



Digital Leadership in Hybrid Work Settings: Belonging, Place Identity and Team Cohesion

Tanwangini Sahani

Email: tanwangini.sahani@gmail.com

Abstract:

Hybrid work has moved from an emergency response to a durable organizing model, but the leadership literature has lagged behind the practice shift. This secondary research paper synthesizes recent peer-reviewed literature on digital leadership in hybrid work settings with a focus on three objectives: (1) tracing how digital leadership has evolved post-pandemic, (2) evaluating its influence on employees' sense of belonging, and (3) identifying gaps related to social isolation, inclusion, and team cohesion. Using a targeted narrative review of recent reviews and empirical studies, the paper finds that digital leadership has broadened from technology-mediated communication to a more comprehensive capability set combining strategy, delivery, empowerment, trust, and interpersonal coordination. The hybrid work concept is itself becoming more precise, now commonly framed through modality, location, and temporality. Across the literature, belonging is shaped by both remote and onsite experiences: remote work can enhance autonomy and control, while onsite work strengthens human connection and information exchange. At the same time, the evidence base remains thin on how leaders prevent social isolation, minimize inclusion gaps between remote and co-located workers, and sustain team cohesion across mixed-mode teams. The paper concludes that future research should be more longitudinal, cross-cultural, and multi-level, while also examining technology use as a relational as well as operational leadership issue.

Keywords: *Digital Leadership, Hybrid Work, Belonging, Place Identity, Inclusion, Team Cohesion, Secondary Research.*

1. Introduction

Hybrid work is no longer best understood as a temporary response to the pandemic; it is increasingly treated as a distinct, multi-dimensional work arrangement that blends digital and face-to-face work, office and non-office locations, and synchronous and asynchronous time patterns. Recent conceptual work shows that the term is still being refined, but the field now has a clearer framework for analysis than it did during the immediate pandemic period (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025).

This conceptual clarification matters because leadership in hybrid settings is not equivalent to leadership in fully co-located or fully remote settings. A recent systematic review of leadership in hybrid workplaces found that the literature is still fragmented across disciplines, that a clear definition of hybrid leadership is still emerging, and that researchers consistently point to the need to shift from control toward trust and equitable inclusion (Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024).

At the same time, newer digital leadership research suggests that the construct has evolved beyond a narrow focus on communication technologies. A multi-method review and Delphi study argued that digital leadership has become a broader way of thinking and behaving in a complex digital environment, combining strategic and delivery-oriented capabilities with interpersonal attributes such as empowerment and collaboration (Tigre et al., 2025). This expansion is especially relevant in hybrid work, where leaders must coordinate across physical and digital boundaries while sustaining relationships, identity, and belonging.

The present paper focuses on three connected objectives. First, it synthesizes recent literature to show how digital leadership has evolved post-pandemic. Second, it evaluates how digital leadership influences employees' sense of belonging in hybrid workplaces. Third, it identifies gaps in current research on social isolation, inclusion, and team cohesion. These objectives are timely because hybrid work is now a long-term organizational arrangement, but the social consequences of this arrangement remain less understood than its productivity effects.

2. Methodology

This study uses a targeted narrative secondary review rather than a fully exhaustive systematic review. The synthesis draws primarily on recent peer-reviewed literature published in 2024-2025, especially reviews and empirical studies in journals such as *Human Resource Management Review*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *Management Review Quarterly*, *Administrative Sciences*, *Cogent Psychology*, and *International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning*. The analysis is organized around the three stated objectives and privileges sources that explicitly address digital leadership, hybrid work, belonging, place identity, inclusion, and team cohesion.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Digital leadership after the pandemic

Post-pandemic literature shows a clear conceptual shift. Earlier work tended to use e-leadership as a technology-centered label, but recent research treats digital leadership as a broader construct that combines digital fluency with leadership behaviors needed in dynamic environments (Tigre et al., 2025). The construct now commonly includes strategy, execution, interpersonal orientation, empowerment, innovation, collaboration across boundaries, and adaptability (López-Figueroa et al., 2025; Tigre et al., 2025).

