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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF BELONGING WITHIN WOMEN WORKING IN A HYBRID  
ENVIRONMENT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Global Leadership and Change

by

Jam Narte Harley

July, 2024

Farzin Madjidi, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

The dissertation, written by

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Dushawn, your untiring confidence in me and unwavering support have been my pillar of strength. In moments of doubt and anxiety, you stand by my side, matching my uncertainties with steadfast belief in my abilities. Your drive, dedication, and unwavering faith in me continually inspire me to reach higher and keep pushing forward. This dissertation is a testament to our partnership, and I am forever grateful for the love and support you provide.

To my daughter Luna, my source of light and the reason I work so hard to be the best version of myself. Thank you for being so patient with Nanay. Your innocence and limitless enthusiasm remind me of the value of curiosity and tenacity. May this work remind you of the countless opportunities life has in store for you.

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Lastly, to my fellow immigrant children, may this work symbolize our shared journey and encourage and empower others to pursue their dreams fearlessly. Together, we can break barriers and create a brighter future for ourselves and our generations.

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## ABSTRACT

This research discusses the opportunity presented by the post-pandemic return to work to support Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives by creating a new belonging framework for women working in a hybrid environment. The transition to remote and hybrid work arrangements amid the pandemic highlighted the importance of leaders tackling ongoing challenges in leadership and management, such as digital transformation and remote management, which led to rapid change, anxiety, and uncertainty. The lack of daily contact has significantly impacted workplace relationships and highlighted the importance of belongingness for employees' well-being and retention. Hybrid work arrangements are likely to become a permanent fixture. Nevertheless, employees' experiences have varied significantly, especially regarding their sense of belonging and work-life balance, especially for women and marginalized groups. Thus, organizations should consider adopting modified methods to foster belonging and purpose in hybrid work environments, including regular communication, clear expectations, flexibility, training and development, and recognition and celebration of achievements. By doing so, organizations may foster a feeling of belonging and support for employees, increasing employee involvement, efficiency, and overall achievement. The study also examined critical factors that fostered a culture of belonging among women in a hybrid work environment. Examining existing literature, 60 crucial items were identified and incorporated into a survey. Using a modified Delphi method, a panel of 20 experts used a Likert scale ranking the importance level for each item's input toward belongingness. Following three rounds of discussions, the expert panel agreed on 85% (51 out of 60) of the items with a MeSI score of 3.00%, an IQRSI score of 8.00%, and a MoSI score of 10.00%. This led to the study's stability.

Subsequently, intercoder reliability was employed to pinpoint themes and significant factors to develop Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework.

*Keywords:* remote work, hybrid work, work environment, sense of belonging, COVID-19

## Chapter 1: The Problem

### Introduction

People can rethink how they work if only once every generation. During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution shifted many Europeans and Americans from farms to industries (Lund, 2018). When the United States (U.S.) government began to pull back COVID-19 prohibitions, and as employers and employees began to solidify their plans to return to work, one thing became increasingly evident: future work-from-home (WFH) would become hybrid (Bloom, 2021a). As workers worldwide return to the traditional office environment, women's careers at home seem to stagnate (Bateman, 2021). Additionally, less than 10% of women preferred to stay in their present employment for another 5 years (Omoigui, 2022). The lockdown necessitated the evolution of hybrid corporate operations beyond the "onsite plus remote" equation it produced. Thus, pre-pandemic on-site procedures or lockdown-created remote practices must evolve to accommodate the needs of an inclusive hybrid work environment with women in mind (LeHong & Chhabra, 2021).

The feeling of belonging is essential to achieving diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022). This refers to feeling appreciated, respected, and included in the culture and social fabric of the organization. In hybrid working environments where employees either work from home for a few days a week or a set number of days per month and several days at the office, maintaining the feeling of belonging is especially important for women, who may feel isolated and isolated from the organization's culture and colleagues (Jaiswal & Arun, 2020). Studies have shown that strong feelings of belonging are related favorably to job satisfaction, job performance, and employee participation (Ampofo et al., 2023). For women, belonging is essential for their professional development and development.

Research shows that women who feel they belong are likelier to engage in proactive career behaviors, such as seeking mentoring relationships and career development opportunities (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Additionally, a sense of belonging can buffer the adverse effects of workplace discrimination and harassment on women's well-being and mental health. For instance, a study by Rosette et al. (2016) found that a strong sense of belonging reduced the adverse effects of discrimination on women's self-esteem and job satisfaction. Similarly, Huang and Lin (2019) found that a sense of belonging moderated the harmful effects of work incivility on women's emotional exhaustion.

A sense of belonging is crucial for women's professional development, well-being, and participation in the workplace (Deutsch et al., 2023). Organizations must take proactive steps in a hybrid working environment to maintain and promote the feeling of belonging, especially for their female employees, to establish a diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environment (Mooney & Becker, 2021). By creating a supportive workplace culture, providing opportunities for connection and collaboration, and addressing any problem of discrimination or harassment, organizations can contribute to cultivating a sense of belonging that benefits all employees, regardless of gender or origin. Ultimately, feeling connection and social cohesion is suitable for individuals and the organization, contributing to greater productivity, innovation, and retention of talents.

### **The Need to Belong**

The return to work is an opportunity to develop a new, more successful operating model for companies and individuals navigating a more uncertain world. There is, however, a significant caveat: companies must tackle the widening gap between their and their employees'



future outlooks (De Smet et al., 2021). In some respects, individuals are more connected than ever, with technology allowing people to communicate with friends, family, and colleagues regardless of location. The COVID-19 pandemic created a sudden switch to remote and hybrid work models, significantly impacting workplace culture and employee well-being, including the sense of belonging (Juchnowicz & Kinowska, 2021). Switching to remote work may lead to a lack of social interaction and disconnection from the organization's culture, reducing employees' sense of belonging (Belle et al., 2015). Recent studies have shown that the sudden shift to remote work has decreased employees' organizational identification and belonging (Uru et al., 2022).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that employees have a strong sense of belonging, optimistically impacting the organization. For example, Dorta-Afonso et al. (2021) found that belonging predicts higher levels of employee satisfaction and organizational commitment. In another study by Hansen et al. (2014), the authors found that the feeling of belonging is progressively related to organization identification and employee engagement. In addition, a strong sense of belonging has been shown to impact organizational performance positively. A study by Jing and Yan (2022) found that perceived organizational support, including the sense of belonging, predicts higher levels of performance at work and lower intentions of employee turnover. Likewise, a study by He et al. (2022) found that belonging was positively linked to the creativity and innovation of employees.

Most workers transitioning to a hybrid work model during lockdowns would like to continue working in a hybrid environment (K. Parker et al., 2022). In an era when a significant percentage of businesses are seeking to return to office fully, this is causing them to be confronted with many employee resignations, seeking more flexibility in their work setup (Chen, 2022). A poll by Gallup (2017) discovered that employees now required to return to the office

would prefer to find new employment that would allow them to continue working remotely (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022). Hence, individuals who have created a strong feeling of belonging in their remote work environment may be more motivated to pursue remote employment choices, even if it means leaving their present company, to keep this sense of belonging. The results of the Gallagher poll indicate that employers must consider the preferences of their employees when making decisions on remote employment. Some employees work in the office, while others work from home. To retain talent and maintain a diverse and inclusive workplace, businesses must devise means to satisfy these choices.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) stated that people universally desire to establish and maintain lasting, meaningful, and positive relationships with others. Many studies have demonstrated the significance of social relationships. For instance, research conducted by Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) indicated that social loneliness and isolation are related to an elevated risk of premature mortality, comparable to the danger posed by smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity. Similarly, Cacioppo et al. (2010) discovered that loneliness is connected with a variety of adverse health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease, dementia, and depression. Moreover, social relationships are essential for employee health and productivity.

Rosso et al. (2010) discovered that support from coworkers and superiors correlates favorably with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2017) found that social support fosters employee engagement and intrinsic motivation. They emphasized the importance of connection and how any actual, potential, or perceived changes in one's sense of belonging can trigger emotional reactions. Positive feelings are associated with increased belonging, while negative emotions arise from a sense of reduced belonging (Cockshaw et al., 2013).

According to Maslow (1943), human motivation is propelled by a structured pyramid of needs, from basic physiological to self-actualization. Maslow's theory states that a foundation issue is the only way to achieve the next need. To achieve self-actualization, a person must first secure the feeling of belonging and acceptance, which is in the middle of this hierarchy (L. Waller, 2021).

Since workers gradually return to some hybrid workplace, interpersonal relationships must be reestablished (Carucci, 2021b). Social relationships and cultural cohesiveness have been stretched in most businesses during the previous 18 months, resulting in fragmentation. The difficulties of remote work, dramatic unpredictability, the cumbersome process of determining what returning to the office may entail, and the enormous migration of workers fed up with cultures that make them feel worthless have all conspired to damage a feeling of community. Since last year, the average number of work meetings has progressively increased, significantly increasing the digital density of workers' days (Microsoft, 2021). In the hybrid world, most interactions have only been with colleagues and have primarily centered on the tasks at hand; Microsoft data indicate that cross-functional cooperation decreased by 25% during the epidemic while interactions inside groups grew (Carucci, 2021a). According to research, cross-functional collaboration is favorably associated with workplace belonging and inclusion. According to De Smet et al. (2021), cross-functional cooperation is favorably associated with psychological team safety and employee engagement. Likewise, Trinkenreich et al. (2023) discovered that cross-functional cooperation was positively linked to belonging and work satisfaction.

Creating and maintaining a supportive social environment would boost employees' feelings of belonging and propensity to stick with the company (Ampofo & Karatepe, 2022). Employees' growing desire for hybrid and remote work models may lead firms to lose the

necessary talent (Kumar & Banerjee, 2022). To maintain a diverse and inclusive workplace, businesses must consider employee preferences (Pichler et al., 2021). Social interactions and cultural cohesion are essential for human motivation and productivity (Rosso et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Lack of belonging can result in unpleasant emotional responses and alter the order of basic human needs (Cockshaw et al., 2013).

### **Hybrid Teams**

A hybrid work setup is one form of a distributed team, where some employees work remotely for part of the week and in their base office on other days (Bélanger & Watson-Manheim, 2006; Fiol & O'Connor, 2005; Griffith et al., 2003). According to Fiol and O'Connor (2005), the hybrid setup can begin in person and slowly transition to being fully remote. Today, many firms have adopted a more temporary use for the hybrid model, which presents complications since some employees can work remotely while others must be physically present (Hamouche, 2021). Managers must manage teams with various work formats and balance employees' requirements and dynamics (Hatfield & Pearce, 2022). Forward-thinking firms can develop new management methods and competencies to support today's flexible, hybrid ecosystem while constructing the future workplace. The move to hybrid work and an emphasis on what rather than the where give a genuine opportunity for a revolution in terms of inclusion not just in the workplace but also via work (Ladika, 2023). Hybrid offers a means to democratize opportunity and access talent regardless of their location. Hybrid work allows people to employ technology to enable participation in a global economy by anyone, anywhere, speaking any language, irrespective of socioeconomic status (Konovalova et al., 2022). The list of announcements from some companies adopting a hybrid work model in Table 1 displays the

diversity of industries considering a new work model as a necessary move toward innovation and organizational change (OLoughlin, 2022).

**Table 1**

*Companies Announce a Hybrid Work Model as of 2022*

<b>Company</b>	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Microsoft	Hybrid/Optional	Worksite (the physical space where you work, for example, office, center, home, mobile): We recognize that some employees are required to be on site and that some roles and businesses are better suited for working away from the worksite than others. However, for most roles, people view working from home part of the time (less than 50%) as now standard – assuming manager and team alignment. "
The State of Massachusetts	Hybrid	"Gov. Charlie Baker's administration is planning to implement a permanent 'hybrid' work model for roughly 20,000 of the state's 44,000 full-time workers, a spokesman for the state's Executive Office for Administration and Finance confirmed Friday.
Citigroup	Hybrid	"Most staffers will be expected to be in the office only 3 days a week when the world emerges from the coronavirus pandemic," he said.
Cigna	Hybrid	"At Cigna, we are reevaluating when people need to be in the office and what the office is used for. Before the pandemic we had about 43% of our workforce working remotely full-time. We predict that this will grow to 60% of full-time remote employees post-pandemic. We see the office as a place for people to collaborate. "

*Note.* This list defines hybrid: work from home and the office. Adapted from, "Every Company Is Launching A Hybrid Work Model. Build A Better Company," by H. OLoughlin, 2022, October 12, Remotely (<https://buildremote.co/hybrid-work/hybrid-work-companies-list/>). Copyright 2022, Remotely.

Work-from-home (WFH) arrangements have gained popularity and global reach due to restrictions since 2020 (Badaru et al., 2022). The WFH plan has altered how individuals perform their duties to obtain equivalent or better results. It enabled employees to effectively divide their time and deploy resources to fulfill company goals (G. Waller, 2022). Some firms that were compelled to implement remote work addressed attrition, loneliness, and well-being issues better. However, these negative consequences are still pervasive across the corporate landscape, especially for traditionally disadvantaged groups (Kniffin et al., 2021). There is more to life than work (Tokumitsu, 2015), but if people devote one-third of their adult lives to their jobs, it stands to reason that this should be viewed as significant (Staglin, 2019).

Recent studies have emphasized the significance of employees' feelings of belonging to a team or organization (Roberson & Perry, 2022). Chamorro-Premuzic and Berg (2021) discovered that employees with a sense of belonging to their firm are more inclined to express important aspects of their identity, ultimately leading to a higher degree of engagement and a more favorable impact on their well-being. Also, the feeling of belonging is associated with greater employee engagement and drive (Haldorai et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that a strong feeling of belonging, or social cohesion, is related positively to work satisfaction, organizational loyalty, and reduced employee turnover rates (Y. S. Lee & Liu, 2021). The four primary causes of employee turnover are lack of growth and advancement, ineffective management, inadequate remuneration, and a negative workplace culture. These reasons for employee departure are prevalent in many firms worldwide (Robinson, 2021). They lacked organizational solidarity, which entails establishing solid relationships with one another and having the same goal, such that neither is ever questioned (Carucci, 2021b).

In virtual situations, when physical connection between members is limited, the cohesion-building benefits of connection may be especially relevant (Weisenfeld et al., 2001). Due to the virtuality of the team, there is typically less communication in teams working remotely, resulting in inferior team performance compared to people working entirely in the office. Instead of stressing the prominent, concrete characteristics that identify a group, virtual interactions emphasize the members' sense of belonging. Despite a relative absence of physical interaction, identification in hybrid teams fosters a sense of belonging (Fiol & O'Connor, 2005).

In many firms, the return to work has been challenging, with several employers rescinding plans after universal policies failed to provide a satisfactory return (Microsoft, 2021). Although leaders know these problems, their answers must be revised. Generally, 52% of CEOs desire a 4–5 day workweek to improve connectedness and cooperation. However, returning to the office may not address the problem. If no further measures are taken, it might potentially backfire. The world has evolved, and so have employee attitudes. Companies must adapt strategies to foster community, coherence, and a sense of belonging (De Smet et al., 2022).

A Microsoft (2022) study showed that transformations that have overtaken the workplace during the past many years are permanent. Flexibility is a characteristic, not a trend. There must be more than leadership approaches for a dispersed, digitally linked workforce (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). The potential of a hybrid working environment and the true extent of their most significant asset, their people, can be realized by leaders who rely on facts, not just gut, and prioritize clarity, social power, and career advancement. Positive corporate results are more dependent than ever on positive human outcomes (S. K. Parker & Grote, 2022).

## **Statement of the Problem**

A new standard for human resource diversity, especially within global corporations, is having a multinational-diverse team (Zander et al., 2012). In 2019, Microsoft (2022) also mentioned that acquiring and retaining diverse talent will need a strategic approach to hybrid work, and almost half of the global worker are contemplating leaving their current employer. Because volatile categories of teams will likely emerge over the term, hybrid teams that start virtually are also exposed to much uncertainty (Fiol & O'Connor, 2005). Hybrid group members who begin virtually will likely apply tactics similar to those used to decrease ambiguity as members of pure remote workers. However, as will be addressed in further detail below, future face-to-face contacts will likely introduce identifying information that calls portions of these initial predictions into doubt, amplifying rather than lessening ambiguity.

Executives are not uninterested in fostering community among their staff; instead, there is no straightforward method. This is particularly true in the era of hybrid work, where firms are attempting to improve the flexibility of employment arrangements and implementing distant regulations that might reduce opportunities to live the culture in person (Chamorro-Premuzic & Berg, 2021).

The growth in hybrid work and a wider separation between personal and professional commitments has prompted employees to reconsider existing relationships with their managers and jobs. This reevaluation phase reveals divergent perspectives about returning to work that could lead to reluctance and disengagement (Kelly et al., 2014). Thus, the leadership style has moved from assignment and guidance to empathy and cooperation (Crummener et al., 2021). Although the members remain demographically diverse, hybrid teams are typically only somewhat diverse since sporadic encounters frequently limit value and informational variety



even though demographic diversity is maintained. This increases the likelihood of overlap between subgroupings. Due to their frequent interactions, members of hybrid teams can also rapidly recognize the outward manifestations of diversity (Fiol & O'Connor, 2005).

As noted previously, the need for remote workers increased during the lockdown (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Consequently, leaders must explain the importance of diversity, inclusion (DEI), and belonging and recognize behaviors that create settings where employees feel marginalized (Shore & Chung, 2022). Firms will continue to pay greater attention and allocate resources to DEI in 2021 and beyond. However, not all organizations can lead such a diverse group of people (Romansky et al., 2021).

Uddin (2021) discovered that women who worked from home during the pandemic had increased social isolation and a less satisfying work-life balance than males. In addition, Darouei and Pluut (2021) found that women working remotely are more likely to have negative work-family spillover, which can contribute to feelings of alienation and fatigue. This has been connected to employee well-being, work satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. Thus, the feeling of belonging is essential, especially for women. Creating a culture where every individual, regardless of background, has a high sense of belonging is crucial, especially in an ever-changing environment (Chaudhry et al., 2021). With belongingness, companies see benefits like increased performance, innovation, and employee engagement (Bhardwaj & Kalia, 2021).

To retain personnel, organizational leaders must continuously strive to foster employees' sense of belonging of employees. This is much more difficult than acquiring fresh talent. Since spending more time away from the office, workers have doubted the value of their current job and the sense of purpose it gives. Furthermore, the isolation caused by the epidemic has increased our yearning for genuine belonging (Carucci, 2021a). Since people have migrated

away from in-person encounters and begun to rely on video conversations and screen activities to stay connected, the idea of belonging has been challenged. Organization leaders understand that new core competencies are required to promote belongingness in the workplace (Chamorro-Premuzic & Berg, 2021).

A lack of belonging might impede workplace DEI initiatives. Employees with a strong feeling of affiliation are more inclined to support DEI efforts. In contrast, individuals who feel alienated or detached from their jobs are less inclined to support these efforts, which might hinder the achievement of DEI objectives (Rai & Dutkiewicz, 2022).

