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Proximity Advantage and Career Opportunity in Hybrid Organizations

Andrei Popescu^{1*}, Mihai Ionescu¹, Elena Stan², Cristina Radu³

1. Department of Proximity and Career Opportunity, Faculty of Business, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania.
2. Department of Hybrid Organizations and Advancement, Faculty of Management, University of Agricultural Sciences Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
3. Department of Career Dynamics, Faculty of Psychology, Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania.

Abstract

Hybrid work has altered where organizational members perform their jobs without eliminating the importance of who is seen, who gains access to influential actors, and who receives consequential career opportunities. Existing research provides substantial evidence on virtual work, flexible-work stigma, behavioral visibility, manager relationships, and career outcomes, yet these literatures do not establish a universal career penalty for remote work or a general causal advantage of office presence. This Original Conceptual Theory Article develops a proposed Theory of Proximity Advantage to explain when relative co-presence may become consequential for career opportunity in hybrid organizations. The theory distinguishes physical proximity from visibility, visibility from verified performance, informal access from leader-member exchange, and relational access from sponsorship and realized advancement. It proposes that hybrid-work configurations may create unequal observability and interaction opportunities; these differences may shape managerial inferences and relational access and, under discretionary allocation systems, influence developmental assignments, sponsorship, exposure, and advancement consideration. The theory is explicitly conditional. Proximity advantage should weaken where contribution is reliably observable, hybrid work is normalized, access to managers is structured, and opportunity criteria are transparent. It may also coexist with digital visibility costs and legitimate performance-based differentiation. The contribution is therefore not a claim that proximity invariably improves careers, but a testable explanation of when proximity can acquire career value. Empirical validation requires longitudinal, multilevel, experimental, and opportunity-event designs capable of separating observability, inference, access, performance, and allocation.

Keywords: The persistence of proximity advantage, Theoretical foundations, Visibility bias in hybrid work, Career-opportunity allocation, Equity-oriented organizational responses, Proximity

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Corresponding author: Andrei Popescu

E-mail ✉ andrei.popescu@faa.ro

Introduction

Hybrid work appears, at first, to weaken the organizational importance of location. Employees can perform knowledge work across offices, homes, and other settings, and organizations increasingly coordinate through digital infrastructures. Yet virtual work research has long shown that “working apart” is not a single condition: telecommuting, virtual teamwork, computer-mediated collaboration, and geographically distributed work involve different combinations of distance, interdependence, technology, and managerial control [1]. Alternative work arrangements likewise vary in employment relationship, scheduling discretion, and location, meaning that flexibility cannot be treated as a unitary organizational practice with uniform career consequences [2]. The central theoretical problem is therefore not whether hybrid work eliminates proximity, but when remaining differences in co-presence become consequential.



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A location-only explanation is insufficient because remote-work experiences depend on work design. Communication quality, social support, autonomy, workload, monitoring, and self-discipline can shape how effectively employees work away from a conventional workplace [3]. These conditions affect employees' capacity to perform and remain connected, but they also caution against interpreting physical presence as a straightforward indicator of contribution. An employee may be highly productive while less observable, or highly observable while adding little marginal value. Hybrid arrangements therefore create a potentially consequential separation between where work occurs, how contribution is evidenced, and how managers form judgments about employees.

Network evidence adds a relational dimension. Organization-wide remote work can restructure collaboration patterns, including greater siloing and less synchronous communication, without directly establishing a career penalty [4]. Such network changes matter theoretically because career opportunities are often not allocated through performance metrics alone. Employees can also depend on information flows, developmental assignments, managerial advocacy, and exposure to influential organizational actors. If hybrid configurations alter who interacts with whom, they may change the opportunity environment even when formal job responsibilities remain stable.