This shift is visible in hybrid work research as well. Ebojoh and Högberg (2024) concluded that hybrid workplace leadership is still underdefined, but their review shows that leadership in this context must deal with abrupt changes in coordination, trust, and inclusion. In practical terms, digital leadership is no longer just about using platforms; it is about organizing social and operational life across multiple spaces at once.

The post-pandemic period therefore marks a move from tool use to relational orchestration. Leaders are expected to maintain performance while also preserving the human side of work, especially where employees split time between office and remote locations. The literature suggests that this requires not only technical competence but also emotional intelligence, communicative clarity, and the ability to create shared meaning.

3.2 Hybrid work, belonging, and place identity

Hybrid work research has become more conceptually precise. Lauring and Jonasson (2025) argued that hybrid work can be understood through three dimensions: modality, location, and temporality. This matters for leadership because employees may switch between digital and physical work modes, office and non-office locations, and synchronous and asynchronous interaction patterns. A leader who manages only one dimension, such as communication frequency, will likely miss the broader experience of hybrid work.

Belonging is central to this broader experience. In a qualitative study of hybrid work settings, Urrila et al. (2025) found that remote work was associated with control over work and personal time, remote working skills, and virtual communication practices, while onsite work was associated with human connection, information exchange, and the perceived relevance of being in the office. Their findings show that belonging is not produced by location alone; it emerges from how work is organized across locations.

The place-identity literature extends this argument. Sun et al. (2025) systematically reviewed research on sense of place in hybrid work and identified seven critical factors shaping identity, four identity states (home-oriented, work-oriented, integrated, and virtual), and dual effects on employee well-being. This suggests that hybrid work does not merely change where work happens. It also reshapes how employees mentally locate themselves in relation to work, home, and the organization. Leaders who ignore this shift may inadvertently weaken attachment and meaning.

3.3 Team cohesion, inclusion, and social connection

Team cohesion in hybrid settings depends on how well leaders integrate remote and onsite members into a shared social system. Eng et al. (2024) found that hybrid workers valued a combination of onsite and remote work, especially when organizations supported socialization, collaboration, suitable ICT solutions, digital maturity, structured communication, flexibility, and empowerment. These findings point to the practical conditions under which cohesion can be sustained.

Identity leadership also appears important. Shi et al. (2024) showed that supervisors who actively foster shared identity can help connect remote work teams and strengthen feelings of connectedness. This is a useful bridge between leadership theory and hybrid work practice because it suggests that team cohesion is not a passive consequence of working together; it is something leaders actively build through identity-relevant behaviors.

Even so, the literature still leaves important gaps. Urrila et al. (2025) explicitly noted that the social and relational implications of hybrid work remain limited in the research base, and their findings point to early signs of work loneliness and the need to understand what constitutes satisfactory work relationships. Taken together, recent studies imply that hybrid work can support flexibility and effectiveness, but only when leadership practices counteract isolation and avoid creating uneven access to information, attention, and belonging.

4. Findings and Analysis by Objective

4.1 Objective 1: Evolution of digital leadership in hybrid work environments

The extant literature demonstrates that digital leadership has undergone a significant conceptual and functional transformation, particularly in the post-pandemic context. Initially, digital leadership was narrowly framed as the ability to leverage digital tools for coordination, communication, and performance monitoring in virtual environments. However, recent scholarship repositions digital leadership as a multidimensional capability that integrates technological proficiency with relational, strategic, and socio-emotional competencies.

Contemporary reviews, such as Tigre et al. (2025), conceptualize digital leadership as a dynamic interplay between task-oriented (strategic execution, digital transformation, decision-making) and people-oriented dimensions (empowerment, trust-building, collaboration, and adaptability). This dual orientation reflects a broader shift in leadership theory, where effectiveness is no longer determined solely by operational efficiency but also by the leader's ability to navigate the psychological and social complexities of digitally mediated work environments.