### **Purpose Statement**

This Delphi study examined critical factors in the leadership of a hybrid team. It also explored how leaders measure belonging within their organization. An additional lens was also given to strengthen support through workplace belonging for women working in a hybrid environment. All information collected yielded a best practice framework to strengthen the sense of belonging, especially within the female workforce. The researcher assumed this framework would help organizations maintain their talents and support their potential in these changing environments.

This study could inform leaders and managers on how to best engage and retain their employees in this era of drastic change in the working environment heightened by the pandemic. The research questions aided in creating a best-practice framework to foster a sense of belonging within hybrid teams. These best practices would be adaptable to most industries.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions informed this Delphi study.

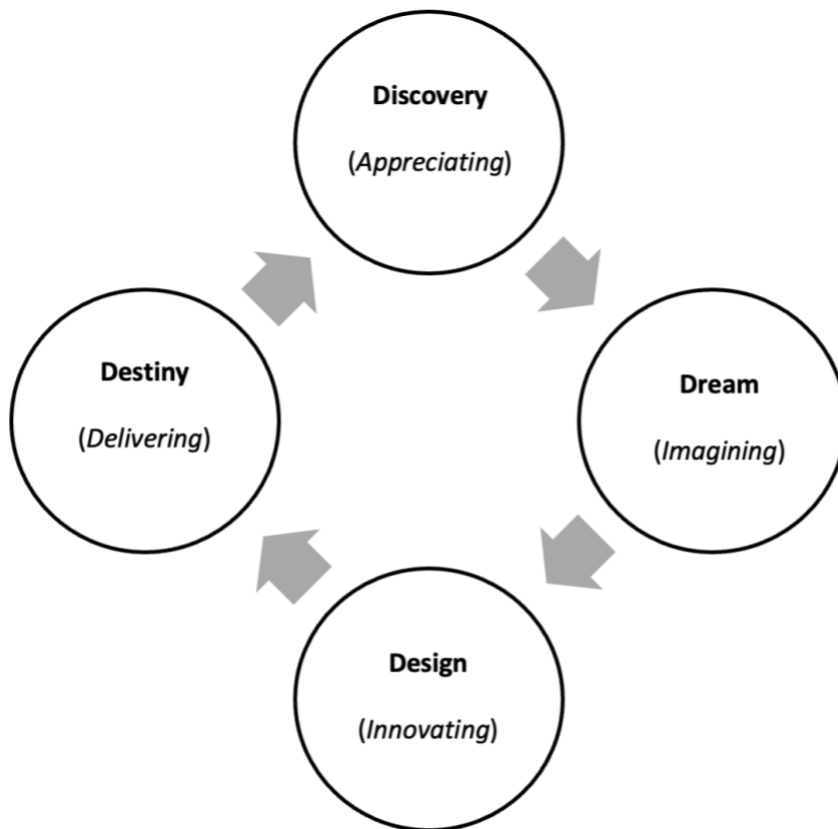
- RQ1: What are the critical factors for creating a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?
- RQ2: Can these critical factors be used to develop a theoretical framework for understanding a solid culture of belonging among women working in a hybrid work environment?

## **Frameworks**

There are various categorizations of appreciative inquiry, critical constructivism, and the hypothesis of belonging.

### ***Appreciative Inquiry***

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a recent asset-based method in organizational development that has gained recognition for its successful use in enabling organizational transformation (Coghlan et al., 2003). The company can use AI to improve its processes through inquiry and recognition (Trajkovski et al., 2013). The four-stage AI process incorporates (a) discovering what is excellent within the system, (b) imagining positive pictures of the future, (c) producing practical designs, and (d) achieving design and goal results (Jason & Glenwick, 2015; Reed, 2007). Figure 1 shows the four-stage AI process from the discovery to the destiny phase, leading to a continuous cycle of improving organizational processes.

**Figure 1***Appreciative Inquiry Cycle*

*Note.* Adapted from D. K. Whitney, and A. Trosten-Bloom, 2010, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (2nd Ed.). Copyright 2010 by Berrett-Koehler Publishing.

Most organizational transformation processes are based on identifying problems and developing solutions. This conventional method focuses on what could have led to the problem, regardless of the item's importance (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2012). Numerous scholars have critiqued the traditional method over the years, and due to this, a new AI process that is more open to changes and emphasizes social and psychological present realities has been developed.

Examining the AI literature reveals two distinctive outcomes that differentiate AI from other organizational design (OD) interventions. They are connected in some way. First, AI generates new information, followed by a new action driven by a new metaphor (Bushe &

Kassam, 2005). The most crucial factor of appreciation inquiry is that it produces new knowledge or models. Cooperrider et al. (2013) argue that using conventional research methods leads to redundancy instead of generating new solutions or perceptions. This dated way of doing research that some OD consultants use has yet to propose a new approach. Instead, it just compares status with also dated practices. According to them, artificial intelligence arose from a desire for investigation techniques with the ability to generate new concepts of social structures. This further emphasizes how AI is a tool that generates new solutions that are best for new problems (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). AI is a method for visualizing progress based on best practices within organizations or employees instead of attempting to remedy what does not (Greenwood & Kelly, 2020).

### ***Critical Constructivism***

Constructivism is the foundation of critical constructivism. According to constructivism, nothing symbolizes a neutral perspective; nothing exists until consciousness molds into something apparent (Kincheloe, 2005). Critical constructivists believe that traditional techniques of justification and theory-as-validated-truth offer no solution to the most fundamental pedagogical problems.

The critical constructivist perspective on leadership behavior is focused on interaction, mind, and experience in a single paradigm (Nissinen, 2001). Individual preferences, conditions, situations, and learning stages may benefit from implementing various learning approaches. The critical constructivist approach ensures that the frameworks and concepts are met, enhancing the effectiveness of training and implementation as much as possible. Critical constructivists seek to rebuild an identity, that is, to identify its constituent elements, which they think are formed through writing or spoken communication between and among individuals. Critical

constructivists capitalize on the use of language in building and transforming social realities (Theys, 2018).

Understanding the power dynamics that define social, cultural, and historical traditions enables critical constructivists to build organic links with them. In addition, they are conscious of their position regarding these significant power relationships, as discussed regarding positionality (Kincheloe, 2005). For various reasons, Nissinen (2001) also noted that the critical constructivist approach is essential to leadership research. The following states the approach and method, answering why this was imperative for this study.

- The critical constructivist approach combines the most prominent learning theories to date and provides a complete framework for leadership development.
- Through this method, researchers can better understand and explain the process of power and influence in human contact, particularly the leader-follower interaction.

Critical constructivists seek to discover new and varied ways of seeing and building social reality. In this setting, they can learn to respect knowledge and diverse ways of making meaning, which have mainly been ignored by dominant cultures historically (Kincheloe, 2005).

### **Belongingness Hypothesis**

According to the belongingness theory, humans must build and maintain robust interpersonal connections (Crawford, 2022). This idea is supported by two criteria: a small number of frequent, effectively good encounters and the interaction's temporally constant reciprocal affective care for wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging should be examined through these perspectives: social and economic standings, identities and emotional bonds, and moral and political values (Crawford, 2022). People who belong seek connections, self-identification, and social status (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Intriguingly, Yuval-Davis

(2006) stated that belonging might impose limitations on how a typical individual achieves a sense of belonging.

Communicate Bond Belong (CBB) is an adaptive and motivational explanation of human communication's role in relational aspects of social interaction (J. A. Hall & Davis, 2017). The primary need is the sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Previous research explored how the need for attachment creates the urge to build relationships and socially commune with others (J. A. Hall & Davis, 2017). For the goals of CBB theory, the fundamental internal desire that motivates the construction of relationships through apparent social behaviors is better conceptualized as the urge to belong.

Social identity is an individual's perspective of who they identify as, depending on which societal group(s) they belong to (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through social identity, they fulfill psychological needs that include a feeling of belonging (Greenaway et al., 2016). Social identity can improve and make people healthier and stronger by providing people with a sense of belonging (Canto & Vallejo-Martín, 2021). Guided by the frameworks discussed, this research sought to create a best-practice model for fostering one's culture of belonging by altering traditional human resource practice within this scope.

### **Significance of the Study**

Much research showed that not wanting to belong in the workplace affects how someone performs, contributes, and engages. This, in turn, negatively impacts productivity, which becomes an organizational problem (L. Waller, 2021). In addition to deliberately pursuing diversity in the workplace, many firms have tried to ensure that every staff member feels included. Developing a feeling of belonging gives an excellent opportunity for HR professionals to evaluate their inclusion strategy and objectives (J. Wiles & Turner, 2022). If employees feel

they are part of the organization, a positive effect has a great reach. Therefore, a strong feeling of belonging is related to a significant rise in work performance, a lower turnover rate, and a decrease in absenteeism (Newheiser et al., 2017).

Company culture is now finding the value and importance of belonging to people's well-being and overall health. When people feel excluded, anxiety is the most prominent emotion, followed by depression and sadness. Within a year from 2020 to 2021, the number of people having anxiety or depression symptoms increased almost 10% more, according to the CDC (Vahratian, 2021). Workplace belonging impacts the productivity and well-being of employees, which in turn affects their productivity. Employees who feel connected to their team and position will perform better overall. There has been a clear link between people's mental health and belongingness of people (Allen et al., 2021).

Teams within prosperous and inclusive organizations often attribute their success to their sense of belonging (Dlamini, 2021). Even in teams operating in the same area daily, developing a sense of belonging is difficult, which is now an essential challenge for people working in hybrid teams. According to Deloitte's Human Capital Trends study, belonging is one of the greatest challenges organizations face today (Bordeaux et al., 2021). In their survey, the majority of respondents indicated that cultivating a feeling of belonging was crucial to the success of their company, and almost everyone agreed on its positive effect on organizational performance. It becomes clear that belonging is a complex phenomenon that affects the relationship between a company and its employees and the importance people attach to their jobs (Belle et al., 2015).

### ***Work-Life Balance***

Workers can benefit from a flexible working environment to create a better work-life balance. Burkhard (2022) argues that women in top management only hold their positions for a



short time, and those who take maternity leave struggle to transition back into working full-time. Therefore, organizations should utilize a part-time working strategy to promote work and life balance. Brussevich et al. (2018) claim that legal, institutional, and fiscal policy levers affect how women apply to specific industries. Similarly, work structures that ease women's work and personal lives make it easy for women to keep their work. At the same time, the availability of affordable and quality childcare enables women to manage and perform well in their jobs (Burkhard, 2022). Strategies that promote work-life balance favor women more than men. For example, Burkhard (2022) found that more women work part-time than men in Switzerland. The main factors forcing women to work part-time in Europe are family responsibilities, lack of full-time employment, higher education, and getting sick. Sardelis et al. (2017) claimed that women's turnout in conference meetings to promote STEM participation can be improved by offering childcare. Women are unduly responsible for childcare, which amplifies the difficulties conference attendees face (Sardelis et al., 2017). Thus, offering childcare as an essential conference service will stimulate women with children to participate and give them a chance to showcase their skills while networking and collaborating with other scientists.

Pressure at home and work generates negative consequences that affect the performance of employees. Cerrato and Cifre (2018) opined that conflict at home and work results from a high-stress level, limited time, and competing behavioral expectations. Conflict between work and home increases when workers deal with home-related issues during work hours, which affects their productivity. On the contrary, work responsibilities also affect someone's participation and presence at home. Foley and Cooper (2021) argued that closing schools for weeks places women with the additional burden of unpaid obligations that risk them getting into domestic violence. These are among the gendered inequalities that have been experienced and

persist. The onset of the COVID-19 virus allowed the establishment of new workplace directives promoting gender equality. Workplace inequity has created a massive disadvantage for women. Foley and Cooper note that women were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, where their working hours decreased by 10.8%, equivalent to 7.5% for men. Underemployment and underemployment were also high (21%) for women, while that for men was low (19%). In search of fitting into paid work, women were forced to take flexible, low-paying jobs such as childcare and elder care to balance their career ladder. Therefore, employers need to devise an effective system that enables workers to balance work and nonwork activities while addressing the shortcomings faced by women in times of pandemic to build sustainable jobs and gender equality. Therefore, the work-life balance strategies endorsed to support women should focus on time, underemployment, and financial insecurity.

While belonging and purpose are essential regardless of how or where workers work, they are experienced differently remotely or in a hybrid model (Brecheisen et al., 2022). In these situations, alienation and disconnection manifest as employees feel unsupported and lack a clear understanding of how their job contributes to the organization's success (Dutta, 2022). Due to this, our methods for fostering belonging and communicating purpose within our remote and hybrid teams will need to be purposefully modified (Shuck, 2022). Wanting to belong in an organization is an intrinsic human urge. It has also been stated that belonging is one of our most significant types of motivation and substantially influences various well-being-related parameters, such as life satisfaction, cognitive performance, and physical health (Greenwood & Kelly, 2020).

### **Assumptions of the Study**

The following assumptions have been made for this study:

- The interviewer built a degree of rapport with the research participants and produced a safe setting that encouraged free and honest reflection.
- All interviewees have the exact definition of a hybrid workplace.
- The study participants significantly understood human resource management and professional experience. However, participants were selected carefully and precisely based on their eligibility and accessibility to enough experts.
- The study interviewer had no control or influence over the comments and feedback given by the experts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The researcher's primary occupation has been adopting a hybrid work model over the past 2 years, from working in person for 4 years before the change. Therefore, there is a degree of subjectivity surrounding the researcher's original expectations regarding the outcome of the investigation. As with any personal account of activities, inherent prejudice may develop. Intentionally or unintentionally, leaders and managers are prone to omit certain crucial information or difficulties. The researcher will be careful and aware of these perspectives and attitudes toward potential outcomes and will endeavor to determine the genuine essence of the stakeholders' beliefs. Given the author's current viewpoint on a hybrid work environment, researcher bias is also possible. Other limitations of this study include the following:

- In research in which they participate, panel experts may need help to perceive the whole picture.
- Among the limitations of the Delphi method is a drop-in response rate for each successive round.
- For a variety of unknown reasons, panelists can purposely suppress information.

## Definition of Terms

This dissertation explored critical factors in fostering a sense of belonging within hybrid teams of professionals; therefore, some terminology may need to be clarified. Additionally, some terms have many definitions and are used interchangeably. The definitions of selected important phrases are provided below to help clarify the issues explored in this study.

- *Work from Home (WFH)*: Refers to working from home or remote locations instead of going to the office or workplace (Bloom, 2021a).
- *Hybrid Work*: A type of work arrangement that combines remote work and on-site work, where some employees work remotely during a part of the work week and in their base office on specified days (Bélanger & Watson-Manheim, 2006; Fiol & O'Connor, 2005; Griffith et al., 2003).
- *Remote Work* is a different form of employment in which employees perform tasks outside the main office and communicate with their team and external partners through digital technologies (Spreitzer et al., 2017).
- *A Sense of Belonging* is an optimistic yet frequently changeable and temporary bond with other individuals, locations, and experiences (Allen et al., 2021).
- *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)* refers to individuals' physical or sociocultural distinctions. Equity signifies the equal and fair treatment of individuals regarding opportunities and outcomes. Inclusion means establishing an environment that promotes a sense of belonging among varied groups (Arsel et al., 2022).

## Chapter Summary

The planet is in a perpetual state of change and evolution. Numerous occurrences make us feel polarized, less stable, and unstable. External events such as climate change, political

instability, global pandemics, racial prejudice, etc., are producing dissatisfaction, anxiety, and disturbances. This results in people discovering consolation in daily life. For most of us, this entails looking to the organization for purpose and cohesion. However, corporations are experiencing their upheavals. Changes in workforce makeup, working methods, virtual offices, etc., are causing people to feel alienated. This has caused workers to struggle to unplug from work, separate their personal and professional lives, and face psychosocial dangers, including isolation (De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021).

The Great Renewal follows the Great Resignation. Since 2020, millions of individuals and businesses have been pushed to be open to hybrid labor for the first time. Multiple surveys have revealed that employers eagerly anticipate the return of their staff to the workplace. However, due to factors that balance personal health, home, and work, the enthusiasm is split between employees in returning fully in person. Despite restrictions easing due to confidence in vaccinations and the lesser spread of the COVID-19 virus, employees are gaining leverage in the ongoing discussion over the future of workplace models (Lenka, 2021).

This chapter explored the implications of the hybrid work model for employees' belongingness by applying the lens of the belongingness hypothesis. If employees have total freedom over where they work, individual preferences and goals may result in two distinct cultures. Given its apparent inevitability, this is an immediate issue that corporate executives must address immediately.

According to studies, there is a substantial association between belonging commitment and motivation in the workplace, which immediately translates into employee retention, pride, and motivation. Engaged employees are often willing to endorse their firm to their peers as an excellent employer. Furthermore, a sense of belonging shows more significant associations with

engagement for people who have historically been underrepresented or felt excluded, suggesting that activities based on fostering a sense of belonging may have a more substantial influence on enhancing workplace engagement (Culture Amp, n.d.). People who feel they belong to a group are more resilient and engaged and have better overall work performance. These ideas argue that stressing / activities that emphasize that people belong at the organization can be more sophisticated.

Belongingness is essential regardless of how or where workers work; however, there is a distinct divide in views on the level of belonging when working remotely or in a hybrid model (Jämsen et al., 2022). In these situations, alienation and disconnection manifest as employees feel unsupported and lack a clear understanding of how their job contributes to the business's success (Dutta, 2022). As a result, the way individuals cultivate belonging and convey purpose to hybrid teams will need to be consciously modified.

In the context of women working in hybrid teams, the importance of a strong sense of belonging increases. In typical workplace environments, women, particularly those from marginalized groups, may already feel alone and excluded. With hybrid work arrangements, the absence of in-person connection and physical separation might worsen these emotions. To guarantee that women in hybrid teams feel valued and included, it is crucial for employers to consciously foster a culture of belonging (Bordeaux et al., 2021).

In the context of DEI, the importance of belonging for women in hybrid teams cannot be stressed. To build a diverse, egalitarian, and inclusive workplace, it is crucial that every employee feels appreciated and involved. When women feel alienated or isolated, they may be hesitant to express their opinions and ideas, resulting in the absence of a variety of thought and a misunderstanding of the organization's difficulties (Culture Amp, n.d.). In contrast, when women

feel included and appreciated, they are inclined to share their knowledge and thoughts, resulting in more creativity and improved decision-making.

A strong feeling of belonging is essential for the success and well-being of women working in hybrid teams and the success and health of the business as a whole. To guarantee that all workers feel valued and included, regardless of where or how they work, organizations must consciously cultivate a culture of belonging (Jämsen et al., 2022). Creating a diverse, egalitarian, and inclusive workplace may alter how individuals and organizations build belonging and communicate purpose within hybrid teams.

## Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

### Hybrid Workplace Set-Up

The hybrid work system has grown in popularity due to its numerous advantages, which include access to a larger talent pool, increased productivity, decreased expenses, and enhanced employee experiences (Alexander et al., 2020). This shift towards a hybrid work system is also being influenced by technological advancements, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, which are anticipated to reduce the need for humans to perform specific tasks in the future (Yu & Hafner, 2020).