Direct career evidence further argues against a universal proximity thesis. Telecommuting has not been associated with one invariant career penalty; its relationship with objective career success varies with telecommuting intensity, workplace norms, and face-to-face contact with supervisors [5]. This article therefore develops an original, non-empirical Theory of Proximity Advantage. The proposed theory asks when relative co-presence may produce greater observability or informal access, when those differences influence managerial inference and relationships, and when such processes enter discretionary career-opportunity allocation. It does not presume that proximity is inherently productive, legitimate, or advantageous. Rather, it treats proximity advantage as a conditional organizational process whose plausibility depends on identifiable mechanisms, rival explanations, and boundary conditions.

Theoretical foundations

The first foundation concerns signaling under distributed work. Qualitative research shows that geographically dispersed employees may deliberately create "face time," including visible sacrifice, to signal commitment and secure recognition or desirable work [6]. This evidence supports a distinction between physical presence as a work location and physical presence as an interpretable signal. It does not establish that managers are correct when they infer commitment from presence, nor that visible sacrifice reflects superior performance. For the proposed theory, face time matters only insofar as observers assign meaning to it and that meaning becomes consequential.

A second foundation is behavioral visibility. Digitalization can make employees' actions observable to others and thereby enable inferences about competence, effort, preferences, or intentions [7]. The important theoretical distinction is that observability and accuracy are separate. A behavior can be easy to see yet weakly diagnostic of actual contribution. Communication visibility extends this insight by showing that computer-mediated exchanges can be observed by audiences beyond the original sender and recipient, exposing communication patterns and relational networks that previously remained less visible [8]. Hybrid work therefore does not produce a simple contrast between "visible office work" and "invisible remote work"; it redistributes visibility across physical and digital channels.

The third foundation concerns attribution. Work-life and flexible-work policies can carry socially interpreted meanings, including inferences about employees' work devotion, and these interpretations depend on supervisor expectations and organizational norms [9]. This provides a plausible bridge between observed work arrangements and career-relevant judgments without proving that such judgments are biased. Physical face time, behavioral visibility, and communication visibility are thus complementary but analytically distinct channels through which organizational actors may become observable to others [6–8]. The proposed Theory of Proximity Advantage builds on these foundations but adds a new cross-domain claim: visibility becomes career-relevant only when it shapes consequential inference, relational access, or opportunity allocation. That claim remains to be tested at individual, dyadic, team, and organizational levels.

Visibility bias in hybrid work

Visibility is not itself bias. Flexible workers can nevertheless encounter flexibility stigma, including perceived expectations that using flexible arrangements will have negative career consequences [10]. Such perceptions are important because they reveal a social meaning attached to work arrangement, but they do not demonstrate realized discrimination or actual promotion loss. The proposed construct of **visibility bias** is therefore narrower: it refers to a systematic distortion in evaluative inference when differences in observability are treated as evidence of differences in contribution, commitment, readiness, or potential beyond what verified performance information warrants.

Hybrid work can make this problem especially salient because employees must manage how they are seen across uneven channels. Newcomers entering organizations remotely report uncertainty about visibility and engage in practices intended to become appropriately visible to colleagues and supervisors [11]. The relevance for career theory is not that all remote workers

are unseen, but that employees may face different burdens of producing recognizable presence. Those burdens may be stronger when evaluators have sparse performance information, when socialization depends on informal interaction, or when employees cannot readily observe the standards by which visibility is interpreted.

Digital substitutes do not resolve the problem automatically. Longitudinal evidence indicates that communication visibility can coexist with technology-assisted supplemental work, showing that increased digital presence may carry costs rather than functioning as a frictionless substitute for physical co-presence [12]. Enterprise social-media affordances can also support impression-management strategies, allowing employees to shape how others perceive their competence, commitment, or relational positioning [13]. These findings complicate any recommendation that hybrid workers should simply “be more visible”: increased digital observability may demand additional effort and may privilege employees who can invest in visibility-producing behavior.

The proposed theory therefore treats visibility bias as contingent, not ubiquitous. A manager may legitimately observe behavior that is genuinely diagnostic of performance, and employees may differ in output for reasons unrelated to location. Bias becomes theoretically relevant only when differential observability systematically influences judgments beyond reliable performance evidence. This distinction preserves an evidential boundary between descriptive visibility and evaluative distortion. It also requires multilevel testing: employee perceptions of being unseen cannot by themselves establish manager bias, and manager judgments cannot by themselves establish organizational-level inequality unless they are linked to consequential allocation processes.