This evolution becomes particularly salient in the context of hybrid work arrangements. Unlike fully co-located or fully remote settings, hybrid work introduces structural asymmetries—such as unequal access to information, visibility disparities, and differences in communication richness—that fundamentally reshape leadership demands. In such environments, leaders are required to move beyond traditional supervision and instead engage in intentional work design and social system orchestration.

From a work design perspective, digital leaders must ensure that workflows are structured to support both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration without generating fragmentation or coordination overload. This includes making strategic decisions about which tasks require real-time interaction and which can be effectively managed through asynchronous channels. At the same time, leaders must manage the cognitive load associated with digital tool proliferation, ensuring that technology enhances rather than hinders productivity and well-being.

Equally important is the dimension of social design, which has gained prominence in post-pandemic leadership discourse. Hybrid work weakens informal interactions and spontaneous encounters that traditionally foster trust, cohesion, and shared identity. As a result, digital leaders are increasingly expected to deliberately cultivate social connection, psychological safety, and team cohesion through structured interactions, inclusive communication practices, and symbolic actions that reinforce organizational culture.

This shift reflects a broader transition from a paradigm of “managing presence” to “managing participation.” In traditional office settings, leadership effectiveness was often implicitly linked to physical visibility and time spent at work. In contrast, hybrid environments require leaders to focus on engagement quality, contribution, and inclusion, irrespective of employees’ physical location. This necessitates a redefinition of performance management, communication norms, and leadership visibility itself.

Despite these advancements, the literature reveals several critical limitations. As highlighted by López-Figueroa et al. (2025), research on digital leadership remains fragmented and uneven across industries, organizational contexts, and geographic regions. Much of the existing evidence is concentrated in knowledge-intensive sectors and Western contexts, limiting the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, there is a lack of robust empirical studies examining the causal mechanisms through which digital leadership influences organizational and employee outcomes in hybrid settings.

A particularly important gap lies in the tendency of prior research to conceptualize digital leadership primarily as a technology-enabled practice, rather than as a relational and socially embedded process. In hybrid work environments, leadership cannot be reduced to the effective use of digital tools; rather, it must be understood as an ongoing process of meaning-making, identity construction, and relationship management across physical and virtual spaces. This calls for a more integrative perspective that bridges technological, behavioral, and psychological dimensions of leadership.

In summary, the evolution of digital leadership reflects a paradigm shift toward a more holistic, adaptive, and human-centered approach. However, the field remains theoretically underdeveloped and empirically incomplete, particularly in capturing the social dynamics and lived experiences of hybrid work. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing both scholarly understanding and practical effectiveness in contemporary leadership contexts.

4.2 Objective 2: Influence of digital leadership on employees’ sense of belonging

The literature consistently highlights that digital leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping employees’ sense of belonging in hybrid work environments, although the mechanisms through which this occurs are complex and still evolving. Belonging, broadly understood as the perception of being accepted, valued, and included within a social system, is particularly vulnerable in hybrid settings due to reduced physical proximity, fragmented interactions, and uneven participation across work modes.

Recent studies suggest that digital leadership influences belonging primarily through three interrelated pathways: communication quality, relational consistency, and equitable access to connection opportunities. Urrila et al. (2025) emphasize that belonging in hybrid work is not solely determined by remote or in-office experiences in isolation, but rather by how effectively leaders integrate these parallel work realities into a coherent social experience. This highlights the importance of leadership in bridging structural divides inherent in hybrid models.

High-quality communication emerges as a central mechanism in this process. In digitally mediated environments, communication is not merely a tool for information exchange but a primary vehicle for social connection and meaning-making. Leaders who establish clear, transparent, and inclusive communication practices help reduce ambiguity, enhance psychological safety, and reinforce employees' sense of being "in the loop." Importantly, communication must be both intentional and multimodal, balancing synchronous interactions (e.g., meetings, video calls) with asynchronous channels (e.g., collaborative platforms) to accommodate diverse work patterns without excluding any group.

