

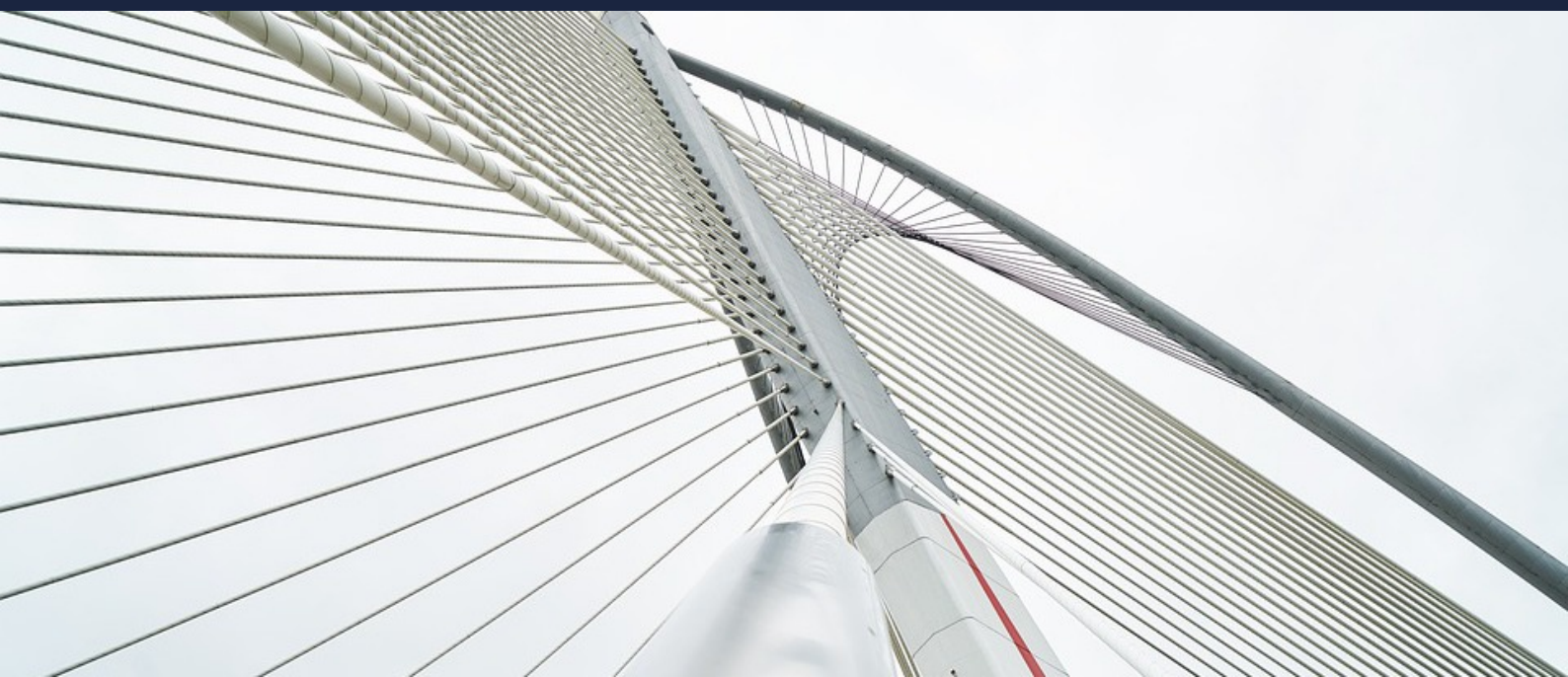
BEYOND THE DESK ROTA

Hybrid Work as Operating Model Transformation — Why the Delivery Side Sees What Leadership Misses

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Gap Between Office Policy and Operational Reality

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“The organisations treating hybrid work as a facilities question are making the same mistake they made with digital transformation ten years ago — confusing the visible change with the structural one.”

1. The Wrong Question

Eighteen months after the pandemic forced the largest unplanned experiment in remote working that the corporate world has ever conducted, the conversation about what comes next has settled into a remarkably narrow groove. How many days in the office? Two? Three? Which days should be mandated? Should teams decide or should policy be uniform? The debate is vigorous, the opinions strongly held, and the entire discussion is asking the wrong question.

From the delivery side — from the perspective of someone who manages complex programmes across distributed teams — the question of office attendance is almost trivially unimportant compared to the question it obscures: how do we redesign the operating model for a workforce that is fundamentally, permanently hybrid?

This is not a workforce preference issue. It is an operating model transformation. And the gap between how leadership is framing it and what practitioners on the delivery side are actually grappling with is wide enough to be genuinely dangerous.

2. What the Delivery Side Sees

Programme and delivery managers have spent the past year and a half rebuilding how work actually happens. Not in the abstract, strategic sense that leadership teams discuss at offsite retreats, but in the concrete, operational sense: how decisions get made when half the team is remote. How governance works when the informal corridor conversation — the mechanism by which most organisations actually resolve ambiguity — is no longer available five days a week. How you run a steering committee when the chair is at home, two members are in the office, and the technology makes it impossible for anyone to hear the person dialling in from a meeting room with poor acoustics.