Working in a hybrid environment presents unique challenges, as employees work remotely and in the office and engage in virtual and in-person interactions (Halford, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic has also augmented the trend towards remote work, with hybrid WFH becoming the most prevalent method in the U.S. by the end of 2022, accounting for approximately 30% of all full-paid workdays (Barrero et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurship has also been a driving force behind the development of the hybrid work system, as many businesses are increasing their international reach through digital promotion and capitalizing on the opportunities presented by digitalization (K. M. J. Iqbal et al., 2021). Social networking and freelance work have also performed a noteworthy role in developing the remote work system, with bloggers, writers, content creators, and creatives signifying the practicality of remote work from various locations (Hermann & Paris, 2020).

A hybrid work model is a type of agreement that determines the proportion of remote and in-office work for employees and contractors. Additionally, it establishes who is responsible for assigning staff members' work schedules (Macareg, 2022). Table 2 shows the identification of hybrid teams.



**Table 2***Identification of Hybrid Teams*

<b>Shared Characteristics</b>	<b>Implications for identification</b>	<b>Managerial Implications</b>
Moderate degrees of uncertainty	Significantly unstable development of categories, particularly when starting in a virtual environment.	Employ in situations where rapid development of identification is not necessary in a dispersed environment.
Moderate levels of uncertainty	Insufficient in-person interaction to counteract the effects of subgroup closeness.	Choose individuals with a strong ability to tolerate uncertainty to counteract the impacts of subgroup closeness and the challenges arising from diversity.
Intermittent-rich individualistic cues	A lack of diversity and an insufficient number of courtesy practices to prevent the formation of divisive subgroups.	Employ streamlined communication channels to minimize the impact of dividing lines.
Moderate degrees of diversity  Intermittent Politeness Rituals		

*Note.* Adapted from “Identification in Face-to-Face, Hybrid, and Pure Virtual Teams: Untangling the Contradictions,” by C. M. Fiol, and E. J. O’Connor, 2005, *Organization Science*, 16(1), 19, p. 32 (<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1040.0101>). Copyright 2005 by Informs Publications Online.

Management and employees generally agree that the hybrid approach works best for them. Table 3 illustrates the four hybrid work arrangements (Macareg, 2022). The goal is to divide a worker's employment week into tasks, differentiating between those best performed in the office, such as training events, significant meetings, and mentoring, and those that can be performed remotely, such as reading, writing, and coding. Under the hybrid-WFH plan implemented, in-person duties are scheduled on office days, such as Monday, Tuesday, and

Thursday. In contrast, individual chores are scheduled to occur on Wednesday and Friday (Bloom, 2021b).

**Table 3**

*Four Hybrid Work Models*

Models	Work Location Ratio	Work Schedule Decision-Maker
Remote-First	Mostly home-based work w/ on site work	Depends on company policy
Office-First	Mostly on-site work w/occasional home-based work	Depends on company policy
Flexible	Depends on the preference of staff members	Employees & Contracts
Fixed	Depends on the preference of the company	Employer & Management

*Note.* Adapted from “What Is Hybrid Work & How to Make It Work in 7 Steps,” by L. Macaraeg, 2022, *Management Library* (<https://managementhelp.org/hybrid-work>). Copyright 2022, Management Library.

Regardless of the drive length, the hybrid model enables workers to conserve money on food, gas, time, and everything else associated with commuting (Pepperdine Graziadio Business School, 2022). Hybrids have existed for decades in specific industries, such as job training, medical services, and microcredit; however, in recent years, they have begun to arise in new sectors, such as environmental services, consulting, retail, consumer products, food, and information systems (Battilana et al., 2012).

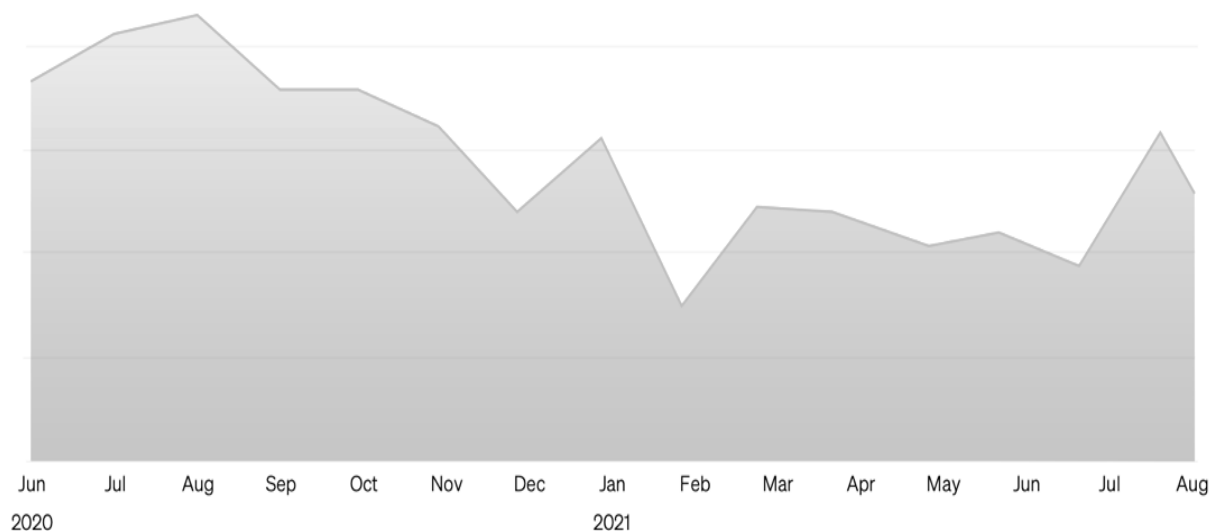
### **Impact of COVID on Workplace Setup**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the workplace environment, prompting a re-evaluation of physical workspaces and the adoption of preventive measures to reduce the spreading of coronavirus (K. M. J. Iqbal et al., 2021). For many companies, remote work became necessary for the first time due to the pandemic (Newman & Ford, 2021).

However, it is imperative to note that remote and hybrid work was already on the rise before the pandemic. In the UK, for example, around 12% of the labor force worked remotely at most one day per week in 2019, while approximately 5% reported working primarily from home (Mutebi & Hobbs, 2022).

Before the pandemic, there was a belief that everyone needed to be in the exact physical location to maintain efficiency and company culture. Some companies even tried to create an attractive office environment to retain employees (Boland et al., 2020). However, the pandemic forced a radical change in traditional work systems, with the adoption of remote work becoming necessary for many companies to comply with social distancing policies.

The McKinsey Global Institute has categorized over 800 occupations into 10 work zones based on their proximity to coworkers and clients, the number of interpersonal interactions required, and their indoor or on-site nature (Madgavkar et al., 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2020). Sectors such as entertainment and travel, which require frequent in-person interactions, were significantly impacted by the pandemic, with many establishments being forced to close in 2020 and labor demand within these industries decreasing. Despite the advantages of remote work, such as improved flexibility and less time commuting, only some have welcomed the shift to remote working due to the pandemic (Newman & Ford, 2021). Figure 2 shows a graph reflecting the change to fully remote work rates.

**Figure 2***Shift to Fully Remote Work Rates*

*Note.* Adapted from “Redefining Inclusive Leadership Insight Report,” 2021, by *BetterUp* (<https://grow.betterup.com/resources/insights-report-inclusive-leadership>). Copyright 2021 by BetterUp.

The trend towards hybrid work arrangements has grown faster than full-time office employment. As of June 2021, the rate of returning to a hybrid work arrangement was 233% higher than the rate of returning to full-time office work, indicating a significant shift in employment practices (BetterUp, 2021). This shift was prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many businesses to adopt the idea of remote work to continue operating quickly (Kniffin et al., 2021). Although hybrid work arrangements existed before the pandemic, they catalyzed widespread adoption (K. M. J. Iqbal et al., 2021).

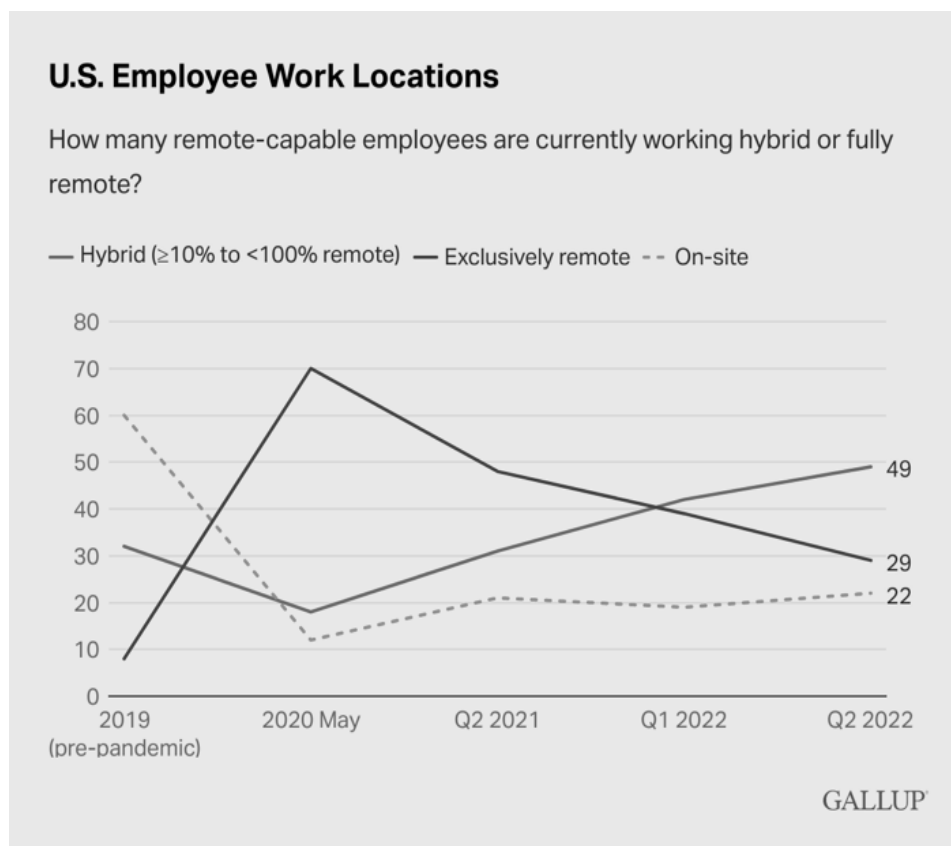
Organizations worldwide have established new working regulations recognizing that flexible employment is a permanent element of the modern workplace rather than a temporary response to the pandemic (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). The pandemic has also highlighted the need for support for flexible work choices (Bentley et al., 2021). Many companies allowed

employees to choose their daily work location to guarantee employee safety while gradually restarting on-site operations, emphasizing spatial flexibility (Shao et al., 2021). This shift towards remote work and digitalization has had unprecedented effects on the social sustainability of office work, including organizational innovation fitness, workplace environment, and the health and productivity of office workers (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021).

### **The New Norm of Work**

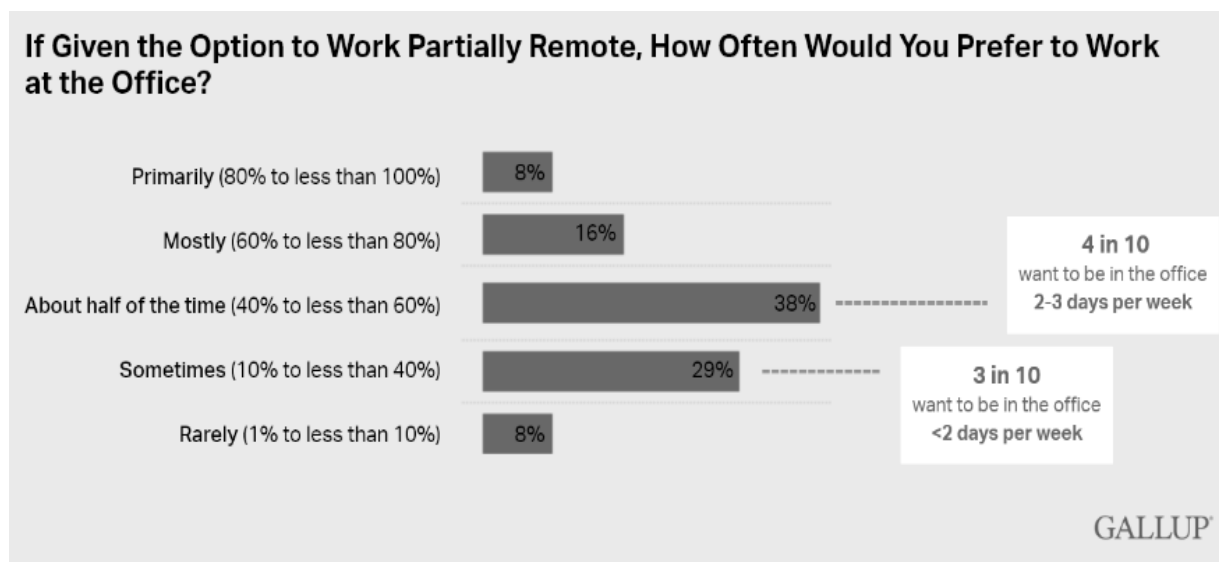
Adopting hybrid work models has become increasingly popular due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and many leaders believe this model could become a permanent fixture beyond 2021 (Roy, 2022). Previous studies have shown generally positive results for flexible work arrangements on employee well-being, although specific issues have been identified from both employee and leadership viewpoints (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021). According to a survey by Foundry, 94% of companies have adopted a hybrid work structure in response to the pandemic. While there was initial skepticism about the impact of hybrid/remote work on productivity, many firms report that the hybrid model has been successful. A study found that 72% of IT decision-makers believe there has been a positive shift in the remote and hybrid work mindset due to the transition to work-from-home (Raap, 2022).

As the pandemic progresses, the constraints and benefits of remote work are becoming more apparent, and it is assumed that hybrid work will become a more permanent part of the future. WFH employees enjoy greater flexibility and can adjust their work schedules to accommodate personal and family obligations. Pandemic-driven behaviors such as hybrid work, remote work, WFH, flexible work environments and schedules, the ability to work from any location, and working close to home are anticipated to continue even as some individuals rejoin the workforce (Vyas, 2022).

**Figure 3***U.S. Employee Work Locations*

*Note.* Well over 70 million workers, or around half of full-time workers, claim they can do their duties remotely from home. They are known as remote-capable staff. From “Return to the Office: The Current, Preferred and Future State of Remote Work,” by B. Wigert, and S. Agrawal, 2022, August 31, *Gallup* (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/397751/returning-office-current-preferred-future-state-remote-work.aspx>). Copyright 2022 by Gallup.

Hybrid work arrangements continue to increase in popularity in 2022, with projections indicating that at least half of remote-capable employees will remain in hybrid work (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022). This shift is driven by employees' preference for hybrid work, reflecting a strong desire to work when, where, and how it is most convenient for them. The demand for employee welfare, work-life balance, and flexibility is higher than ever, indicating a shift away from the traditional office setup as the only option. Figure 4 shows a chart discussing the preference for office work frequency.

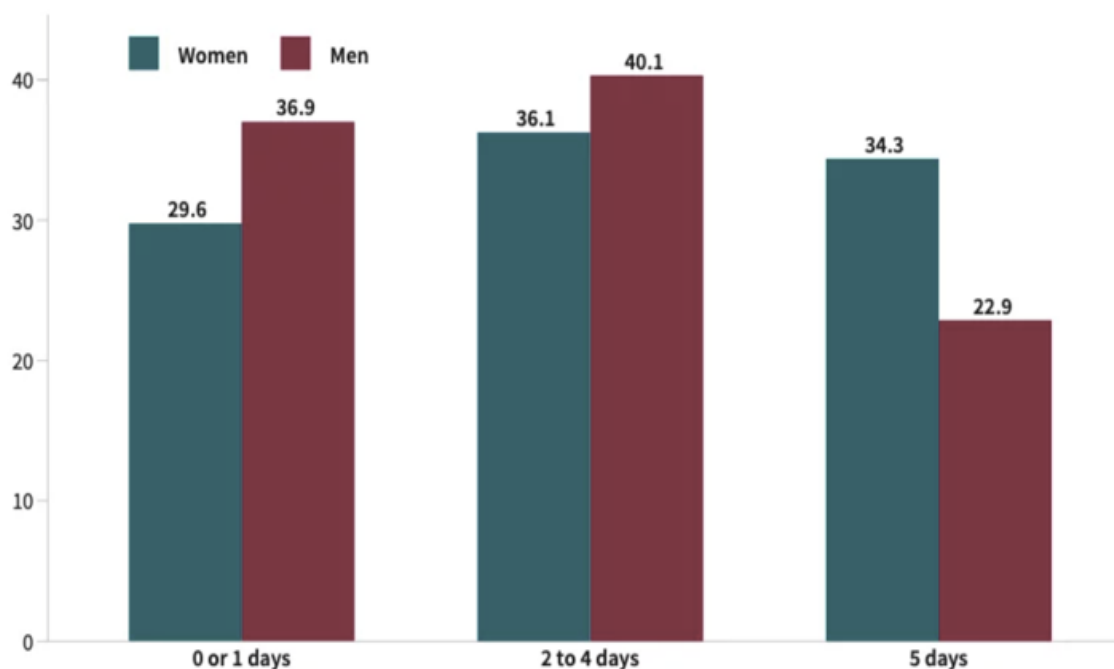
**Figure 4***Preference for Office Work Frequency*

*Note.* From “The Future of Hybrid Work: 5 Key Questions Answered with Data,” by B. Wigert, 2022, March 15, *Gallup* (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/390632/future-hybrid-work-key-questions-answered-data.aspx>). Copyright 2022 by Gallup.

Employee preferences and the suitability of hybrid models vary by organization and scope of work. There is no universally applicable solution. Leaders must determine which work model best suits their organization (Wigert, 2022). Figure 5 shows the number of college-educated employees with children under 12 who prefer remote work.

**Figure 5**

*Post-Pandemic Number of Employees With Children Preferring Remote Work*



*Note.* College-educated employees with children under 12. Adapted from “*Hybrid is the Future of Work*, 2021b, June, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (<https://siepr.stanford.edu/publications/policy-brief/hybrid-future-work>), Copyright 2021 by Stanford University.

Relevant guiding principles, hybrid work rules, and managing the trade-offs between letting teams set their standards and a universal work location policy have all become challenging tasks. Therefore, there is a genuine concern that those in positions of power will make decisions based on biases, such as proximity bias, brought on by the idea that it was better before when everyone was together in the office (Gibson et al., 2023).

A hybrid workplace can promote better overall health and help employees attain an improved work-life balance. Employees who can enter the office may feel more productive and connected to their team and business (Vyas, 2022). The 21st century has brought a new period of life and work, with fast-evolving opportunities and challenges, all shaped by technology-driven



designs that simultaneously claim control over our lives. As workplace norms continue to shift, the restrictions placed by the pandemic have led to a wave of self-exploration, possibilities, and rediscoveries for workers and businesses alike (T. Singh, 2021).