Relational consistency is equally critical. In hybrid contexts, employees often experience variability in leader accessibility and interaction frequency, which can lead to perceptions of neglect or favoritism. Digital leadership that emphasizes regular check-ins, responsiveness, and continuity in interactions helps maintain relational stability and trust. This is particularly important for remote employees, who may otherwise experience reduced visibility and fewer opportunities for spontaneous engagement.

A third key mechanism is the distribution of opportunities for social and professional connection. Hybrid work environments often create asymmetries in access to informal interactions, mentorship, and networking opportunities, with in-office employees benefiting disproportionately from spontaneous encounters. Effective digital leaders actively mitigate these disparities by designing inclusive interaction structures, such as hybrid meeting norms, virtual collaboration spaces, and deliberate inclusion in decision-making processes.

From a practical standpoint, the literature suggests several leadership practices that can enhance belonging. These include establishing predictable communication rhythms, ensuring that remote employees are included in both formal and informal knowledge flows, and leveraging digital platforms to recognize contributions and reinforce shared goals. Such practices align with broader conceptualizations of digital leadership, which emphasize the importance of trust-building, motivation, teamwork, and the human-centric dimensions of digital transformation (López-Figueroa et al., 2025).

Beyond interactional dynamics, belonging in hybrid work is also deeply connected to issues of identity integration. Sun et al. (2025) argue that hybrid work arrangements generate multiple, context-dependent identity states, as employees navigate between home-based and office-based roles. These shifting contexts can create fragmentation in how individuals perceive their connection to the organization. In this regard, digital leadership plays a critical role in facilitating identity coherence, helping employees align their diverse work experiences into a unified sense of organizational membership.

This requires leaders to move beyond transactional engagement and actively engage in symbolic and cultural leadership practices, such as reinforcing organizational values, creating shared narratives, and fostering a sense of collective purpose that transcends physical location. By doing so, leaders help employees interpret their experiences within a broader organizational context, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging.

However, despite growing recognition of these dynamics, the literature remains limited in several respects. There is insufficient understanding of how different leadership styles interact with individual differences (e.g., personality, work preferences) to shape belonging outcomes. Additionally, most studies adopt cross-sectional designs, limiting insights into how belonging evolves over time in hybrid settings.

In summary, digital leadership significantly influences employees' sense of belonging by shaping communication patterns, relational dynamics, and identity processes within hybrid work environments. While existing research provides valuable insights, further work is needed to develop a more nuanced and longitudinal understanding of how belonging is constructed and sustained in digitally mediated organizational contexts.

4.3 Objective 3: Gaps in social isolation, inclusion, and team cohesion

Despite the rapid expansion of research on hybrid work and digital leadership, the literature reveals several critical gaps, particularly in relation to social isolation, inclusion, and team cohesion. While existing studies provide descriptive insights into employee experiences, they often fall short in explaining the underlying mechanisms through which digital leadership shapes these outcomes over time.

The first major gap concerns social isolation, which has emerged as a persistent risk in hybrid and remote work arrangements. Although studies such as Urrila et al. (2025) highlight the prevalence of early-stage loneliness in hybrid settings, and Eng et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of socialization and collaboration for employee engagement and well-being, there remains a limited understanding of how leadership interventions systematically mitigate these risks. Much of the current literature identifies isolation as an outcome but does not sufficiently unpack the processual role of leadership behaviors—such as communication structuring, relational signaling, and inclusion practices—in preventing or alleviating isolation.

In particular, there is a lack of clarity regarding the temporal dynamics of isolation. Hybrid work environments are not static; employees' experiences of connection and disconnection fluctuate over time depending on task demands, team interactions, and organizational practices. However, most existing studies adopt cross-sectional designs, capturing only a snapshot of employee experiences. This limits the ability to understand how isolation develops, persists, or is reduced through sustained leadership actions. Consequently, there is a need for longitudinal research that examines how digital leadership influences the trajectory of social connectedness over extended periods.