Informal access to managers and opportunities

Visibility can matter without producing career advantage, and access can matter without being caused by proximity. Leader–member exchange research shows that leader and employee perceptions of relationship quality, including their agreement, are associated with employability and career-relevant outcomes [14]. Related evidence positions leader–member exchange as a relational pathway connecting career adaptability with career prospects, while also identifying individual agreeableness as a boundary condition [15]. These findings justify treating manager relationships as potentially consequential, but they do not establish office attendance as an antecedent of superior exchange relationships.

Sponsorship is more consequential still. Unlike generic contact or mentoring, sponsorship involves active advocacy that can help protégés obtain advancement opportunities [16]. The proposed theory therefore distinguishes informal access, leader–member exchange, and sponsorship. Informal access is defined here as low-friction opportunities for unscheduled or lightly structured interaction with managers or influential actors. It may create occasions for information exchange or recognition, but it is not equivalent to a high-quality relationship and does not guarantee advocacy. Sponsorship, in turn, represents a more consequential relational mechanism because an influential actor actively expends social capital on another employee’s behalf. Relational differentiation also creates an important alternative explanation. Differences in leader–member exchange can generate team-level consequences through relationship conflict and procedural-justice perceptions [17]. Yet unequal relationships should not automatically be interpreted as proximity bias: managers may differentiate because employees contribute differently, possess different expertise, or hold different responsibilities. A theory of proximity advantage therefore requires evidence that work-location-linked access alters relational processes after accounting for legitimate performance and role differences.

The article consequently proposes a staged distinction: proximity may create opportunities for contact; contact may create informal access; informal access may support relationship development; and some relationships may become sponsorship or other consequential advocacy. Each arrow is conditional, and the complete chain is proposed rather than established. The organizational issue is not simply whether hybrid employees interact with managers, but whether interaction opportunities are uneven, whether the resulting differences are performance-relevant or merely visibility-enhancing, and whether those differences enter decisions about development, exposure, and advancement.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for proximity advantage and career opportunity in hybrid organizations.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Proximity Advantage and Career Opportunity in Hybrid Organizations.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Hybrid/virtual work configuration	Distribution of work across location, time, technology, and coordination arrangements	Prevents location-only explanations	Broader than remote-day count	Context shaping exposure and interaction	Configurations vary substantially	No configuration has an assumed career effect
Relative physical proximity	Comparative opportunity for co-presence with	Identifies potential	Not equivalent to performance	Proposed antecedent of some	Direction and magnitude unvalidated	Proximity alone is not advantage

	managers or influential actors	exposure asymmetry	or relationship quality	visibility/access differences		
Behavioral visibility	Degree to which actions can be observed	Separates being seen from contributing	Different from verified output	Possible input to managerial inference	Diagnostic accuracy varies	Observability does not establish performance
Communication visibility	Observability of communication and relational activity	Captures digital visibility	Not identical to physical face time	Possible digital substitute or amplifier	Substitution remains conditional	Digital presence need not equal substantive access
Work-devotion attribution	Interpretation of work arrangements as signals of commitment	Explains evaluative meaning	Judgment, not objective contribution	Possible inference pathway	Attribution may be accurate or biased	Stigma perceptions do not prove realized discrimination
Informal managerial access	Proposed low-friction opportunity for unscheduled or lightly structured interaction	Connects exposure to relational opportunity	Distinct from LMX and sponsorship	Proposed bridge construct	Direct hybrid mediation is untested	Access does not guarantee influence
Leader-member exchange	Quality and mutual perception of the leader-employee relationship	Identifies consequential relational differences	More durable than contact	Potential relational mechanism	Proximity antecedent unestablished	Unequal LMX is not automatically illegitimate
Sponsorship	Active advocacy by an influential actor for advancement	Identifies consequential influence	Stronger than mentoring or visibility	Potential allocation pathway	Hybrid antecedents require testing	Advocacy does not ensure promotion
Career-opportunity allocation	Proposed distribution of developmental assignments, exposure, sponsorship, and advancement consideration	Expands outcome beyond promotion	Opportunity event, not realized career success	Proposed focal outcome domain	Measurement requires event-level data	Opportunity receipt is not equivalent to final advancement
Proximity advantage	Proposed condition in which relative co-presence yields career-relevant benefit through observability, access, or allocation	Integrates fragmented mechanisms	Not simple office attendance	Central proposed theory construct	Complete causal chain unvalidated	Should weaken where performance and access are standardized