### **Belonging to a Hybrid Workplace**

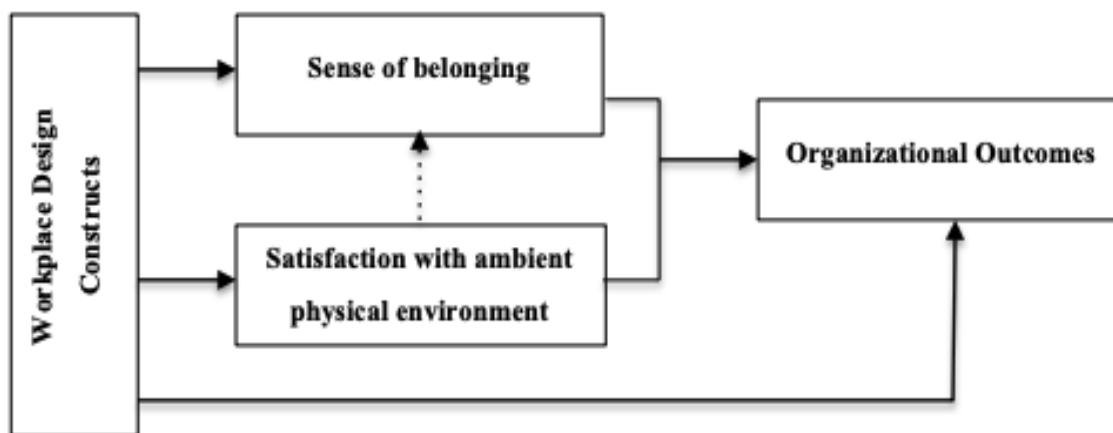
To effectively manage and lead a team, it is essential to understand the value of belongingness linked to engaged communities, innovation, shared values, and openness to diversification and change (Filstad et al., 2019). Employers face a risk-reward decision when considering modifications to established employment arrangements. Hybrid employment arrangements can offer greater flexibility, a more positive employee experience, and improved work-life balance, with research showing that they can disproportionately positively affect DEI programs and performance. To understand belonging in a hybrid space, researchers have explored the elements of belonging and how welcoming the new way of work is for both genders regarding policies and work-environment conditions (Glover & Guerrier, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic created an unexpected disruption in traditional business practices, with the shift to remote work creating additional hurdles for employees to feel included, engaged, and find purpose in their jobs (Attfield & Barth, 2021). Belonging can be evaluated from psychological, sociological, physical, and spiritual angles. Sociologically, belonging refers to group participation and is characterized and observed through behavioral connotations, including participation in organizations and social networks (Hagerty et al., 1992, 1996). Feeling connected to one's community is associated with the concept of belonging (Edwards, 2011), with an accurate perception of convergence characterized by a sense of belonging, value to each other and the team, and a common belief that meeting needs will occur through the willingness to be together (D. W. McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Research has used theoretical foundations to operationalize the concept of an emotional sense of workplace community, with a sense of belonging being one of the key characteristics (Burroughs & Eby, 1998). The strength of relationships within a setting is a crucial factor influencing a person's sense of belonging, with physical elements such as the work area size, functionality, enclosure level, and level of flexibility also playing a role (Fischer, 1997; Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2000). Figure 6 shows the workplace design model.

**Figure 6**

*Workplace Design Model*



*Note.* Relationship between workplace environments and the sense of belonging. Adapted from “An Investigation of Workplace Characteristics Influencing Knowledge Worker’s Sense of Belonging and Organizational Results,” by J. Lu, 2015, *Technische Universität Dresden* (<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=30e957c1fc8b04fcda9b4e45dc2391a749cb399b>). Copyright 2015 by Technische Universität Dresden.

***Theoretical Models of Belongingness***

The concept of Identity-Proximity explores the relationship between one's sense of self and their proximity to others. According to Kohut (1984), a person's identity cannot exist in isolation; instead, it relies on the reflection of values, connectivity, and similarities provided by others. The reactions and responses reinforce and shape one's self-experiences, forming a self-identity concerning others. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that social interactions play a

crucial role in the subjective sense of self, with belongingness being influenced by the degree of proximity to others.

**Emotion-Sharing – Reciprocal Connectedness.** According to R. M. Lee and Robbins (1995), the sense of belonging is developed throughout one's life, from childhood to adulthood, through various social connections, including friendships and affiliations. While their three-part logic lacks objective validation, the authors suggest that the desire to belong is closely linked to the value one derives from connections with others and the willingness to step outside one's comfort zone. Overall, they argue that the need to belong is characterized by the ability to exchange emotions in a reciprocal manner, which fosters a sense of connectivity in adulthood.

**Supportive-Proximity – Emotional Support From Others.** One argument posits that individuals evaluate stressful situations by assessing whether they have the resources to manage the stressors. Identifying the social resources needed to cope with these challenges is a vital coping strategy in dealing with social stressors. Consequently, individuals often seek emotional support from their social relationships when faced with stressors. Thus, assessing challenging situations should activate a sense of belonging that extends beyond significant others and depends on emotional support from those close enough to offer assistance (Kemper & Lazarus, 1992). Given that subjective experiences and cues heighten an individual's need for belongingness, it is suggested that a person's social affiliation motivation may revolve around the desire for ongoing emotional support (Hill, 1987).

**Similarity of Self and Others – Social Identity.** According to Hogg and Terry (2000), once individuals identify with a particular social category, their self-categorization as a social identity becomes fully operational. This means that a person's value is affected by the variety of potential social groupings to which they belong. He further argues that if an individual gains a

sense of belongingness by being assigned to a group of similar individuals, they are more likely to favor their group simply because they are members.

**Environmental Satisfaction - Interactions and Experiences.** According to Bronfenbrenner (1996), the ecological framework argues that an individual's experiences and development are connected to their interactions with the events in their environment, whether positive or negative. Therefore, the feeling of belongingness based on environmental satisfaction is linked to how a person perceives and connects themselves to the overall enjoyment of an event within their surroundings.

A model proposed by Lynn Shore et al. (2011) identified four main quadrants that represent an individual's sense of belonging and perceived value based on uniqueness and sameness, as depicted in Figure 7. The uniqueness quadrant addresses the issue of diversity in an organization. When everyone in an organization is similar in age, gender, ethnicity, or educational background, there is a lack of diversity or "sameness." This is what diversity initiatives aim to address (Berson, 2020).

**Figure 7***A Framework for Belonging*

*Note.* Adapted from "Inclusion and Diversity in Work Groups: A Review and Model for Future Research," by L. M. Shore, A. E. Randel, B. G. Chung, M. A. Dean, K. Holcombe Ehrhart, & G. Singh, 2011, *Journal of Management*, 37(4), p. 1262. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310385943>). Copyright 2011 by Southern Management Association.

Businesses often prefer employees similar to them in terms of background or qualifications, assuming that "people like me" are the most qualified candidates. However, research has shown that this approach can be limiting and ineffective (Berson, 2020). The issue of diversity is addressed in the uniqueness quadrant of Lynn Shore et al.'s (2011) framework of belonging, which emphasizes the importance of valuing differences to prevent homogeneity in organizations. On the other hand, inclusion is highlighted on the right side of the belonging axis, where organizations genuinely listen to, value, and respect individuals regardless of their demographic, experience, or background (Berson, 2020). Regarding the impact on the workplace, belongingness is considered a more robust indicator than employee satisfaction or work performance because it directly affects the efficiency of business operations and costs (Vischer, 2008).

### *Components of the Experience and Representation of Belonging*

Research investigated the connection between people's feelings of belonging at work and the material, aesthetic, and emotional features of workplaces and the workplace (Filstad et al., 2019).

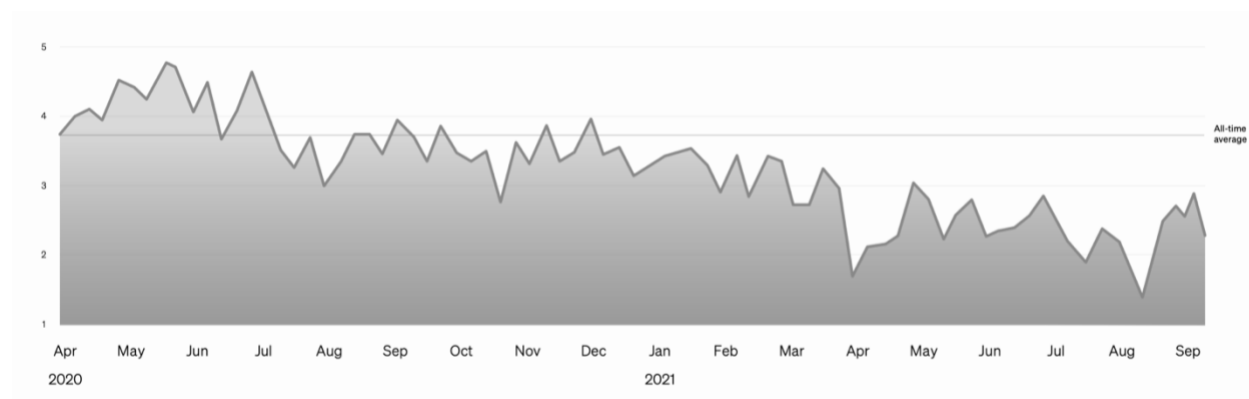
- **Being part of:** Belonging can be related to a group, event, organization, or coworkers. Some participants perceive belonging as part of their organization's objectives or strategies, while others view it as part of a team or group. In some of the photographs, workplace activities such as bowling, eating, playing, dancing, and working are depicted. Belonging is portrayed either through activities or interpersonal interactions, explicitly or implicitly.
- **Becoming:** Belonging is portrayed as a dynamic process involving both material and relational dimensions. Participants in the study described these aspects, which sometimes overlapped or conflicted with each other. In the photographs, several objects such as buildings, passages, workstations, computers, logos, and clocks were visible, but individuals rarely appeared alone. Similarly, when individuals or groups of colleagues were shown, they were rarely accompanied by physical objects. The photographs illustrated that participants often differentiated between the tangible and relational aspects of belonging, indicating how they understood and experienced the concept.
- **As Experiencing Boundaries:** The boundaries of belonging are experienced in various forms, such as the presence or absence of belonging, the degree of belonging, and the boundaries of work-related experiences. One photograph illustrates the absence of belonging through an empty corridor, closed doors, and the need for colleagues to

socialize with during lunch hours. This empty physical space symbolizes the absence of a sense of belonging, limited sharing of experiences, few social opportunities, and feeling excluded from the workplace community. The photograph exemplifies the boundary between belonging and non-belonging.

- **As Performing:** Belonging was observed as a form of performance through active participation in shared activities, although not necessarily linked to accomplishing specific work goals. Photos of action frequently illustrated the participants' verbal descriptions of belongingness. Other examples of belongingness also showed the importance of performing activities together. Both large-scale endeavors, like creating a strategy, and small-scale activities, like sharing a meal or chatting over coffee, were depicted as fostering a sense of belongingness (Filstad et al., 2019).

### ***Impact Of The Sense Of Belonging In The Workplace***

Corporate understanding of diversity has evolved from focusing on demographic representation and numerical quotas to including inclusion, equity, and belonging as critical components for achieving a positive workplace environment and successful business outcomes (BetterUp, 2021). The collective sense of belonging has decreased since the pandemic, reaching an all-time low in April (see Figure 8). Moving to remote and hybrid work has made it more challenging to maintain connection and community, as individuals move away from each other in separate boats.

**Figure 8***Belonging Over Time*

*Note.* Adapted from “Redefining Inclusive Leadership Insight Report,” 2021, by *BetterUp*. (<https://grow.betterup.com/resources/insights-report-inclusive-leadership>). Copyright 2021 by BetterUp.

Belonging was ranked as the second most significant predictor of employees' intention to stay, after factors such as fear of job loss and obligation. The study indicates that the level of connection to colleagues and the work itself influences employees' intent to remain. As belongingness continues to decline throughout 2021, companies that can maintain a sense of belongingness and positive employee experience in hybrid or remote work settings will have a significant competitive edge (BetterUp, 2021).

Research shows that women who sense a work culture where they genuinely belong are likelier to succeed in the workplace (Alight Blog, 2021). A strong sense of belonging is linked to higher job satisfaction levels, improved mental health, enhanced productivity, and reduced feelings of fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Conversely, those who lack this feeling of belonging at the job are less likely to enjoy these benefits. It is becoming increasingly apparent that belonging is critical in driving employee and organizational performance (Fortuna, 2020).

In addition, women report lower levels of belonging than men, including work-life balance and pay fairness. Specifically, women are 25% less likely to feel safe expressing



opposing opinions and 20% less likely to think that their unique identity and background are respected by their employers (Achievers, 2021). To promote belonging in the workplace, it is imperative for individuals of diverse backgrounds to feel included and recognized for their contributions (Waters, 2021). The recent EY Belonging Barometer study revealed what employees require to feel a sense of belonging at work and the factors that lead to inclusion (Twaronite, 2019). However, one in four employees still needs a sense of belonging, challenging talent retention and peak performance (BetterUp, 2021).

Inclusive leaders who create a sense of belonging tend to have teams that produce exceptional work. Employees feel more empowered to make decisions and express their opinions when they believe they have an ally in the workplace (Eatough, 2021a). Additionally, 56% of employees with a strong sense of belonging report higher job performance (Waters, 2021).

According to Fortuna (2020), one's level of success at work is strongly influenced by their sense of belonging at their place of employment. This sense of belonging is the most significant outcome indicator of participation and can lead to enthusiastic, devoted, and passionate employees. Workplaces that foster a strong sense of belonging are associated with better productivity, improved employee well-being, and reduced employee turnover. However, a feeling of not belonging in the workplace, either culturally or within a team, can lead to loneliness and harm job performance (H. Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).

Banchefsky et al. (2019) found that social belonging is a stronger predictor of women's persistence in male-dominated majors than ability belonging. However, it is unclear whether ability belonging also plays a significant role. The authors suggest that women may pay more attention to their social and intellectual belonging in everyday interactions.

Woodfield (2016) highlights the responsibility women feel and the segregation they experience in the IT industry, which leads to a discrepancy in the sense of belonging between men and women. Glover and Guerrier (2010) note that hybrid jobs are challenging to categorize, requiring individuals to combine technical and soft management skills. These jobs are highly sought after and paid well in the information technology industry, but per Glover and Guerier, research has shown that men perform more technological tasks. This pattern suggests that women feel less of a sense of belonging in areas that require technical expertise.

### ***Contemporary Position of Hybrid Work to Belonging***

In the past, our sense of belonging was primarily driven by strong social connections within our groups, fostered through in-person collaboration such as coffee chats or joint projects. However, COVID-19 has increased isolation and distancing, significantly impacting our sense of belonging, especially in the workplace (Eatough, 2021b). The pandemic has also highlighted long-standing challenges related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), as well as the role of organizations in promoting social change. The past year has seen a heightened awareness of issues like racial inequality, disparities, hate crimes, and the impact the pandemic has had on women's employment, which were significant challenges even before the outbreak (BetterUp, 2021).

As seen in Figure 9, before the pandemic, the three leading predictors of belonging were proficiency in the following:

- Social Connection (5)
- Emotional Regulation (4)
- Authenticity (3; Eatough, 2021b)

It is not surprising that COVID-19 has impacted our communication and relationships at work.

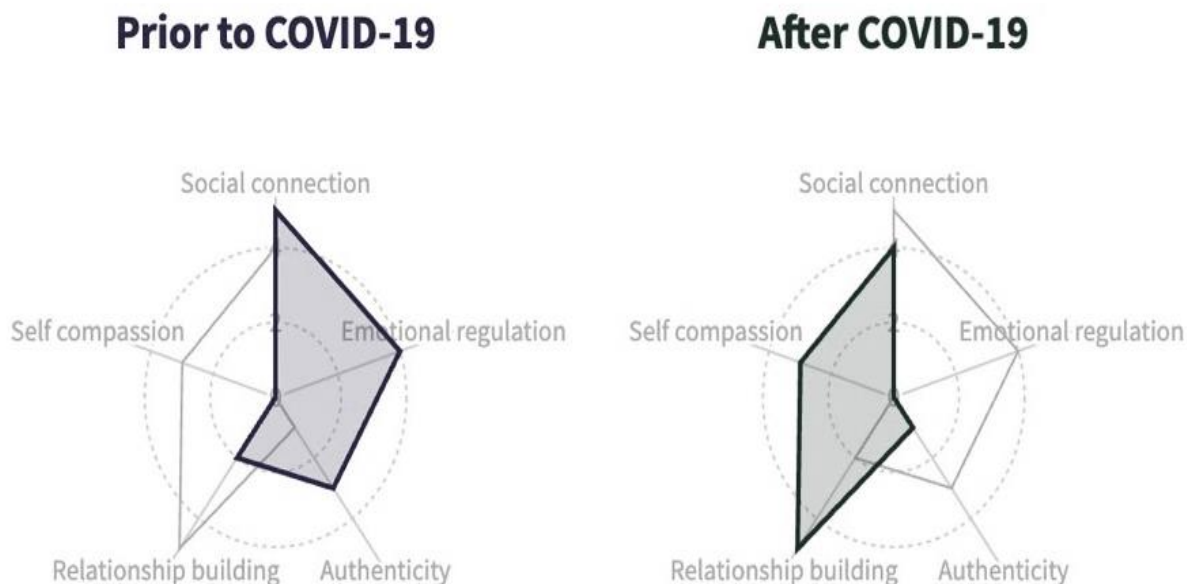
Since the epidemic, the predictors of high belonging have changed to include the following:

- Relationship Building (5)
- Social Connection (4)
- Self-compassion (3; Eatough, 2021b)

### Figure 9

*Drivers in Predicting High Belonging*

■ Prior to COVID-19 ■ After COVID-19



*Note.* From “How Has Belonging Changed Since COVID-19?,” by E. Eatough, 2021b, *BetterUp* (<https://www.betterup.com/blog/belonging-after-covid-19>). Copyright 2021 by BetterUp.

### Women Workforce

According to Arda Özalp (2021), numerous countries experienced a "women's revolution" in the 1970s, transforming gender norms as women became more involved in lifelong employment. The worldwide employment of women underwent a significant shift due to factors such as higher literacy rates, a desire for financial independence, evolving socio-

economic conditions, and changing attitudes. Nonetheless, working women often struggle to balance their professional and personal obligations, as noted by Wani and Ahmad (2021).

The United Nations Foundation declared 2020 a landmark year for gender equality research worldwide. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undermine the modest progress made over the last few decades. The pandemic has exposed pre-existing inequalities and amplified the adverse effects of the outbreak. As a result, women globally face unstable employment prospects and are more likely to work in informal jobs. Single-parent households, headed mainly by women, struggle to maintain access to social protections, further exacerbating the situation. Consequently, women have shown less resilience to economic downturns than men (UNSDG Policy Brief, 2020).