The second critical gap relates to inclusion and equity between remote and onsite employees. Hybrid work inherently creates structural asymmetries, including differences in visibility, access to informal information, and participation in decision-making processes. These asymmetries can lead to what is often described as proximity bias, where employees who are physically present in the workplace receive greater recognition, influence, and career opportunities.

Although recent reviews (Ebojoh&Högberg, 2024; Lauring & Jonasson, 2025) acknowledge the importance of equitable inclusion, the empirical evidence remains limited and fragmented. Specifically, there is insufficient research examining how digital leadership practices can actively counteract participation inequalities and ensure fairness across different work modalities. For example, while inclusive meeting practices and digital collaboration tools are frequently recommended, there is little systematic evidence on their effectiveness in reducing perceived inequities or improving inclusion outcomes.

Moreover, the concept of inclusion itself is often treated in a generalized and under-theorized manner within hybrid work research. There is a need to move beyond broad notions of inclusion toward more nuanced constructs, such as interactional inclusion (quality of participation), informational inclusion (access to knowledge), and identity-based inclusion (feeling valued and recognized). Understanding how digital leadership influences these distinct dimensions is essential for developing more precise and actionable insights.

The third significant gap pertains to team cohesion, which is particularly challenging to sustain in hybrid environments due to reduced face-to-face interaction and fragmented communication patterns. While Shi et

al. (2024) highlight the relevance of identity leadership in fostering a sense of connectedness, the literature remains limited in identifying which specific digital leadership behaviors are most effective in building and maintaining cohesion over time.

Existing studies often emphasize the importance of trust, shared identity, and communication, but they rarely establish clear causal linkages between leadership actions and cohesion outcomes. Additionally, the predominance of qualitative and cross-sectional research designs constrains the ability to generalize findings or determine the relative impact of different leadership strategies. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how cohesion can be sustained dynamically, particularly in teams that operate across shifting combinations of remote and in-person interactions.

A broader limitation underlying all three areas—social isolation, inclusion, and cohesion—is the lack of integrative, multi-level research frameworks. Most studies examine these outcomes in isolation, without adequately considering their interdependencies. For instance, social isolation can undermine inclusion, while weak inclusion can erode team cohesion. However, few studies attempt to model these relationships simultaneously or examine how digital leadership influences them as part of a complex, interconnected system.

Furthermore, the literature is heavily concentrated in Western, knowledge-intensive organizational contexts, raising concerns about cultural and contextual generalizability. Hybrid work practices, leadership norms, and employee expectations may vary significantly across regions and industries, yet these variations remain underexplored.

In summary, while the existing body of research provides valuable initial insights, it remains conceptually fragmented and methodologically limited. There is a pressing need for future studies that adopt longitudinal, multi-level, and cross-cultural approaches, and that explicitly connect digital leadership behaviors to outcomes such as social isolation, inclusion, team cohesion, and performance within a unified analytical framework. Addressing these gaps will be critical for advancing both theoretical development and practical application in the evolving landscape of hybrid work.

5. Summary of Recent Literature

Study	Type	Main contribution	Relevance to this paper
Tigre et al. (2025)	SLR + Delphi	Digital leadership now combines strategic, delivery, and interpersonal capabilities.	Supports Objective 1.
Lauring & Jonasson (2025)	Conceptual review	Hybrid work is defined through modality, location, and temporality.	Clarifies the setting.
Urrila et al. (2025)	Qualitative study	Belonging emerges differently from remote and onsite experiences.	Supports Objective 2.
Sun et al. (2025)	Systematic review	Hybrid work reshapes place identity and well-being.	Supports belonging and identity analysis.
Eng et al. (2024)	Qualitative study	Socialization, communication, and empowerment support effective hybrid work.	Addresses cohesion.

Shi et al. (2024)	Empirical study	Identity leadership helps connect remote teams.	Addresses inclusion and cohesion.
Ebojoh & Högberg (2024)	Systematic review	Hybrid workplace leadership remains underdefined and trust-based.	Frames the leadership gap.
López-Figueroa et al. (2025)	SLR	Digital leadership research is growing but still uneven and underdeveloped.	Supports evolution and gaps.