Career-opportunity allocation

Career advantage should be studied at the level where opportunities are actually distributed. Promotion is only one endpoint. Before promotion, employees may receive developmental assignments, exposure to senior decision makers, stretch responsibilities, sponsorship, client access, or consideration for advancement. This article therefore proposes career-opportunity allocation as the organizational distribution of discretionary opportunities that can shape later career trajectories. The construct is intentionally event-focused: an opportunity can be allocated without producing eventual advancement, and promotion can occur through pathways that do not involve proximity.

Direct post-pandemic evidence demonstrates why the theory must remain conditional. In a discrete-choice experiment involving managers, working-from-home arrangements affected career-related evaluations partly through perceptions of employee performance and commitment [18]. Such evidence is important because it isolates an evaluative mechanism, but managerial choices in experimental scenarios are not equivalent to realized organizational promotion decisions. By contrast, a randomized hybrid-working trial found that a structured two-day-per-week home-working arrangement did not damage employee performance or promotion outcomes [19]. Available post-pandemic evidence is therefore inconsistent with a universal career penalty: some managerial evaluations disadvantage working-from-home profiles through perceived performance or commitment, whereas a structured randomized hybrid arrangement produced no promotion disadvantage [18, 19].

Career allocation must also be separated from broader relational resources. Longitudinal research on organizational embeddedness indicates that career success can operate through distinguishable resource pathways, including human capital, and does not justify assuming that sponsorship networks automatically mediate every career benefit [20]. This matters for proximity theory because employees who are more embedded, skilled, trusted, or strategically positioned may both gain greater manager access and receive better opportunities. A valid test must therefore distinguish proximity-generated access from pre-existing resource advantages.

The proposed outcome is consequently not “career success caused by office presence.” It is a narrower process: whether otherwise comparable employees experience systematic differences in access to discretionary opportunity events because relative co-presence affects observability, interpretation, or relational access. This definition also accommodates opportunity denial, delayed consideration, and unequal exposure without treating every missed opportunity as evidence of bias. This focus