### ***Gender Inequity Increases***

Gender inequalities have persisted in the workplace for many years, including wage disparities and limited opportunities for promotions, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and have resulted in many women leaving the workforce. Although it is not always emphasized, it remains a significant issue. According to Schwantes (2021), women are 41% less likely than men to feel a sense of belonging in their workplace. This, combined with the pandemic's impact, maybe a compelling reason for the 33-year low in women's participation in the job market. While DEI programs aim to address gender disparities and other gaps, current strategies may not be sufficient to make all employees feel supported and included. Schwantes (2021) notes that women are 23% less likely than men to believe their organization's DEI efforts are adequate.

Globally, women and girls are responsible for three times more unpaid care work than men, a disparity that is expected to worsen due to the pandemic. With 1.52 billion children (87%

of the world's student population) forced to stay home, girls and women are likely to bear the brunt of full-time childcare and homeschooling, tasks typically assigned to them within the family (Gonzalez-Perez, 2022).

In the Asia-Pacific region, a significant portion of the population is engaged in informal employment, exacerbating their vulnerability due to the lack of social protection. According to a survey, informal workers are at greater risk of losing their jobs during economic downturns, including the COVID-19 pandemic, with job losses ranging from 25% to 56% in all countries (UN Women, 2020). In Bangladesh and the Maldives, women in informal employment are more likely than men to experience reduced working hours, while in Cambodia, Pakistan, and the Philippines, the opposite is true.

Despite the focus on informal workers, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted formal workers, with many reporting reduced working hours. In Bangladesh, the Maldives, the Philippines, and Thailand, women have experienced a significant decline in their working hours. The gender gap in Thailand is only eight percentage points. However, in Bangladesh, it is a staggering 69 percentage points, with women in formal employment nearly six times more likely to experience reduced hours compared to men following the outbreak of the virus. This trend is particularly concerning as women already had a higher likelihood of earning less than their partners in every country analyzed on this issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) programs that simultaneously recognize and promote multiple identities. For example, research has shown that pandemic-induced gender inequalities in the labor market are linked to parental status. In this regard, mothers have fared better than non-parent women (Lofton et al., 2021). However, women in traditional gender-role-based households still bear the

brunt of household and childcare responsibilities, often referred to as the female second shift (Markey, 2022). The closure of schools has had a significant impact on working mothers' ability to meet their commitments. One in 10 working mothers with children under 18 reported quitting their jobs due to the pandemic, with half citing school closures as one of the reasons. Three out of every 10 mothers reported taking time off due to school or childcare closures (Ranjil et al., 2021).

The pandemic has led to the rise of hybrid employment, which has allowed women to achieve a better work-life balance. Recent statistics suggest that women prefer remote work more than men, with a study of 30,000 college-educated Americans with young children revealing that women desire to work from home about 50% more frequently than men (Markey, 2022). Over the past 2 years, hybrid work has demonstrated its potential to address challenging workplace inequities, particularly gender norms. Previously, job inflexibility exacerbated the gender wage gap and directed men and women toward different career paths. However, if hybrid work is not designed with inclusion, it could have the opposite effect.

### ***The Great Resignation***

Since 2021, the rate of individuals leaving their jobs in the U.S. has surged to levels not observed since the launch of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey program in December 2000, known as the Great Resignation (Gittleman, 2022). Women have been leaving their jobs at unprecedented rates, driven by a desire for more fulfilling careers. The rate at which women in leadership positions are changing jobs is at an all-time high, surpassing the rate at which men in leadership positions are changing jobs (LeanIn, 2022). The Women in Workplace Study highlighted three reasons why women are leaving their jobs:

- Women leaders want to progress but encounter more significant obstacles than men.
- Women leaders are overworked and underappreciated.
- Women leaders desire a more positive work culture.

Women in healthcare and academia face significant barriers to leadership aspirations, often called the "glass ceiling" by Marilyn Loden in 1978 (Ganiyu et al., 2017). Despite the evolution of social movements, laws, and practices, several factors that support or reinforce the glass ceiling contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

Exposure to female leaders in male-dominated fields directly impacts how other women are evaluated. Specifically, a woman's performance as a leader is critical to assessing another woman's qualifications. Following exposure to an unsuccessful female leader, as opposed to a successful female leader, female candidates were deemed less qualified and less likely to be recommended for a leadership position (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

Additionally, a study found that women received higher performance ratings than men, but their potential ratings were 8.3% lower on average. Consequently, female employees were 14% less likely than their male counterparts to be promoted (Benson et al., 2022).

Women face the phenomenon known as the glass cliff, whereby they are more likely to be appointed to corporate leadership positions during times of crisis, while men are more likely to be appointed during times of prosperity (Lasna Kabir, 2020). The appointment of women to leadership roles, particularly during difficult times, can expose them to stereotypes and lead to criticism, as the chances of success are low (Karakaplan Özer, 2022).

Research has shown that when assessing performance in ambiguous situations, such as when there is no physical output, or it is challenging to assess the value of a task, women are

often rated as less competent than men (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). In group work, where there is additional ambiguity about individual contributions, gender-based expectations can lead to women's efforts being undervalued. As a result, men may be more likely to advance within an organization when women are given disproportionately less credit for their collaborative efforts.

Researchers studying gender have long argued that providing employees with greater control over their work schedules and methods would improve gender equality in the workplace. This change is currently available. However, suppose individuals do not intentionally plan the implementation of hybrid work. In that case, a new version may be created regarding the same issue by valuing the ideal worker who works extended hours in the office while allowing others to work remotely (De Witte, 2022).

### ***Social-Cultural Bias to Women in the Modern Work Environment***

In today's competitive and dynamic business environment, corporations must leverage the strengths of all their members. As globalization has expanded, human resources have been forced to embrace workplace diversity (Friedman, 2007). Babic and Hansez (2021) argue that the rise of women in the labor market indicates a change in attitude that has resulted in policies and provisions to ensure that women have similar opportunities to men. Tabassum and Nayak (2021) confirm that gender-related biases and barriers have decreased. However, gender stereotypes continue to prevent women from succeeding in the workplace, particularly in leadership roles.

According to a report by IBR (2020), as cited by Tabassum and Nayak (2021), only 29% of women hold senior management positions globally. Babic and Hansez (2021) note that in Belgium, only 16% of leadership positions are held by women, although this has significantly increased from 10% a decade ago. Panda (2020) suggested that gender bias puts women at a more significant disadvantage than men globally, with men occupying more powerful positions



in government and business. Consequently, women in leadership roles also face external gender bias, which affects their ability to lead corporations effectively. As a result, women in today's corporate world experience discrimination that creates a "glass ceiling," which limits their opportunities for advancement.

Gender bias and stereotypes continue to impede women's progress in management careers, resulting in a glass ceiling that prevents them from advancing beyond a certain level due to discrimination based on gender or race (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Panda, 2020; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women experience discrimination in obtaining senior management positions, indicating they cannot hold them regardless of their qualifications, experience, and skills. Although equal opportunity policies forbid open discrimination against women, the glass ceiling persists in modern organizations because these barriers are difficult to observe. According to Panda (2020), invisible barriers other than sexism hinder women from attaining senior positions. Gender biases, norms, and stereotypes in managers' minds prevent women from progressing to leadership roles (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Panda, 2020).

Women entrepreneurs encounter various barriers and biases that impede their success in business. These obstacles are primarily gender-based and rooted in cultural norms, values, and customs, according to Bullough et al. (2022). Women are subject to bias regarding their leadership style and the perceptions of their practical leadership practices. The role incongruity theory posits that individuals perceive inconsistencies between their leadership ideals and the expectations of gender roles for women. This leads to discrimination when women are seen as less suitable than men as potential leaders, as the anticipated behaviors for their gender roles conflict with leadership attributions. Bias also arises when the accepted conduct of a leader is

viewed less favorably when endorsed by a woman, resulting in negative attitudes towards female leaders and creating barriers for women to become leaders and achieve leadership success.

Tabassum and Nayak (2021) conceptualized gender stereotypes affecting women's performance in managerial positions in the contemporary workplace. They revealed that women are pressured by gender stereotypes, negatively impacting their mental health when they employ interpersonal leadership styles in male-dominated industries. Similarly, gender stereotypes limit women's ambition for career progression and hinder their performance in the workplace. Managers are perceived as illogical and emotional, while men are believed to portray gender-neutral decision-making and rationality.

Additionally, Babic and Hansez (2021) found that women feel excluded from communication and essential opportunities for career advancement due to needing more mentors. Women are limited to opportunity promotion whenever they are assigned positions with lower visibility, which prevents them from connecting and networking with senior management. This creates a glass ceiling for women, which results in different treatment than their male counterparts. Moreover, Panda (2020) found that gender inequality exists in contemporary organizations across all industries, as customers discriminate between workers based on gender. Women working in a biased workplace have fewer positive attitudes and trust than men because they feel left out and expect more discrimination.

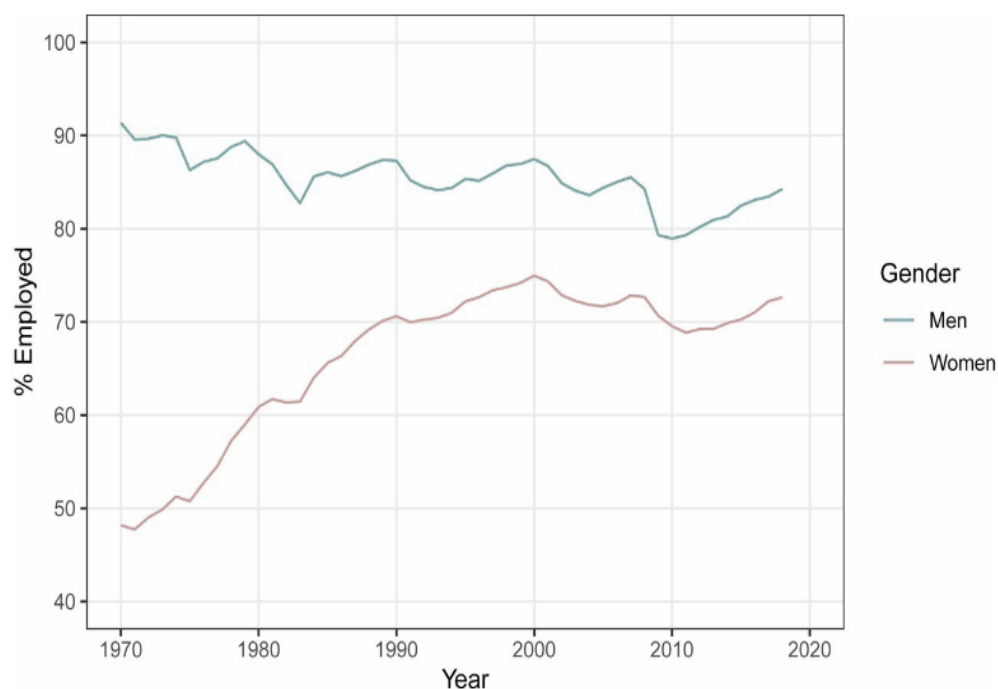
### ***Bridging The Gender Inequality Gap In The Workplace***

According to England et al. (2020), there has been a significant shift in gender inequality in the workplace in recent years, with more women entering traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering, accounting, technology, and mathematics. This trend has been institutionalized in organizational policies, resulting in more equal employment opportunities for

women. The authors note that this change has been facilitated by a shift in attitudes toward gender roles, with society becoming more accepting of women pursuing careers outside the home. In their analysis of employment trends in the U.S. from 1970 to 2018, England et al. (2020) found that while men's employment rates have been consistently higher than women's, women's employment has increased from 48% in 1970 to 73% in 2018. During the Great Recession, men's employment rates experienced more significant fluctuations than women's, with men's employment falling from 91% in 1970 to 84% in 2018, while women's employment fell from 84% to 79% in 2008 and 2009, before rising to 84% in 2010 (England et al., 2020). Figure 10 shows the percentage of men and women employed between 1970 and 2018.

### Figure 10

*Percentage of Men and Women From 1970 to 2018*



*Note.* Adapted from “Progress Toward Gender Equality in the U.S. Has Slowed or Stalled,” by P. England, A. Levine, and E. Mishel, 2020, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(13), 6990 (<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1918891117>). Copyright 2020 by NAS.

Women's participation in STEM fields has been encouraged to achieve gender equity. However, men still dominate these fields, with only 20% of white women and less than 10% of women of color holding STEM positions in the U.S. (Sardelis et al., 2017). To overcome gender biases and inequality in STEM, promoting conferences where minority groups can network and collaborate for future accomplishments has been suggested as a practical approach. However, Sardelis et al. (2017) argued that STEM conference opportunities are unequal between men and women, reducing women's chances to seize the opportunities presented in these meetings. To address this issue, Sardelis et al. recommended that women be allowed to participate in these conferences to enhance their visibility in research and science and serve as models to encourage junior female scientists. A similar approach should be taken in exposing women to frontline industries and occupations, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where women served as essential workers (Foley & Cooper, 2021). Thus, it is necessary to prioritize effectively exposing women to areas they need to venture into to overcome gender biases and inequality in various fields.

Women's pursuit of advanced education has increased, empowering them to seize employment opportunities and reduce male dominance in some fields. According to England et al. (2020), in 1970, more men obtained baccalaureate degrees than women. However, the number of women pursuing these degrees rose, while that of men remained flat for 20 years. Similarly, the researchers found that the number of men pursuing doctoral degrees, such as MDs and PhDs, was relatively flat between 1970 and 2000, which later rose. In contrast, the number of women pursuing doctoral degrees started below that of men but later rose sharply and consistently, surpassing that of men in the early 2000s. Women's massive enrollment in advanced degrees and

their excellent performance have increased their career opportunities and earnings in fields previously dominated by men.

According to Burkhard (2022), providing equal access to education is a crucial step in addressing societal inequalities, as it allows all children, regardless of gender or race, to think critically. Schools and higher learning institutions shape social values and create a culture promoting equality. Burkhard also noted that men and women learn differently, with disparities observed in literacy and mathematics. Women tend to underestimate their abilities in mathematics, which may discourage them from pursuing careers in natural sciences. In contrast, men tend to overestimate their abilities. Therefore, it is essential to empower women to pursue studies in science and mathematics to increase their representation in these fields. Burkhard suggested that employers should standardize evaluation criteria to accommodate as many women as possible and achieve gender equity in companies.

According to Burkhard (2022), companies can promote women's inclusion on boards by publishing the composition of their boards, which can help to coerce them to incorporate women as part of company boards. The endorsement of this strategy has led to an increase in the number of women on boards from 15.1% in 2015 to 24% in 2021. This and other regulations have promoted women's inclusion on boards. Burkhard noted that companies including women on their boards and management have outperformed their counterparts who have yet to embrace diversity. Additionally, Foley and Cooper (2021) found that equality bargaining can be used to create gender equality, but it is underdeveloped by unions. They suggest that creative and inclusive reworking of unions to include gender equality can bypass the barrier of resistance from officials and union members to negotiate inclusion and equal treatment of women in organizations, particularly in the UK.

### ***Work-Life Balance***

Burkhard (2022) suggests implementing a flexible work environment and offering part-time working arrangements to promote work-life balance and support women in top management positions. Brussevich et al. (2018) argue that legal, institutional, and fiscal policies can also boost women's selection in certain occupations and sectors. Policies on leave and affordable, quality childcare availability can empower women to balance their professional and familial duties efficiently (Burkhard, 2022). However, women are more inclined to take on part-time work than their male counterparts due to family responsibilities, lack of full-time employment, higher education, and illness (Burkhard, 2022). To encourage women's participation in STEM conferences, Sardelis et al. (2017) suggested offering childcare services to reduce the burden of childcare responsibilities that typically fall on women. Women with children can attend conferences, network, and showcase their skills alongside other scientists by providing childcare.

Managing work and personal life can create obstacles that hurt employees' performance. Cerrato and Cifre (2018) suggest that conflicts can arise due to high stress levels, limited time, and competing expectations from both work and home domains. Women are particularly affected by these conflicts, which result in both work-home conflict (WHC) and home-work conflict (HWC). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted gender inequalities in the workplace, with women being disproportionately affected. Foley and Cooper (2021) note that the pandemic has reduced working hours for women by 10.8%, compared to 7.5% for men, and high rates of underemployment and unemployment (21% for women versus 19% for men). Furthermore, women have had to take low-paying jobs, such as childcare and eldercare, to balance their work and personal responsibilities. The pandemic has thus underscored the need for employers to

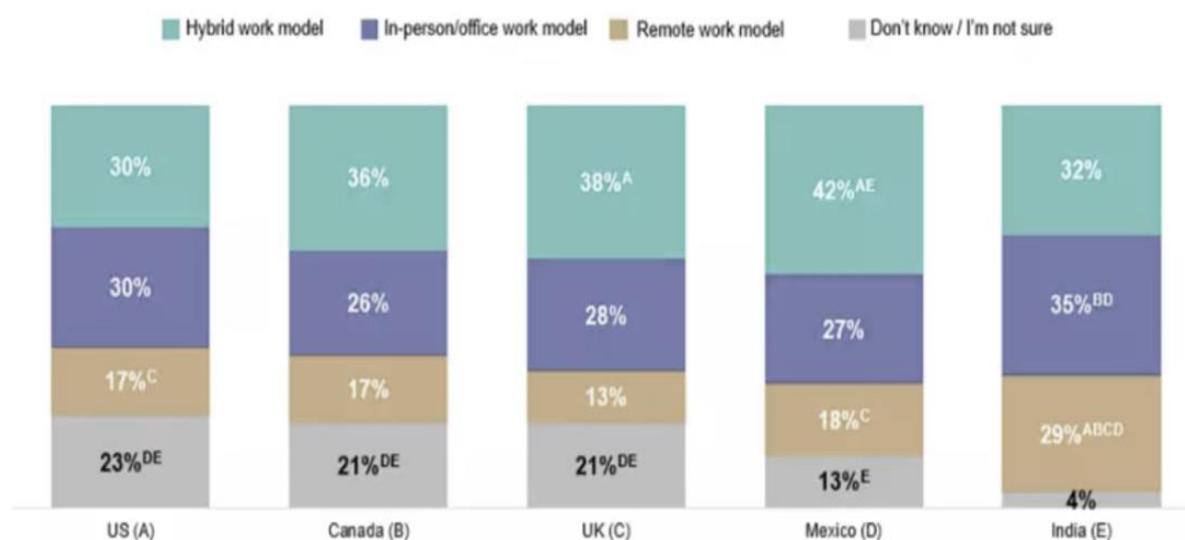
develop work-life balance strategies that address the specific needs of women, including underemployment and financial insecurity, in addition to time management.

### ***Women Working in a Hybrid Environment***

To enhance workplace productivity, hybrid work environments can be implemented using fixed and flexible hybrid methods (Milenko et al., 2021). However, a study conducted in India revealed that women faced additional responsibilities when working remotely, leaving them feeling neglected due to the lockdown's impact on their work and personal lives (Devagiri, 2022). While flexibility may help retain women and minority populations in the workplace, physical presence is believed to be crucial for career advancement. According to Xie (2022), in the U.S., both the mixed work paradigm and in-person/office models are considered equally beneficial for career advancement, while only 17% believe that remote work is the best approach. Interestingly, more people in Canada, the UK, Mexico, and India than in the U.S. believed that the mixed work paradigm is advantageous for advancing women and minorities in the workplace. Figure 11 shows the beneficial work model for advancing women and minorities.