The practitioners who manage delivery have learned several things from this experience that the leadership conversation has not yet absorbed.

First, the informal information economy of the office was far more load-bearing than anyone realised. Organisations ran on overheard conversations, chance encounters at the coffee machine, the five minutes before a meeting starts when the real agenda gets surfaced. These were not social niceties. They were governance mechanisms — informal, undocumented, but deeply effective at surfacing problems early, building alignment across silos, and resolving conflicts before they escalated. Hybrid work has not eliminated these mechanisms; it has made them intermittent and unevenly distributed. The people who happen to be in the office on the same day share information that remote colleagues miss, creating an asymmetry that no amount of Slack channels or Teams messages can fully compensate for.

Second, decision-making cadence has changed in ways that hybrid attendance policies do not address. When teams were fully co-located, decisions could be made in real time — a quick conversation, an immediate escalation, a same-day resolution. When teams were fully remote, they adapted to asynchronous decision-making — documented proposals, written responses, structured decision logs. Hybrid work occupies an uncomfortable middle ground where neither model works reliably. On office days, teams revert to real-time decision-making, leaving remote colleagues out of the loop. On remote days, the asynchronous discipline that fully remote teams developed erodes because everyone knows they will be together tomorrow. The result is that decisions are made inconsistently, documented patchily, and communicated unreliably.

The organisations treating hybrid work as a facilities question are making the same mistake they made with digital transformation ten years ago — confusing the visible change with the structural one.

Third, team cohesion and trust — the invisible infrastructure of effective delivery — require deliberate investment in a way they never did before. In a co-located world, trust built naturally through repeated interaction, shared experience, and the accumulated social capital of working alongside someone day after day. Hybrid work disrupts this accumulation. New team members who have never met their colleagues in person, experienced practitioners who communicate almost entirely through screens, leaders who cannot read the room because the room is a grid of video thumbnails — these are not minor inconveniences. They are structural changes to the conditions under which teams develop the trust that effective delivery requires.

3. The Leadership Blind Spot

The puzzle is not that these challenges exist — anyone running a delivery team has been grappling with them since early 2020. The puzzle is that the leadership conversation has largely failed to engage with them.

In my experience, the explanation is not that leaders are unaware. Many of them have experienced these challenges personally. The explanation is that the hybrid work

question has been captured by the wrong functions. It has become an HR and facilities conversation — a matter of policy, real estate, and employee satisfaction surveys — rather than an operations and delivery conversation. The people designing hybrid work policies are typically not the people who manage complex delivery. They are optimising for employee experience and workplace utilisation, which are legitimate concerns but are not the concerns that determine whether an organisation can actually execute its strategy in a hybrid model.

The result is policies that are coherent from a people-management perspective and incoherent from a delivery perspective. A mandate that everyone is in the office on Tuesday and Wednesday may look tidy on a policy document, but if the programme's critical stakeholders are in different offices, or the supplier team is fully remote, or the governance forums meet on Thursdays, the policy solves nothing that the delivery team actually needs solved.

4. What Is Actually Required

If hybrid work is an operating model transformation rather than a workplace policy, then what does it demand?

It demands, first, that organisations treat the redesign of collaboration, governance, and decision-making as an explicit programme of work, not as an organic adaptation that will happen naturally. The past eighteen months have shown conclusively that teams left to figure out hybrid working on their own produce wildly inconsistent results. Some teams adapt brilliantly; others deteriorate. The difference is rarely about the individuals involved — it is about whether anyone has deliberately designed how the team will work, or whether the team has simply defaulted to a degraded version of its pre-pandemic operating model.

It demands, second, that governance be redesigned for hybrid rather than bolted on. The steering committee format that worked when everyone was in the same room does not work when participants are split across locations and screens. The information flows that relied on physical proximity must be replaced with designed alternatives — not more emails and more meetings, but different structures that achieve the same outcomes through different means. This is design work, and it requires the same rigour that organisations would apply to any other operating model change.

It demands, third, that leadership teams model the behaviours they expect. If the organisation says it is hybrid but every important decision is made in a room that remote participants cannot fully access, the message is clear regardless of what the policy says. Leaders who default to corridor conversations for critical decisions, who treat video calls as a lesser form of meeting, or who unconsciously favour the people they see in person are undermining the operating model they claim to support.

5. The Opportunity Being Missed

There is a version of this transition that goes well. Hybrid work, done deliberately, could produce organisations that are more disciplined in their decision-making (because decisions must be documented rather than assumed), more inclusive in their governance (because remote participation forces explicit rather than implicit inclusion), and more resilient in their delivery (because teams that can operate effectively across locations are teams that can operate effectively through disruption).

But this version requires treating hybrid work as what it is: a fundamental change to how the organisation operates, not a question of how many days people sit at a desk. The delivery side sees this clearly, because the delivery side lives with the operational consequences of getting it wrong. The leadership conversation will catch up eventually. The question is how much capability the organisation loses in the interim, while its leaders are still debating desk rota policies and its delivery teams are quietly rebuilding the operating model from the ground up.