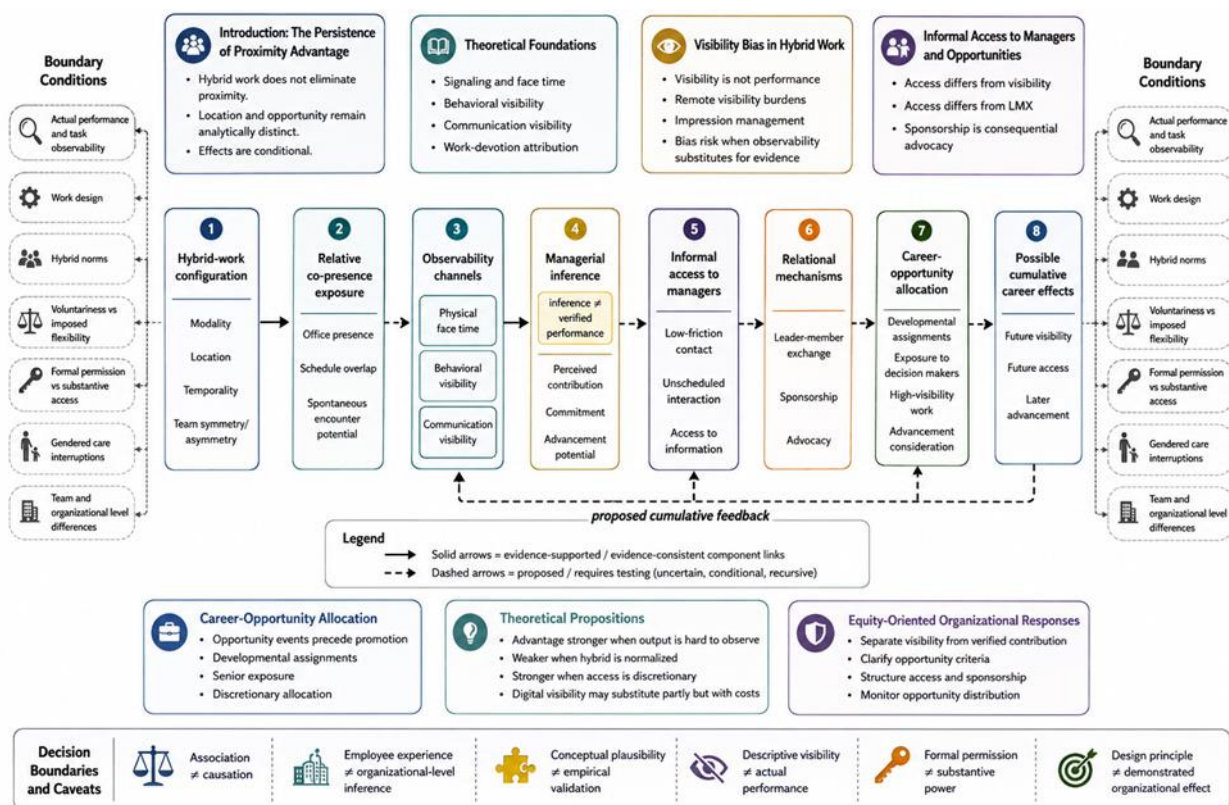
makes temporal ordering explicit. A developmental assignment may precede stronger performance evidence, wider networks, and later promotion, so analyses beginning only with realized advancement may miss the earlier allocation event through which advantage emerged. The theory predicts no proximity advantage when opportunity allocation is based on transparent performance evidence, when developmental access is structured, or when physical and remote employees have substantively equivalent channels to influential actors.

Proposed theory of proximity advantage

Hybrid work requires a configuration-sensitive theory. Hybrid arrangements can differ in modality, location, temporality, and the degree to which team members switch symmetrically or asymmetrically across work settings [21]. Geographic flexibility can also coexist with maintained or improved objective output, demonstrating that office proximity is not a valid general proxy for productivity [22]. Evidence from work-from-home settings likewise indicates that observable output can respond differently across tasks and contexts [23]. Within-person diary evidence further suggests that daily home and office work can activate competing processes, including concentration and isolation, rather than one universally superior performance pathway [24]. These findings establish the need to separate work location from contribution.

The proposed Theory of Proximity Advantage integrates these boundaries through five linked stages. Hybrid-work configuration shapes relative co-presence exposure; exposure may create asymmetries in physical or digital observability; observability may enter managerial inferences about contribution, commitment, or potential; such inferences may interact with informal relational access; and those processes may become consequential when managers allocate discretionary career opportunities. The complete chain is an original proposed synthesis. No selected evidence demonstrates it as a validated mediation model, and any link may be absent, reversed, or overwhelmed by performance, task, team, or organizational conditions.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for theory of proximity advantage, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.



Original proposed synthesis. Not a validated causal model; not a universal organizational prescription.

Figure 1. Theory of Proximity Advantage

The figure is an original conceptual synthesis developed for “Proximity Advantage and Career Opportunity in Hybrid Organizations.” Arrows and grouping indicate evidence-supported or proposed relationships rather than measured effect sizes. The figure does not represent a validated causal model, universal organizational prescription, regulatory determination, or deployment-ready system.