**Figure 11**

*The Most Beneficial Work Model for Advancing Women and Minorities*



*Note.* From “One in Three Women Tries to Shatter the Glass Ceiling Amidst Ongoing Hardship,” by K. Xie, 2022, (<https://press.hp.com/us/en/blogs/2022/Women-shatter-glass-ceiling-ongoing-hardship.html>). Copyright 2022 by Hewlett-Packard.

According to a report, there may be a gender disparity in the number of men and women returning to work. The report suggests that men and women may prefer working from home, in-person, or in a hybrid setting. The report notes that men are likelier to return to work in person, while women prefer remote work. Failure to adopt hybrid work models may result in men having more control over the workplace, allowing women to close the gender gap (Gartner Research, 2021).

### ***Benefits and Challenges of a Hybrid Work Set-up for Women***

While much of the existing literature emphasizes the added responsibilities and challenges women face with hybrid work arrangements, such models can create more opportunities for women if implemented effectively. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women in the workforce had to bear a disproportionate amount of the burden compared to men. However, the introduction of flexible work-from-home and hybrid work models has provided women with



significant benefits, enabling them to pursue opportunities that may have been previously out of reach. Hybrid models offer women the motivation and flexibility to structure their day according to their unique needs and circumstances (T. Singh, 2021).

**Benefits of Hybrid Environment for Women Employees.** Haas (2022) stated that recent surveys indicate women prefer working remotely and full-time more than men by a margin of 10%. A permutation of remote and in-person work constitutes a hybrid work environment, which has become popular during the COVID-19 pandemic (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021). According to Wontorczyk and Roźnowski (2022), the hybrid work model has both benefits and drawbacks, especially for women in the workplace. Women prefer the hybrid work environment because it gives them more control over their time and money, reducing commuting time and helping them achieve a work-life balance (Ucel et al., 2022).

Additionally, remote work can benefit women who face difficulties performing optimally in their employer's workspace due to various factors, such as living far away or having disabled family members. The hybrid work environment also enables women to maintain contact with their loved ones, crucial for restoring their personal and work lives, as Wontorczyk and Roźnowski (2022) noted. Kooli (2023) highlighted the challenges women in the UAE faced while working from home during the pandemic. These include visible barriers such as presentism and impervious workplaces and hidden barriers such as cultural and religious issues. Therefore, a hybrid work environment is more suitable for women, as it offers flexibility and helps reduce work-related challenges.

Women benefit from a hybrid environment as it provides a comfortable workplace where they can advance professionally, even after childbirth, and foster mother-child bonding (Kooli, 2023). In addition, research has shown that a hybrid environment promotes gender equality, as

physical stature does not matter in this working environment. This means that women are treated equally to their male counterparts, who may enjoy advantages due to their physique in other work environments.

According to Wontorczyk and Roźnowski (2022), a hybrid environment provides a peaceful and quiet working space, which allows women to focus on their tasks and increases their productivity. Moreover, a hybrid working environment promotes loyalty to employers, and workers can enjoy flexible work planning that improves their well-being and health (Kooli, 2023; Wontorczyk & Roźnowski, 2022). The isolation that comes with hybrid work arrangements was also beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing workers from contracting the virus and maintaining their health (Wontorczyk & Roźnowski, 2022). Women working in a hybrid environment have more control over their work, whether they follow organizational rules or work autonomously.

According to Wigert and White (2022), hybrid work offers several benefits, including improved work balance, effective time utilization, flexibility in work hours and location, burnout prevention, and increased productivity. This approach allows employees to split their work time between home, a local, flexible space or office, and the central headquarters, improving efficiency and promoting work-life balance, especially for women (Santillan et al., 2023).

A recent poll showed that 56% of respondents believed the hybrid work setup facilitated their career advancement (Wigert & White, 2022). Additionally, 75% reported increased productivity; the same percentage stated that it improved their work-life balance. Interestingly, almost half of the respondents (49%) said they would consider quitting their job if required to work in the office daily, highlighting the vital role hybrid working plays in their daily lives.

Women employees also benefited from this model, with 55% reporting improved career progression.

Recent studies have shown that adopting a hybrid working model can benefit women more than men (Santillan et al., 2023). Perkbox's research reveals that 61% of women feel more comfortable expressing their true selves while working remotely, compared to only 51% of men surveyed. Additionally, 55% of respondents noted that hybrid working has led to more diverse and inclusive work environments, while 54% reported a better work-life balance (Omoigui, 2022).

Flexible work-from-home and hybrid work models have allowed women to pursue opportunities that may have previously been hindered by factors such as relocation, marriage, and pregnancy (T. Singh, 2021). These hybrid models allow women to plan their day and work around various commitments; technological advancements have eliminated temporal and physical barriers, reducing the chances of women voluntarily dropping out of the workforce. Women can now take control of their professional destinies.

As Anders (2022) stated, there is a higher proportion of women (20%) than men (14%) who have opted for hybrid work arrangements as of August 2022. This gender disparity in hybrid work arrangements has drawn the attention of many people, who have different opinions on whether it is beneficial. For working parents with young children, the option to work from home on some days can make it easier to balance work and personal obligations. While this is true for working mothers and fathers in some families, it is not always the case.

**Weaknesses of the Hybrid Environment for Women Employees.** Despite its advantages, the hybrid work environment presents several challenges for women. One issue is work-family conflict, which is fostered by remote work. According to Kooli (2023), men benefit

more from remote work than women, particularly those without children. On the other hand, mothers must balance caregiving and domestic activities, which may slow their productivity and negatively affect their career growth.

Moreover, Kooli (2023) claimed that a hybrid environment creates an inconsistent climate where domestic roles overlap with work, adding to women's challenges. Another drawback is the decline in communication and efficiency compared to physical offices. Additionally, Kooli argued that this setup hampers interpersonal relationships, which is crucial for a healthy and progressive work environment. Moreover, Wontorczyk and Roźnowski (2022) suggested that the psychosocial risks associated with isolation make women less productive, while K. M. J. Iqbal et al. (2021) asserted that prolonged isolation can burden women when required to socialize or interact with others.

The hybrid work environment can also pose challenges for women and minority groups. K. M. J. Iqbal et al. (2021) warn that the hybrid model may marginalize women and minorities, as they may interact mainly with each other rather than with the broader team. This could lead to difficulty socializing and collaborating with others during online and onsite meetings. Wontorczyk and Roźnowski (2022) found that lack of interpersonal connectivity can negatively impact work engagement and motivation, particularly for women. Moreover, juggling domestic responsibilities and work tasks in a hybrid setting can reduce women's concentration, performance, and productivity. Kooli (2023) highlighted that women face various challenges when working remotely, including work intensification, technical difficulties, and distractions. However, Beno (2021) suggests that the hybrid work environment can also promote forgiveness and compassion among colleagues.

Women may face hindered career progress due to stagnancy when working from home, despite enjoying its flexibility. Haas (2022) notes that it is difficult for women to establish career networks on-site, which becomes even more challenging when working remotely. This makes it difficult for women to build mentoring or sponsorship relationships, as they are less visible to those who could help them advance their careers. Moreover, stereotypes of women being less committed to their work, especially if they are mothers, may make adopting a hybrid or remote working environment seem like a way to be less committed to one's career. In addition, women may not feel heard or taken seriously in virtual meetings, leading to reduced participation. Haas reported that a survey by Catalyst found that 45% of women could not speak during a virtual meeting, while 20% felt that their associates were ignoring them during video calls. This lack of voice may prevent women from seeking clarification, raising complaints or concerns, offering compliments or comments, or contributing to the successful operation of a company.

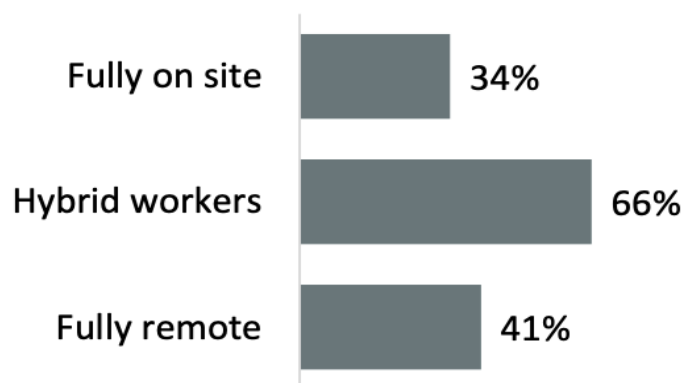
The obstacles to hybrid work include inadequate tools for productive work, reduced engagement with the organizational culture, poor cooperation and relationships, and disrupted work processes. The rise of hybrid work necessitates improving coordination between home and on-site resources. Home offices must be equipped with permanent and fully functional workstations to promote individual productivity. Additionally, office and conference rooms must have remote work collaboration stations that enable distant team members to participate fully in team interactions (Wigert & White, 2022).

Although many firms have adopted hybrid working in the past year, a 2022 Deloitte survey (Deloitte Australia, 2022) highlighted key findings on women's experience in a hybrid environment.

- In the study, 44% indicated they work in a hybrid capacity, suggesting that fears concerning exclusion are not unwarranted. Additionally, 54% of women working in hybrid environments have already encountered a lack of versatility in their work schedules or fear this will occur.
- Nearly two-thirds of women who work in hybrid environments believe they have been sidelined from meetings and discussions, and nearly half claim they do not have sufficient exposure to leaders, a crucial factor in sponsorship and career advancement.
- Based on the study, 64% of employees who work in a hybrid setting reported that their employer did not establish clear expectations for where and how they were expected to work.
- Women who work in a hybrid work setup are considerably more likely to experience microaggressions (See Figure 12) than those who are entirely on-site or are completely remote.

**Figure 12**

*Percentage of People Experiencing Microaggressions in the Past Year*



*Note.* From Deloitte Australia, 2022, Deloitte. (<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/deloitte-women-at-work-2022-a-global-outlook.pdf>). Copyright 2022 by Deloitte.

### *Value Of Empowering Women In The Workplace*

The value of women in the workplace is immense, as they contribute significantly to businesses, industries, and entire economies. A Bloomberg analysis suggests that improving women's access to employment could enhance economic expansion by \$20 trillion by 2050 while closing the gender wage gap could increase the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries by \$2 trillion (Dupita et al., 2021). Women can succeed in the workplace when they move beyond being merely included and develop a deep sense of belonging. This cannot be achieved in isolation but must be integrated into every program and organizational engagement. This involves creating space for their success, taking on leadership roles, acting as sponsors, and encouraging and supporting them both in and out of the office (Alight Blog, 2021).

The meaningful participation of women in the economy is crucial for achieving greater global security and stability. Economically empowered women invest in their communities and families, stimulating economic growth and creating more stable societies. Developing nations must accelerate women's economic empowerment to achieve financial independence and transition from aid partners to trading partners (Women's Economic Empowerment, n.d.).

Boosting gender representation in upper management and promoting more equal development procedures have been identified as critical steps in achieving gender parity in organizations (Dukach, 2022). Researchers have found that organizations use less gender-stereotypical language when they have female executives in leadership positions. Thus, appointing women to leadership roles could positively impact an organization's culture (Lawson et al., 2022).

Studies have shown that organizations with more women have higher work participation and retention rates and a more positive and purposeful organizational culture. These findings vary across factors such as age, industry, company size, executive level, ethnicity, and gender. Furthermore, men reported greater job satisfaction, enjoyment, and less burnout when working in companies with more female employees (LeanIn, 2022).

### **Fostering a Hybrid Environment**

Organizations should implement various strategies to promote a successful hybrid work environment (Colenberg et al., 2021). Communication and preference-focused strategies ensure women can work effectively in a hybrid environment with a working space that minimizes distractions. Women should also be encouraged to utilize communication technologies to interact and connect with colleagues and management. Beno (2021) emphasizes the importance of effective communication in a hybrid environment to promote cooperation and interaction among remote workers. Modern managers must also possess the necessary skills to manage employees in a hybrid environment. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid work was not widespread, making it essential for managers to be equipped with the skills to manage employees in this new work model.

To promote a thriving hybrid work environment, workers must possess IT skills to operate technologies and solve related problems (Beno, 2021). Employers should understand the system's benefits, such as cost savings on office expenses, and provide training for their employees on the required technologies (K. M. J. Iqbal et al., 2021). Organizations should also explore the latest technologies and innovations supporting a hybrid work environment. However, educating employees on cyber threats and data breaches when working remotely is equally essential to ensure they are cautious with their actions and activities.



## **Gaps in the Literature**

The literature on hybrid work systems lacks best practices for women to feel a sense of belonging in such workplace setups. Deloitte's (2021) research offers a range of recommendations for businesses to overcome obstacles and ensure that hybrid work fulfills its potential. The recommendations include providing hybrid employees with practical technologies and connectivity, considering "hybrid schedulers" for employees to share their work locations and arrange in-person collaboration with coworkers, and balancing adaptability and regularity. Transparency of schedules and locations can be critical in ensuring that employees do not miss out on essential interactions due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Employers should also promote equality and inclusion, ensuring all employees are treated equally regardless of their work style.

Providing hybrid event attendance options can be a common strategy to ensure the inclusion of both hybrid and remote workers. Dynamic leadership skills such as empathy and adaptability are crucial for managing hybrid teams. Some significant technology, media, and telecommunications (TMT) companies have implemented new childcare perks, including stipends, expanded caregiver leave, subsidized alternative childcare and tutoring, and help in locating screened-on-demand childcare for employees. However, there is a lack of research on the implementation strategies and how to incorporate all women's issues to benefit from the hybrid work system. Additionally, hybrid work is emerging as a new form of global work organization, and evidence suggests a causal relationship between the degree of hybrid work (the proportion of time spent working from home versus in the office) and work outcomes (De Souza Santos & Ralph, 2022).

Choudhury et al. (2022) found that an intermediate number of days working in the office is associated with an increase in the number of emails sent, the number of emails received, and the uniqueness of work items. They also found that hybrid work can provide workers with a better work-life balance without the risk of isolation from colleagues, representing the best of both worlds. However, there is a lack of research on how women may experience a decreased sense of belonging in a hybrid workplace.

Studies have shown that women often face disadvantages in the workplace compared to men, but there is currently limited research on the specific consequences of remote work. It has become evident that hybrid work arrangements can create power differentials between in-office and remote workers, and remote workers, regardless of gender, may face disadvantages (Haas, 2022). Women who work remotely may experience a double disadvantage, but there is a lack of research to identify potential solutions.

Anders (2022) argued that poorly executed hybrid work arrangements can be improved to create better career opportunities for talented individuals, including women. Leadership coach Valerie Martinelli suggested that managers focus on achieving role-specific fits to create career-nourishing moments for employees (Martinelli, 2021). However, there is a digital divide between rural and urban areas, with rural areas often being left behind in remote work opportunities due to a lack of digital connectivity (Anders, 2022). This disparity needs to be addressed so that the benefits of digitalization can be extended to rural areas to improve their living standards. For women, the flexibility and openness provided by the hybrid work model are significant and welcome, as they often feel obligated to choose between their family and career (Dupita et al., 2021). The successful implementation of hybrid work arrangements has the potential to transform the professional lives of women and contribute to sustainable change.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 began by explaining the variable, the hybrid workplace setup. It defined the term, types, components, and all relevant terms associated with remote work. In addition, the chapter discussed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its association with hybrid workplace systems, as it was the fundamental reason companies started to shift their working model. Explaining why the hybrid system was called the new norm of work, the literature review presented the emphasis on women in the workforce and the contemporary issues women face in shifting working models by linking this with the Great Resignation, the notion of women leaving the workplace altogether due to the lack of support, and feeling underappreciated.

This brought to the study the following variable: belonging to a hybrid space- feeling welcomed and appreciated in the workplace. Therefore, the chapter explained the elements of belonging in a hybrid workplace and why women do not think they belong due to contemporary issues. In addition, analyses are studied on the impact of hybrid workplaces on the force of women to develop associations and significant challenges were discussed. Lastly, gaps were identified in the literature to validate the framework on why a study must be conducted to check the effect of a hybrid work system on women and if women feel they belong with the existing practices of these systems.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and Procedures**

Chapter 3 provided a synopsis of the planning and execution of this investigation. It summarized the study's objectives and research questions. Additionally, the chapter discussed how data was to be collected and analyzed using the Delphi approach. Additionally, the choice of participants, safeguarding human subjects, crafting the study's tools, the methodology for gathering and analyzing data, and the declaration of any researcher biases.

#### **Restatement of the Research Questions**

This study examined critical factors for creating a strong sense of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment. A literature review revealed that numerous studies have been conducted on belongingness, hybrid teams, and women in the workforce, but not on all three elements in conjunction with best practices. Given the shift to a more hybrid work environment after COVID-19, as discussed in Chapter 2, it was important to identify critical factors to create a formidable sense of belonging for women working in hybrid teams. Lower turnover, cultures, and output all contribute to an organization's success.

#### ***Research Questions***

The following two research questions informed this Delphi study:

- RQ1: What are the critical factors for creating a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?
- RQ2: Can these critical factors be used to develop a theoretical framework to understand a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?

## **Research Design**

This study used a Delphi process to understand the critical factors for creating a strong sense of belonging in women who work in a hybrid work environment. The Delphi method is robust for conducting mixed-method research in industry, government, and academia (E. Hall, 2009). This mixed-method approach incorporates quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a fuller view of the topic (Dragostinov et al., 2022). In the initial phase, a combination of qualitative analysis (topics combined) and quantitative analysis (ranking) is used to achieve consensus (S. S. McMillan et al., 2014).

## **History of the Delphi Method**

RAND Corporation pioneered the Delphi methodology, which Norman Dalkey and Olaf Helmer led in 1962 (Landeta, 2006; Skulmoski et al., 2007). This method is considered an organized, discovery learning and evidence-collection technique used for qualitative studies to assist a panel of experts in reaching a consensus in identifying criteria through a sequence of questions and rounds of deliberation (Habibi et al., 2014). Thus, this was created to get a reliable consensus from experts from multiple phases of questions interleaved with feedback in a U.S. military project (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963).

Four features constitute the Delphi procedure (Skulmoski et al., 2007).

1. **Anonymity:** Surveys allow group members to voice their opinions and perspectives without feeling pressured by the other experts' views. This ensures that individual voices will be considered and that no judgments will be made based on other people's views.
2. **Iteration:** Questioning can occur in multiple phases, and group members continue to provide vital feedback at each session.

3. **Controlled Feedback:** Anonymous responses will be distributed to everyone. Usually, a collective summary is presented.
4. **Statistical Findings:** A summary of the group's results is compiled and distributed to the group members. The group view is subsequently transformed into the statistical mean.

There is some room for modification in the implementation of the outlined procedure. For example, the initial round could consist of an open interview with each participant to elicit initial responses. The response can be evoked quantitatively in successive rounds. Using the Delphi approach effectively identifies top information (Dalkey, 1969).

