Task measurability; decision type; validity	Calibration or decoupling, proposed	True performance; data quality	Criterion-validity study
Surveillance-feedback pathway	Trace-based evaluation	Accommodation, gaming, resistance, or concealment	Power; transparency; employee voice	More traces or contested trust, proposed	Control climate; incentives	Quasi-experiment and process tracing
Career-stage pathway	Limited reputation or sponsorship	Dependence on visible interaction and endorsement	Career stage; role; network	Unequal opportunity inference, proposed	Age; family; occupation; selection	Longitudinal career panel
Organizational accumulation	Repeated low-diagnostic criteria	Opportunity allocation and norm reinforcement	Auditability; leadership; work design	Cumulative visibility inequality, proposed	Performance systems; labor market; culture	Multilevel comparative field research

Note: Every expected consequence and integrated pathway is proposed. References establish plausibility, component relationships, or boundaries rather than model validation.

Managerial and organizational implications

The model implies that organizations should examine the quality of performance evidence rather than maximize observable activity. Communication quality and supervisor expectation-setting matter beyond communication quantity [25]. A bounded evidence architecture would clarify which outputs, coordination activities, learning contributions, and relational responsibilities are relevant to each role; who can access associated traces; and how employees may contextualize or correct interpretations. This is a design principle, not a fixed communication cadence. Different tasks may require different evidence, and hidden work should not be made visible when visibility would violate confidentiality, autonomy, or legitimate professional discretion.

Leadership should preserve relational access while avoiding the substitution of surveillance for coordination. Task- and relationship-oriented leadership have been associated with employee functioning in digitally transformed service work, although crisis and sector conditions limit generalization [26]. Managers can clarify availability and response expectations, distinguish developmental feedback from disciplinary monitoring, and discuss how delayed or collective contributions will be evaluated. Such practices may reduce avoidable uncertainty, but their effects are not established by the proposed model. Trust should remain revisable and evidence-responsive rather than becoming either uncritical confidence or continuous suspicion.

Digital technologies redistribute autonomy, feedback, demands, and responsibility through work design [27]. Monitoring choices should therefore be proportionate, transparent, contestable, and connected to a legitimate purpose. Organizations could audit whether trace volume predicts independent contribution, whether opportunity allocation favors employees with greater access to visible assignments, and whether career-stage or role differences shape evidentiary disadvantage. These are evaluation questions, not implementation instructions. Human decision-makers retain responsibility for interpreting context, challenging low-validity indicators, and preventing technological capability from being treated as legitimate evaluative authority.

Future research

The proposed constructs require measurement before the model's paths can be evaluated. Experience-sampling designs can examine within-person fluctuations when measurement timing and burden correspond to theory [28]. Employee reports of cue access, anticipated evaluation, and monitoring anxiety should be paired with manager reports, independently assessed task outcomes, and carefully governed traces. Researchers should test discriminant validity among monitoring anxiety, privacy concern, reactance, role ambiguity, job insecurity, and general strain, while measuring actual and perceived expectations separately.

Two-level dynamic structural equation models can separate within-person dynamics from stable between-person differences [29]. Multiwave employee–manager dyads could test whether cue gaps precede uncertainty, whether trust moderates interpretation, and whether signaling feeds back into later evaluation. Field and quasi-experiments could vary expectation clarity, monitoring purpose, or evidence access; qualitative process research could reveal concealment, adaptation, and contested interpretation. Sophisticated models cannot compensate for weak measures, endogenous technology adoption, or invalid performance criteria.

Cross-sectional designs can establish bounded associations but not the temporal ordering and recursive feedback proposed here [30]. Research should compare tasks, occupations, career stages, national contexts, and enacted hybrid arrangements, while allowing null, reversed, nonlinear, and adverse findings to challenge the model.

Conclusion

This Original Propositional Model Article separates actual contribution from the evidence through which hybrid employees become visible and from the interpretations that shape evaluation. Its proposed Visibility–Trust–Signaling Model links observational discontinuity, performance-inference uncertainty, trust updating, anticipated evaluation, monitoring anxiety, signaling portfolios, signal diagnosticity, and organizational feedback. The central contribution is not a claim that remote work erodes trust or that visibility improves performance. It is a framework for explaining when reduced co-presence may change the evidentiary basis of judgment and when employee efforts to become legible may improve calibration or produce visibility–performance decoupling.

The model remains conceptually plausible rather than empirically validated. Its constructs, pathways, propositions, and organizational implications require measurement, temporal identification, multilevel testing, independent performance criteria, and comparison with rival explanations. Outcomes may be null, reversed, nonlinear, or context-specific. Accordingly, the framework should guide inquiry and critical evaluation, not serve as a universal prescription, validated intervention, or implementation-ready system.

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