The model also proposes a cumulative possibility rather than a necessary cycle. Earlier opportunities may generate later visibility, stronger relationships, or evidence of readiness, which could increase subsequent opportunity access. That feedback

is theoretically important because small allocation differences could become self-reinforcing, but it remains unvalidated. Conversely, reliable output information, standardized access, or normalized hybrid participation may interrupt the pathway before cumulative advantage develops.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in proximity advantage and career opportunity in hybrid organizations.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Proximity Advantage and Career Opportunity in Hybrid Organizations.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Relative co-presence → observability → inference	Hybrid configuration	Physical or behavioral visibility	Telework norms; performance information	Proposed difference in evaluative attention	True performance differences	Compare equally performing employees with different exposure
Digital visibility → observability	Mediated communication	Communication visibility	Technology and communication norms	Proposed attenuation or amplification of physical visibility	Digital activity reflects actual collaboration	Measure physical and digital visibility separately
Visibility → additional visibility work	Need to remain observable	Technology-assisted supplemental work	Workload and norms	Possible burden rather than career benefit	High workload causes both	Establish longitudinal temporal ordering
Relational access → career opportunity	Informal interaction	LMX or sponsorship	Relationship quality; role requirements	Proposed access to discretionary opportunities	High performers attract stronger relationships	Control prior performance and relationship quality
WFH → career evaluation	Work arrangement	Perceived performance or commitment	Work configuration and evaluator context	Conditional career judgment	Actual productivity differences	Link evaluations to realized allocation events
Structured hybrid → no career penalty	Hybrid schedule	Not assumed	Organizational design	Null or attenuated proximity advantage	Firm-specific context	Replicate across occupations and organizations
Embeddedness/resources → career success	Organizational ties	Human-capital or resource pathways	Employee and organizational context	Career advantage independent of proximity	Selection into valuable networks	Model pre-existing resources
Hybrid asymmetry → unequal exposure/access	Configuration differences	Proposed observability and contact asymmetry	Team symmetry; objective output evidence	Proposed opportunity difference	Task allocation or employee preference	Multilevel longitudinal or quasi-experimental test
Prior opportunity → future visibility/access	Earlier allocation	Proposed cumulative feedback	Standardization and transparency	Proposed compounding advantage	Merit-based cumulative development	Event-history tests with prior-performance controls

Theoretical propositions

The theory should generate claims that can fail. First, remote-work intensity should not be treated as a direct measure of disadvantage. Meta-analytic evidence indicates simultaneous autonomy benefits and isolation costs associated with remote-work intensity [25]. Accordingly, proximity advantage should depend on what additional co-presence changes—observability, access, or evaluative information—rather than on the number of remote days alone.

Second, relational inequality is not equivalent to illegitimate favoritism. Leader–member exchange differentiation can have different consequences depending on whether differentiation is grounded in performance or personal liking and on the interdependence of rewards [26]. The theory therefore requires comparison against legitimate performance-based differentiation. Third, telework experiences can be patterned by caregiving and gendered interruption processes [27]. Such differences must be modeled as contextual constraints rather than attributed mechanically to proximity.

Proposition 1: Relative co-presence is proposed to increase career-opportunity advantage when employee contribution is difficult to evaluate through reliable output evidence and managers therefore rely more heavily on observable behavioral cues.

Proposition 2: The proposed relationship between proximity and career-opportunity allocation should strengthen when managers interpret visibility as evidence of commitment, contribution, or advancement potential, and weaken when those judgments are anchored in verified performance information.

Proposition 3: Digital communication visibility is proposed to substitute partially for physical proximity where consequential work and relationships are visible online; however, this substitution should weaken when digital visibility requires disproportionate supplemental work or impression-management effort.

Proposition 4: Proximity advantage is proposed to weaken where hybrid work is prevalent, legitimate, and collectively normalized, because attendance should carry less distinctive signaling value.

Proposition 5: Proximity advantage is proposed to strengthen where developmental assignments, sponsorship, and advancement exposure are distributed informally through managerial discretion rather than through transparent, standardized opportunity procedures.

Proposition 6: Any initial proximity advantage is proposed to become cumulative only when earlier opportunities increase subsequent visibility, relational access, or evidence of readiness; standardized access and performance-based allocation should interrupt this feedback.