#### ***Appropriateness As Applied To This Study***

It has been demonstrated that the Delphi method is beneficial in the following categories: obtaining recent and historical information that is not precisely understood or available, identifying and clarifying genuine and assumed human motivations, and revealing the priority of personal values and social goals (Linstone et al., 1976). Furthermore, Linstone and Turoff (1979) identified the relevant conditions for a Delphi investigation, which are as follows:

- The issue is not amenable to exact analytic procedures. However, it can also benefit from idiosyncratic collective opinions.
- The people responsible for contributing to analyzing a large or complicated problem lack a history of effective interaction and may come from varied backgrounds in terms of experience or skill.
- More people are required than can interact effectively in a direct setting.
- Time and expense prohibit numerous group meetings.

- A supplementary group communication process can improve the productivity of face-to-face meetings.
- Individual disagreements are so strong or politically undesirable that the dialogue must be mediated or guaranteed anonymity.
- Preserving the diversity of the individuals is necessary to ensure the validity of the results (Linstone et al., 1976).

A Delphi study employed the advice of experienced professionals as participants to discover which factors are critical to creating a strong sense of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment and are crucial to their effective design. Since participants may reside throughout the entire U.S., Delphi research saved the time and expense necessary for a group meeting (Geist, 2010).

### ***General Application***

As a tool for expert problem-solving, the Delphi method can be applied to a sizeable range of circumstances (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). The Delphi method is a process that gathers experts (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). Padel and Midmore (2005) noted that Delphi is used less in applied social science because it needed to be more well-known than other methods. However, Delphi has recently been used extensively on health and education topics (Humphrey-Murto & De Wit, 2019). The application of this method has been seen in other fields, including management, strategic planning, and training (Duin, 2016). In recent years, the Delphi method has also been used in studies related to construction projects (Kermanshachi et al., 2020), the hotel industry (Wong et al., 2021), and health sciences (Taze et al., 2022).

### *Previous Applications of Delphi to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging*

Despite its many uses, the Delphi method's primary goal remains the collection of expert opinions on primarily unknown matters, which are challenging to define, extremely context- and expertise-specific, or futuristic (Fletcher & Marchildon, 2014). For example, a 2016 study used a Delphi study to encourage the formation of shared knowledge among global protected area managers concerning planning approaches that will help appropriately manage visitors in the face of growing recreational pressures worldwide (Fefer et al., 2016). Another study applied the Delphi method as an in-depth systematized approach with directors. It produced unexpected and substantial insights regarding the advantages of combining and giving equal value to culture, customer service, and continuous improvement to increase quality in all three areas (McCrary et al., 2017). Table 4 shows a list of research studies that implement the Delphi method in this field.

**Table 4**

#### *Delphi Method and Literature Related to the Study*

<b>Applications of Delphi Method</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging	Kauffeld, S., Tartler, D., Gräfe, H., Windmann, A.-K., & Sauer, N. C. (2022). What will mobile and virtual work look like in the future?—Results of a Delphi-based study. Maassen, S. M., van Oostveen, C., Vermeulen, H., & Weggelaar, A. M. (2021). Defining a positive work environment for hospital healthcare professionals: A Delphi study. Rupprecht, M., Birner, K., Gruber, H., & Mulder, R. H. (2011). Dealing with diversity in consulting teams: results of two Delphi studies. Zallio, M., & Clarkson, P. J. (2022). The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility audit. A post-occupancy evaluation method to help design the buildings of tomorrow.
Framework Development	Janati, A., Hasanpoor, E., Hajebrahimi, S., Sadeghi-Bazargani, H., & Khezri, A. (2018). An Evidence-



Applications of Delphi Method	Examples
	<p>Based Framework for Evidence-Based Management in Healthcare Organizations: A Delphi Study. Malik, R. F., Buljac-Samardžić, M., Amajjar, I., Hilders, C. G. J. M., &amp; Scheele, F. (2021). Open organisational culture: what does it entail? Healthcare stakeholders reaching consensus by means of a Delphi technique.</p> <p>Perrenoud, A. J. (2020). Delphi Approach to Identifying Best Practices for Succession Planning within Construction Firms.</p>

### *Key Assumptions*

The researcher considered several significant assumptions.

- When evaluating the significance of the competencies, the panelists provided entirely honest comments.
- Panelists would not display biased views based on their perspective and what they typically look for without necessarily considering the competencies that are being presented to them.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses of the Delphi Method*

Using the Delphi approach has increased over the past three decades. The current accessibility and continuing acceptance of research tools based on the Internet have helped mitigate the limitations of Delphi while maximizing its advantages and increasing its application scope (Donohoe et al., 2012). The Delphi method facilitates communication between specialists with the help of a mediator (a researcher), thus removing various barriers to a rational academic argument (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019). Some examples of the strengths of using the Delphi method are as follows:

- Permit professionals to avoid direct encounters with each other (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963).
- Connect current knowledge with areas of disagreement and agreement (S. Iqbal & Pison-Young, 2009).
- It does not require closeness or in-person meetings and so permits specialists to think independently (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963).
- Permit indistinctness, which fosters originality, candor, and a stable evaluation of notions while lowering the danger of group interaction that could otherwise sway the outcomes (Donohoe & Needham, 2009).
- Through the input provided in Delphi, an expert can gain a deeper understanding of empirical variables or theoretical conventions, enabling the individual to fix misunderstandings (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963).

Despite the strengths of the Delphi method noted in the literature above, it has been criticized due to some shortcomings that the current method uses (Barrett & Heale, 2020). There has been a lack of direction and consensus on analyzing outcomes, choosing participants, and defining consensus (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019). These weaknesses are further expanded below.

- Defining and selecting the level of expertise pose problems when curating the panel of experts best suited for the study (Welty, 1972).
- Even though Delphi's research has a lot of flexibility and self-reflection built in, it is still unlikely that a group of experts will agree on everything (Barrett & Heale, 2020).
- Delphi can be time-consuming and tedious, so it is susceptible to dropouts. In addition, participants may abandon the program due to lengthy time commitment,

diversion between rounds, or dissatisfaction with the procedure (Donohoe & Needham, 2009).

As discussed previously, anonymity is one of the strengths of Delphi; it is also one of its weaknesses, resulting in certain disadvantages, such as less control of ideas (S. Iqbal & Pison-Young, 2009). It allows panelists to say what they want and others to judge other ideas without fear of censure (de Villiers et al., 2005). Since the success of the technique depends on the characteristics of the responses, the researcher has a significant obligation to analyze the responses thoroughly. Moreover, it is challenging to identify what establishes adequate consensus in the Delphi approach (Donohoe & Needham, 2009).

Although entering information into an electronic/online-based survey is advantageous in using e-Delphi, it may be inconvenient for other professionals. Internet accessibility issues, technological hurdles, and annoyance in inputting data into computer-based displays, as opposed to the simplicity of hard copy "page-flipping," create unanticipated obstacles (Donohoe et al., 2012).

### ***Modified Delphi Methodology***

The modified Delphi study was found to be the suitable method to use for this study. Delphi is advantageous for subjects who are generally excluded from traditional research and may be in a lesser position of power as Delphi allows contributions from respondents to eliminate "power dynamics while increasing involvement (Brady, 2015). The revised Delphi process relies on expert consensus to improve the validity of the content when there is not enough (Shields et al., 2022). The Delphi method starts with a literature review and continues with several rounds of stakeholder voting to arrive at a group decision (Humphrey-Murto & De Wit, 2019).

## **Procedural Steps in the Delphi Process**

The basic design consists of collecting groups of experts who then responded to a series of "rounds" using e-mail responses to specific queries (Hsu & Sandford, 2019). After every round, groups received information regarding the group's answer, which consisted of a ranking of points where they agreed from most to least frequently cited (Avella, 2016). In a Delphi study, a consensus is not synonymous with unanimity, as it can be challenging for groups representing diverse constituencies with differing opinions and interests to reach a consensus (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001).

### ***Panel of Experts***

An expert can be characterized as someone who possesses expertise and knowledge on a particular topic; however, it is challenging to quantify expertise in practice (Nasa et al., 2021). The objective of using experts is to expand the value of suggestions or consensus (Diamond et al., 2014). A Delphi research study does not require a statistical sample to indicate any population. It is a group decision-making process that requires experts with a deep understanding of the topics (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004).

### ***Delphi Study Phases***

For the context of this research, the researchers have modified the Delphi method, utilizing four phases.

- Phase 1: The researcher conducted an intensive literature search and identified critical factors for creating a strong culture of belonging among women in a hybrid work environment.
- Phase 2: Selection of a panel of experts given defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

- Phase 3: Implement the initial Delphi round through the first online survey. This was followed by an analysis of the survey's initial findings.
- Phase 4: Compiled the final list of consensus and report of findings.

### **Participant Selection**

Two methods were employed to recruit volunteers for the research. First, organizations operating a hybrid work paradigm were discovered through a literature review. Second, LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com>) was used to look for employees from these companies who fulfilled the criteria given. Following the identification of these people, a sampling frame was constructed.

Once people were selected, an email solicited their participation in the research (see Appendix C). When their email address could not be located, a LinkedIn message was sent requesting for a reference email to which the original recruitment letter could be sent. This strategy was used for potential panelists whom the investigator does not know directly. Other potential panelists known to the researcher were approached individually by emailing the script.

### ***Analysis Unit***

The analysis unit, which was classified as an expert for the context of this research, consists of individuals 18 years or older who have worked in Human Resources and/DEI (and similar offices) for at least 10 years and whose organization has been operating in a hybrid environment for more than 2 years. Someone is known as an "expert" on a particular topic, issue, or system because of their education, training, or experience (Ruocco, 2011). Top-level executives develop plans and procedures to ensure an organization meets its goals. They direct and organize the work operations of companies and organizations (Hiriyappa, 2009). Executive positions include, but are not limited to, C-suite executives (examples: chief executive officer,

chief of staff, or chief operating officer), president, vice president, director, or manager (Finkelstein et al., 2009).

### ***Purposive Sampling***

This study used purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, researchers deliberately pick individuals to learn about or comprehend the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher utilized LinkedIn, one of the largest professional social networking sites for employees in all industries (Gerard, 2012). Leighton et al.'s (2021) research analysis showed that data acquired through social networking sites such as LinkedIn is an 'effective and efficient' means of recruiting study participants. The researcher also utilized the following LinkedIn paid tools to create a more curated list of experts that matches the population:

- LinkedIn Sales Navigator
- LinkedIn Helper

### ***Sampling Frame***

The methods used to compile a master list with comprehensive contact information are as follows:

- LinkedIn People used to search for keywords "Human Resources" and "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion."
- The location was selected: U.S.
- Potential participants were contacted via LinkedIn messaging to obtain an email address.
- Applied criteria for exclusion and inclusion.
- Applied criteria for maximum variation.
- A survey was distributed that included the consent form on the first page.

- The method was repetitive until the required sample size was achieved.
- The master list was compiled using Microsoft Excel.

### *Sample Size*

The number of experts (sample size) varies between six and 50 (Creswell & Poth, 2018); however, according to Ludwig (1997), the bulk of Delphi surveys employ between 15 and 20 participants. The sample size beyond 100 is uncommon due to challenges in data management and the number of rounds (Nasa et al., 2021). Given this study's range, time, and resources, a sample size of 25 participants was deemed suitable to reach meaningful research. When the investigator could not recruit 25 volunteers, confirmed participants were asked to nominate others.

**Criteria for Inclusion.** Before selecting participants for the study, the qualifications of an expert panel were considered. The inclusion criteria were the following:

- Work experience in Human Resources or Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion divisions.
- Participants were asked to have management or supervisory experience in the past 10 years, defined as January 2012–December 2022.
- Experienced a transition from a complete in-person to a hybrid setup over the past 2 years, defined as April 2020–December 2022.

**Criteria for Exclusion.** Criteria for exclusion were also considered when the expert panel was assembled, and the participants were chosen. The exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Individuals who led hybrid teams, but this work model has not been standardized in their workplace/organization.
- The expert does not oversee any staffing concerns related to human resources or DEI.
- Individuals were in different industries during the 2 years of hybrid work.

**Maximum Variation Criteria.** If the number of responders exceeded what was needed, the following criteria were chosen and considered for maximum variation:

- geographical location,
- experience in DEI and Human Resources Management,
- years of experience within Human Resources Management or DEI roles, and
- in this approach, preference was given to someone available during the research period (February 2023–April 2023).

### **Protection for Human Subjects**

When human subjects are in research, it is essential to protect them as outlined by the Department of Health and Human Subjects of the U.S. Institutional Review Boards (IRB) to supervise the safety of study participants. Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology (GSEP) is a Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB) member. As defined by Pepperdine University's IRB, the mission is to provide full protection for researchers and participants through the following:

- Facilitating and promoting the safety of human research participants' rights, welfare, and dignity.
- Contributing to ensuring adherence to federal guidelines, state laws, university policies, and standard requirements for studies involving human subjects.
- Providing human research initiatives with timely, high-quality education, review, and oversight.
- Helping examiners conduct ethically sound, high-quality research per current regulations (Pepperdine University, n.d.).



Before recruiting study subjects, an exempt request was filed with the IRB for approval by Pepperdine's IRB. All recruitment scripts were accompanied by a consent form in the application, which was emailed to all potential participants. Participants were initially contacted through the LinkedIn messaging system to obtain their email addresses when interested in learning more about the study. Before each interview, interested participants reviewed the informed consent form. The researcher notified potential respondents of the nature of the research topic and asked for their written consent if they were willing to participate voluntarily.

Only the investigator could access the study's complete, password-protected information, and all participant-provided findings were anonymized. A survey system, Qualtrics, was used to collect all the information. In addition, electronic information analysis was performed, and the findings were recorded on a computer to which only the researcher would have password-protected and encrypted access. Once 3 years elapsed since the study's conclusion, the original data was erased to ensure safety and privacy.

### **Instrument Design**

This normative study used Qualtrics, an online survey tool. It consisted of three rounds of gathering information from human resources and DEI experts with experience leading women in a hybrid environment. Email was the only form of communication with the panelists.

### ***Initial List of Critical Items***

Based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the following are the critical factors influencing the promotion of a culture of belonging in the workplace:

- Organizational culture: To confirm that employees stay connected, productive, and engaged, there must be a positive, enduring, supportive, and all-encompassing organizational culture (Byrd, 2022).

- Leadership behaviors: In this sense, leadership plays a crucial role since the actions and goals of leaders are shaped by the behaviors and values they promote (Mey et al., 2021).
- Peer relationships: The relationship quality predicts work well-being (Coissard et al., 2017).
- Growth and Opportunity: A promotion based on performance or capacity to perform the job fosters a sense of justice or equity between employees, likely to be related with job satisfaction (S. Lim, 2008).
- Work Environment: As a result of the changing workplace norm, development projects should be shifted accordingly centered on the needs of both the employee and the organization (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).
- Fairness and Equity: Equity entails rules, methods, and procedures that guarantee all employees have similar opportunities to perform at the highest level (Gonzales, 2022).

### ***Likert Scale***

This survey used a Likert scale in Round 1 to gain a range of expert responses. The measures on the Likert scale ranged from 1 (*not at all important*) to 7 (*critically important*).

### ***Strengths And Weaknesses Of Likert Scale***

Several arguments might be made for the worldwide appeal of Likert scales; the evaluated measures are generally simple to administer and quantify (Bishop & Herron, 2015). The "conventional" analysis of total scores has intuitive significance. Moreover, assuming equal answer validity, the mean scores permit parametric statistics (Mircioiu & Atkinson, 2017). On the other hand, it may be challenging to establish validity and reproducibility with this scale.

Another shortcoming of the Likert scale is that respondents may evade the most extreme of response categories, resulting in a bias towards the average (Taherdoost, 2019).

### ***Validity***

Validity refers to how accurately a survey questionnaire captures what it is designed to assess and should apply to additional demographics (Story & Tait, 2019). The Delphi method ensures its validity through systematic, anonymous discussion between subject matter experts to reach a consensus on legislation, practices, or organizational decision-making (Brady, 2015). In addition, validity is established by the panelists' consensus and regulated input from a homogeneous group (Gero et al., 2022). In this Delphi study, the instrument's validity was ensured by the expert consensus reached after all three rounds of data collection.

The researcher took additional steps to establish the validity of this study and its questions. The researcher refined the questions using *prima facie* validity and peer evaluation (Appendix E). Subsequently, the interview questions were further refined by expert assessment.

- **Content Validity:** Based on personal experience, the researcher created an initial draft of the planned interview questions. A review of the questions informed the initial revision of the relevant literature. After extra consideration, the questions were reconstructed.
- **Peer Review Validity:** Peer reviewers were used to assess further this study's questions and the content's soundness. An email was sent to three peers using a peer review form, an effective method for collecting peer feedback via Qualtrics. Feedback was received on the research questions, and survey questions related to the research question were received; therefore, appropriate modifications were made.

- Expert-review Validity: The researcher gained additional insight from a faculty member to review the research questions to determine their expert validity.

### ***Reliability***

The subjective and narrative nature of the data may eventually make the analysis phase of the instrument less reliable. However, a study is deemed trustworthy if the interview data is consistent and the ideas it tests are measured impartially (Gani et al., 2020). Two peer volunteers tested the survey to ensure the reliability and appropriateness of the instrument. Participants completed questionnaires for each study round and provided readability and applicability feedback to the investigator on the instrument and the accuracy of the acquired data. During the test, feedback was collected to improve the survey questions and make the instrument more valid and reliable.

The Delphi method necessitates integrating the data compiled from each round. Consequently, the researcher must refrain from introducing prejudice into that process. The data will be analyzed inductively to reduce any personal bias that may occur.

### ***Presurvey Demographic Questions***

In most studies with people as participants, demographic questions are needed to accurately describe the study sample (Hughes et al., 2016). Presenting demographic questions first may encourage respondents to complete the study while also directing the researcher to ensure that desired inclusion and exclusion criteria are met (Burns et al., 2008).

### ***Round 1: Data Analysis***

The initial survey instrument contained a list of critical elements identified through the literature review. Participants were asked to rank each category from “Not at all Important” to “Critically Important.” For experts to include any other critical factors not previously identified,

an additional open-ended question was added. The median, mode, and IQR were analyzed for consensus and constancy, and a summary list was curated for Round 2.

### ***Round 2: Data Collection and Analysis***

The second wave of survey instruments comprised a list of critical items that did not reach an agreement and the coded additional factors added from Round 1, to which, in this case, no new items were added. Participants were asked to rank each category presented from “Not at all Important” to “Critically Important.” The median, mode, and IQR were calculated for consensus and stability, and a summary list was curated for Round 2.

### ***Round 3: Data Collection and Analysis***

A third round was implemented since a final consensus was not reached after Round 2. The third-round survey instrument continued to rank critical factors that had yet to reach a consensus from Round 2. Median, Mode, and IQR were calculated for consensus and stability, and a summary list was curated for Round 3.