6. Discussion

This synthesis suggests that digital leadership in hybrid work settings is best understood as a bridge construct: it translates digital capability into social coordination. The post-pandemic literature no longer supports a narrow view of leadership as platform use or remote supervision alone. Instead, digital leadership now encompasses the ability to create trust, coordinate across space, and maintain identity across dispersed work arrangements (Tigre et al., 2025; Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024).

Belonging is the central outcome through which this leadership is likely to operate. Employees in hybrid work need both autonomy and connection, and the literature shows that these needs are tied to different aspects of remote and onsite work (Urrila et al., 2025). Effective digital leadership therefore has to be deliberate about timing, rituals, inclusion in conversations, and the social meaning of office presence.

The gap analysis indicates that the field is still stronger on describing hybrid work than on explaining how leadership should respond to it. Social isolation, inclusion, and team cohesion are all recognized issues, but the causal mechanisms, boundary conditions, and long-term effects remain underdeveloped. This is especially true for underrepresented groups, cross-cultural teams, and organizations with highly asymmetrical hybrid patterns. The next stage of research should move beyond whether hybrid work is beneficial and focus instead on when, for whom, and through which leadership behaviors it is beneficial.

7. Implications

For theory, the review suggests that digital leadership should be studied together with belonging, place identity, and team cohesion rather than as a separate managerial construct. This would better reflect the relational reality of hybrid work.

For practice, leaders should design regular communication rhythms, intentional onsite moments, and equitable participation mechanisms so that remote and onsite employees have similar access to information, influence, and recognition.

For research, the strongest opportunities lie in longitudinal designs, multi-level studies, and comparative cross-cultural samples that can explain how digital leadership affects social connection over time.

8. Conclusion

Recent literature shows that digital leadership has matured from a technology-centered idea into a broader capability for leading distributed work. In hybrid settings, its influence is most visible in the social domain: how people experience belonging, how they attach meaning to places of work, and whether they feel included in mixed-mode teams. At the same time, the evidence base still lacks strong causal and longitudinal answers on social isolation, inclusion, and cohesion. That gap makes hybrid work a timely and important topic for secondary research, especially for scholars interested in the human side of digital transformation.

References

- Ebojoh, S., & Högberg, K. (2024). Exploring leadership in the hybrid workplace. *International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning*, 17(4), 16-41. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijac.v17i4.50857>
- Eng, I., Tjernberg, M., & Champoux-Larsson, M.-F. (2024). Hybrid workers describe aspects that promote effectiveness, work engagement, work-life balance, and health. *Cogent Psychology*, 11(1), 2362535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2024.2362535>
- Lauring, J., & Jonasson, C. (2025). What is hybrid work? Towards greater conceptual clarity of a common term and understanding its consequences. *Human Resource Management Review*, 35(1), 101044. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2024.101044>
- López-Figueroa, J. C., Ochoa-Jiménez, S., Palafox-Soto, M. O., & Sujey Hernandez Munoz, D. (2025). Digital leadership: A systematic literature review. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(4), 129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15040129>
- Shi, J., Feenstra, S., & van Vugt, M. (2024). Connecting work teams in a remote workplace: An identity leadership perspective. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 33(5), 643-657. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2024.2362460>
- Sun, M., Kraus, T., Pauli, R., & Garus, C. (2025). Changing sense of place in hybrid work environments: A systematic review of place identity and employee well-being. *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, 8, 100236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2025.100236>
- Tigre, F. B., Henriques, P. L., & Curado, C. (2025). The digital leadership emerging construct: A multi-method approach. *Management Review Quarterly*, 75, 789-836. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-023-00395-9>
- Urrila, L., Siiriäinen, A., Mäkelä, L., & Kangas, H. (2025). Sense of belonging in hybrid work settings. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 157, 104096. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2025.104096>

Citation: Sahani. T., (2026) “Digital Leadership in Hybrid Work Settings: Belonging, Place Identity and Team Cohesion”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-4, Issue-03, March-2026.