These propositions cross levels of analysis and therefore require careful tests. Employee visibility is an individual exposure; manager inference and LMX are dyadic; opportunity procedures may be team or organizational properties. Temporal separation is also essential because present access may reflect prior performance or prior sponsorship rather than current proximity. Evidence at one level cannot validate the whole pathway. The propositions are deductive extensions of the synthesis and remain subject to refinement, boundary revision, or rejection.

Equity-oriented organizational responses

An equity-oriented response should target allocation conditions rather than assume that either office attendance or remote work is inherently equitable. Social context matters: the consequences and meaning of working from home can differ according to whether the arrangement is voluntary and how many coworkers also work remotely [28]. Organizations should therefore assess hybrid practices as collective configurations, not only individual choices.

The meaning of telework is also context dependent. Qualitative evidence indicates that employees interpret telework through broader organizational and macroeconomic signals, so attendance cannot be assumed to communicate the same commitment meaning across settings [29]. Formal policy is likewise distinct from enacted practice. Evidence comparing formal and informal flexible arrangements shows that different routes to flexibility can carry different benefits and penalties [30]. Consequently, equal written eligibility does not establish equal substantive access or equal career consequences.

The theory suggests several proposed design principles. Organizations may separate verified contribution from behavioral presence when calibrating performance and potential judgments; document criteria for developmental assignments; rotate or structure access to managers and sponsors; and examine opportunity events rather than relying only on annual promotion statistics. Hybrid expectations should be explicit enough that employees do not have to infer whether office presence operates as an unofficial advancement signal. Digital participation should not become a compensatory requirement for continuous availability.

A useful organizational test is therefore procedural rather than symbolic: whether employees working under different legitimate arrangements can identify the same opportunity criteria, reach influential decision makers through credible channels, and contest decisions through comparable processes. Such practices may reduce ambiguity, but the theory does not assume that formalization is always beneficial; excessive standardization can also suppress managerial discretion needed to recognize unusual expertise, emerging potential, or context-specific contribution.

These responses are normative extensions of the proposed theory, not validated interventions. Their appropriateness should depend on task interdependence, occupational requirements, workforce preferences, managerial span, technological capacity, and existing performance systems. Organizations should also avoid treating office-day parity as the primary equity metric: equivalent attendance can coexist with unequal access, while different attendance patterns may coexist with fair opportunity allocation. Evaluation should instead examine who receives stretch work, sponsor advocacy, senior exposure, and advancement consideration, and whether remaining differences are explainable by relevant contribution or role requirements. Such monitoring should itself be proportionate and privacy-conscious rather than converted into intrusive employee surveillance. Equity therefore means comparable access to consequential opportunities under relevant performance conditions, not identical interaction patterns or guaranteed career outcomes.

Conclusion

The persistence of proximity in hybrid organizations is best understood neither as proof that offices are necessary for advancement nor as an obsolete residue that digital work automatically removes. This Original Conceptual Theory Article proposes that proximity can acquire career value when relative co-presence changes observability or informal relational access

and when those differences enter discretionary career-opportunity allocation. The theory therefore locates the potential advantage in organizational interpretation and allocation processes rather than in physical presence itself.

Its central contribution is a set of distinctions: proximity is not visibility; visibility is not verified performance; access is not relationship quality; relationship quality is not sponsorship; and opportunity receipt is not realized career success. These boundaries also delimit the theory. Hybrid configurations differ, digital visibility can substitute for or complicate physical visibility, legitimate performance differentiation can generate unequal relationships, and structured hybrid arrangements can occur without promotion penalties.

The proposed theory consequently remains an explanatory architecture requiring empirical challenge. Its value depends on whether future research can identify when proximity-related exposure affects managerial inference, relational access, and actual opportunity events after accounting for performance, selection, task design, norms, and contextual inequality. A credible theory must permit null, reversed, and context-specific findings rather than treating every career difference as confirming evidence. Where those mechanisms are absent, proximity advantage should also be absent.

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