### ***Final Consensus***

Once consensus is achieved, all items were tabulated according to their median, mode, and IQR. The final consensus report was presented in Chapter 4.

### **Data Collection**

Participants identified through LinkedIn were contacted for their email addresses through the LinkedIn messaging system. Email was the main form of contact with the participants. For efficiency, an informed consent form was included on the initial page of the Round 1 survey. Anyone who did not respond after the third follow-up email was removed.

### ***Electronic Survey Considerations***

Ethical research is based on the idea that potential participants should be able to make decisions based on what they know. As with other types of research, this ensures that people who take online surveys are well-informed (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). In questionnaire research, unique ethical considerations must be made: confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, persuasion, pressure, and failure to disclose interest (Ritchie et al., 2014). Despite its frequent association, it is vital to distinguish between anonymity and privacy (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). Anonymity is concealing the identity of someone who participates in a study or has written about a particular point of view or opinion (Gordon, 2019). Confidentiality avoids releasing research-derived views or information to third parties (R. Wiles et al., 2008).

Electronic surveys have steadily increased in popularity among researchers due to their numerous advantages, such as the aptitude to reach a greater number of possible participants in a brief amount of time (compared to in-person surveys), study participants who may be geographically or otherwise inaccessible, and the efficacy of managing data and collation (Ahern, 2005; Lefever et al., 2007). With the emergence of the COVID-19 epidemic and the diminishing possibilities for in-person data collection, internet-based solutions provide a powerful option for promptly collecting data (Menon & Muraleedharan, 2020).

### ***Follow-up Communication***

Once the list of people who would participate was made, the first survey questionnaire was sent requesting that responses be sent back within a week. Those who had not yet submitted their completed questionnaires were sent a reminder email at least 2 days before the deadline and once more the morning before. When Round 2 was set to begin, participants were given 10 days to complete the questionnaire since they were also provided with a summary of Round 1. People

who had not turned in their questionnaire received a reminder email 3 days before, 1 day before, and the morning of the deadline.

### ***Multi-Round Communication***

The Delphi technique incorporates a three-round questionnaire to assess the critical factors identified. The Delphi survey included (a) results from the systematic review and a short demographic questionnaire for each participant, (b) results from the previous round, and (c) a presentation of results and an opportunity to achieve consensus (Quirke et al., 2021). The participants received feedback on each outcome after Round 1 and Round 2. In Rounds 2 and 3, participants were allowed to adjust their ratings of the result based on input if they chose. Each survey round lasted around 3 weeks.

### **Statement of Personal Bias and Lived Experience**

Researchers are susceptible to prejudice in their professional activities. These biases can be mitigated through the peer review process (Community, 2021). A summary of the investigator's background was provided as follows:

- the researcher was born and raised in the Philippines,
- the researcher immigrated to the U.S. after completing high school,
- the researcher holds an MBA in Organizational Behavior and Change, and
- the researcher has years of experience in higher education, specifically in creating pathway programs for medicine.

The PI of this study has experienced a transition from working fully in person to entirely online due to the COVID-19 lockdown and eventually to a hybrid work setup. Her experience with the changing work environment pushed her to explore this topic further. She anticipated that this research would contribute to positive change within organizational practice and culture.

Much research has been done on the many disadvantages and inequalities women face in the workforce; however, changes after the mandated COVID-19 lockdown have changed the way work is and can be done.

### **Bracketing and Epoche**

Phenomenological reduction, epithet, and bracketing are terms used interchangeably to describe extracting the essence of experience and looking beyond preconceived notions (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The significance of bracketing is derived from its complexity, notably the uniqueness of its phases and pieces. Its intricacy facilitates interpretations and, consequently, the flexibility and growth of the notion (Gearing, 2004). The epoché reduction couplet is a well-known and vital phenomenological research and investigation method. It is a way to gain an eidetic grasp, foundational understanding, or incipient understanding of the phenomenological significance of a human experience by reflecting on the distinctive meaning of the occurrence being studied (van Manen, 2017). The researcher will not share his opinions to influence the responses to remove personal bias, and the data collected will be analyzed as new information. Avoiding personal bias can be done by analyzing all the data as it is provided. Confirming the responses of the responders can also ensure that the data analysis is accurately presented. Lastly, using peer reviewers is important to ensure the entire research process is done correctly.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Delphi Analysis for Research Question 2***

Upon gathering the narrative responses on the participant-provided statements, the data were sorted, encompassing categories and themes were discovered and labeled. During the collection and categorization operations, codes are generated and implemented. Coding divides the information into relevant chunks and labels each section (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



### ***Literature on Item Stability***

Researchers employed the Delphi technique to integrate scientific information and professional expertise into informed judgment and to facilitate successful decision-making (Hasson et al., 2000). The Delphi approach has shown advantages in decision-making over conventional meetings, group sessions, ideation, and other engaging group activities for topics where the best information available is the judgment of educated people. In a Delphi study, the focus is on the consistency of the group opinion instead of individual opinions; hence, assessing the group outcome is preferable to measuring individual rankings (Adler & Ziglio, 1996).

### ***Literature on Consensus in Delphi***

The Delphi method aims to establish a verifiable consensus view of a panel of specialists through an iterative questionnaire process interleaved with controlled feedback (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Determining issue areas and communicating them to all panel members must be clear and completed before the final rounds to reach a consensus (Nasa et al., 2021). The analysis of subsequent iterative rounds permits the evaluation of results for consensus and inconsistent stability between the two consecutive rounds. Iterative and interactive survey phases are beneficial for acquiring qualitative data, improving the form of the statement for panelists, and gaining consensus.

### ***Calculating And Reporting Item Stability In Each Round***

The mean, median and mode was calculated for each response gathered in each round. To determine the consistency of an item's responses, the absolute Coefficient of Variation difference for each item must be computed by subtracting the CV acquired from any two successive rounds of the Delphi survey (Dajani et al., 1979). Items with less than 20% IQR was counted as consensus reached and are thus stable.

### ***Determining the Final Consensus***

The Delphi technique has no universally accepted proportion, as the level employed varies depending on sample size, research objective, and available resources (Hasson et al., 2000). Some researchers argued that 51% agreement among respondents was acceptable, while others stated that 70% or even 80% ought to be equated with consensus (Green et al., 1999; McKenna, 1994; Sumsion, 1998). Triangulation contributes to a more thorough and accurate comprehension of the studied problem, raising the conclusions' validity and reliability (Nassaji, 2020). As such, the final agreement is attained if less than 10% of the items analyzed did not change the median, mode, and IQR value.

### ***Coding Process and Inter-rater Reliability***

The coding results are presented in Chapter 4. The following explains the analysis to help understand how the coding process was conducted:

- The critical items reaching stability during the analysis were appointed codes.
- The findings were discussed with two peer reviewers who are currently doctoral students knowledgeable in qualitative research, coding, and analysis. The reviewers were then asked if they agreed with the identified coded factors. If the reviewers disagreed, the Principal Investigator asked the dissertation committee for further advice.
- The remaining items identified by the reviewers were coded.
- The compiled data were shared with the reviewers to obtain consensus. If a consensus could not be attained, the dissertation chair and committee were asked to review and provide additional feedback.

### ***Data Presentation***

There seems to be no consistent way to publish findings in Delphi surveys, and a literature review revealed that various methodologies have been utilized (Schmidt, 1997). The presentation of each round individually demonstrates the diversity of topics developed in the first round and indicates the level of support per round. The presentation of results is crucial, and the outcomes of successive rounds should be summarized to underscore the significance of each perspective. In discussing statistical tests, the reader needs to understand how to interpret the results and analyze them with the importance attributed to each (Hasson et al., 2000).

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 discussed the research design, methodology, and techniques used to confirm the research's reliability and validity. It also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the instruments and survey tools. The analytical unit comprised the HR or diversity, equity, and inclusion managers selected from the online platform LinkedIn based on an industry search. Chapter 3 detailed the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sample and the maximum variation. Participant recommendations for additional contacts were also considered.

Chapter 3 also includes a declaration from the IRB regarding protecting human subjects. During the study, the participants were provided with a template authorized by the IRB and a consent form. Chapter 3 also presented detailed information for each round of the Delphi process and the steps taken to validate the questions through reviewers. The survey questions have numerous iterations. The appendices show both the original and final iterations of the survey questions. Systematically, data analysis was performed after each round of the Delphi survey. The interquartile range was defined by consensus of less than 20% IQR. The full data analysis was provided in Chapter 4.

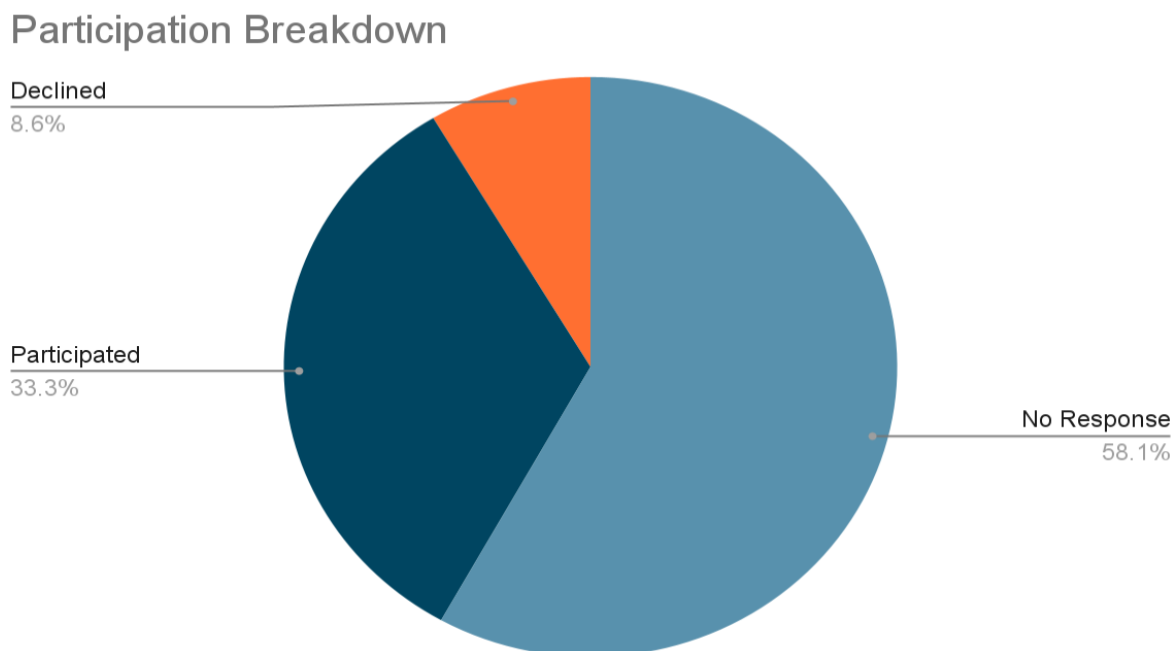
## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter provided information on how the data were gathered and analyzed. RQ1 was analyzed using the Delphi methodology, and coding was employed for RQ2.

### Participant Recruitment

A preliminary review of the available literature was conducted to enlist participants from information provided on companies that have transitioned to a hybrid working environment. Participants were found using LinkedIn. The analysis unit identified participants who met the following inclusivity criteria: (a) aged 18 years or older, (b) have worked in a hybrid environment for at least 2 years, and (c) have worked within the scope of Human Resources and/or DEI.

A preliminary list of 70 possible participants was created. They were contacted via LinkedIn using the recruitment script, which included a prescreening form. An aggregate of 25 participants completed the pre-screening form, were identified to meet participation criteria, and were then asked to sign the informed consent. These individuals produced managers, directors, and C-level executives who oversee human resource departments or DEI initiatives. After sending the preliminary survey request, a follow-up reminder was sent to those who had not completed the questionnaire after 5 days. Then, a final reminder was sent to all participants 1 day before the initial survey deadline. A total of nine participants declined to participate. The reasons indicated were they could not complete the surveys or were uninterested. According to Turoff's (1970) guidelines, the number of participants was sufficient to proceed without further recruitment or the requirement of maximum variation. These actions marked the endorsed commencement of the first phase of the Delphi process. Figure 13 depicts the participation recruitment and yield process.

**Figure 13***Breakdown of Participation and Recruitment***Delphi Phase One***Distribution of Survey One*

The study's first phase involved a questionnaire with 60 critical factors identified from the literature review. Qualtrics hosted the survey. The survey link was dispersed to the participants through an email specific to Round 1 instructions. A total of 20 individuals ( $N = 20$ ) agreed to participate and filled out the survey. In this study, participants were asked to evaluate the importance of critical factors in promoting a culture of belonging among women working in hybrid teams. The term hybrid environment was defined as a work set-up where someone performs their job remotely a few days a week and works at the office on other days. Using the 7-point Likert scale, participants were provided explanations for each point, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5***Likert Scale Definition and Values*

<b>Likert-Scale Value</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Not Important at All (1)	This item does not harm either the organization or the individual.
Low Importance (2)	This item offers no benefits and could potentially harm the success of both the organization and the individual.
Slightly Important (3)	This item provides some benefits to both the organization and individuals, yet its absence would not hinder the success of either.
Neutral (4)	No significant opinions or experiences regarding this item.
Moderately Important (5)	This item is advantageous to both the organization and individuals, yet its absence would not entirely prevent success for either.
Very Important (7)	This item is advantageous, and its absence would hinder the success of both individuals and the organization.
Critically Important (7)	This item is essential and crucial; its absence would obstruct the success of the organization and its individuals.

***Round One Analysis***

After providing the results, the median, IQR, and mode were computed for every item. An item was considered to have achieved consensus if its IQR was 20% or fewer than the range. Of the 60 items, 37 achieved consensus. As a result, 62% of all items had attained a consensus, while the remaining 37% had no consensus. Except for three items, the vast majority (95%) had a score of  $M \geq 5.0$ , indicating that most items were considered moderately to critically crucial in fostering a culture of belonging within women working in a hybrid environment. Table 6 contains these computations, arranged in ascending order of IQR values.

In addition to the quantitative items, the survey incorporated an open-ended question to capture a broader range of participant perspectives, allowing for qualitative insights that could inform the interpretation of the quantitative data. No more critical items were identified through the open-ended responses.

**Table 6**

*Round One Consensus Items*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Decision</b>
1	Organizational Culture	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
10	Meaningful work	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
13	Providing meaningful feedback	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
14	Access to mentors	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
16	The company shows high accountability	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
17	Clear Mechanisms of reporting violations	6.00	1.00	7	Consensus
19	Inclusive Leadership	7.00	1.00	7	Consensus
2	Leadership behavior	7.00	0.00	7	Consensus
20	Leaders giving credit publicly for employees contributions	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
21	Empower team members to make decisions	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
24	Relevant and reliable health benefits	6.00	1.00	7	Consensus
25	Diversity within leadership roles	7.00	1.00	7	Consensus
26	Expanding time-off policies for health care tasks	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
28	Workers are comfortable at voicing their opinions	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
3	Peer Relationships	6.00	0.00	6	Consensus
30	More visible promotions	5.50	1.00	6	Consensus

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Decision</b>
38	Events centered on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
39	Cultural Awareness Events/Celebrations	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
4	Growth and Opportunity	7.00	1.00	7	Consensus
40	Support Groups	5.00	1.00	5	Consensus
41	Annual reports to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging efforts	5.50	1.00	5	Consensus
43	Promotion transparency with employees	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
45	Require anti-bias training for everyone in the company	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
47	Have a strong and clear sexual harassment policy signed off by employees upon starting work	7.00	1.00	7	Consensus
48	Enact a whistleblower policy that protects against retaliation	7.00	1.00	7	Consensus
49	Create systems that elevate voices of historically disenfranchised individuals	6.50	1.00	7	Consensus
5	Work Environment/Set-up	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
51	Ensure that facilities are free of gender and ability privilege with accessible and safe spaces for all	6.50	1.00	7	Consensus
52	Create policies to support new parents and menstruating people	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
53	Ensure meetings are not dominated by few voices	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
54	Have 1:1 virtual meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
57	Schedule intentional activities to increase connections and engagement	6.00	1.00	5	Consensus
58	Acknowledge virtual meeting fatigue	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus



Item #	Items	Median	IQR	Mode	Decision
60	Get the right hybrid workplace tools (ex. zoom, teams, slack, asana, etc)	7.00	1.00	7	Consensus
7	Safety at work	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
8	Work-life Balance	6.50	1.00	7	Consensus
6	Fairness and Equity	7.00	0.00	7	Consensus

Table 7 displayed the items that reached consensus, organized by their significance as determined by a panel of experts ( $N = 20$ ). The importance level was gauged using the median score, where a score of 7 denoted critical importance, and a score of 1 signified negligible importance. The 37 items that met the consensus criteria were excluded from future surveys.

**Table 7**

*Stability Round from Round One*

Item #	Items	Median	IQR	Mode
1	Organizational Culture	6.00	0.75	6
10	Meaningful work	6.00	0.75	6
13	Providing meaningful feedback	6.00	0.75	6
14	Access to mentors	6.00	1.00	6
16	The company shows high accountability	6.00	0.75	6
17	Clear Mechanisms of reporting violations	6.00	1.00	7
19	Inclusive Leadership	7.00	1.00	7
2	Leadership behavior	7.00	0.00	7
20	Leaders giving credit publicly for employees contributions	6.00	0.75	6
21	Empower team members to make decisions	6.00	0.75	6
24	Relevant and reliable health benefits	6.00	1.00	7

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Mode</b>
25	Diversity within leadership roles	7.00	1.00	7
26	Expanding time-off policies for health care tasks	6.00	0.75	6
28	Workers are comfortable at voicing their opinions	6.00	1.00	6
3	Peer Relationships	6.00	0.00	6
30	More visible promotions	5.50	1.00	6
38	Events centered on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging	6.00	0.75	6
39	Cultural Awareness Events/Celebrations	6.00	1.00	6
4	Growth and Opportunity	7.00	1.00	7
40	Support Groups	5.00	1.00	5
41	Annual reports to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging efforts	5.50	1.00	5
43	Promotion transparency with employees	6.00	1.00	6
45	Require anti-bias training for everyone in the company	6.00	1.00	6
47	Have a strong and clear sexual harassment policy signed off by employees upon starting work	7.00	1.00	7
48	Enact a whistleblower policy that protects against retaliation	7.00	1.00	7
49	Create systems that elevate voices of historically disenfranchised individuals	6.50	1.00	7
5	Work Environment/Set-up	6.00	1.00	6
51	Ensure that facilities are free of gender and ability privilege with accessible and safe spaces for all	6.50	1.00	7
52	Create policies to support new parents and menstruating people	6.00	1.00	6
53	Ensure meetings are not dominated by few voices	6.00	1.00	6
54	Have 1:1 virtual meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	6.00	1.00	6

Item #	Items	Median	IQR	Mode
57	Schedule intentional activities to increase connections and engagement	6.00	1.00	5
58	Acknowledge virtual meeting fatigue	6.00	1.00	6
60	Get the right hybrid workplace tools (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Asana, etc.)	7.00	1.00	7
7	Safety at work	6.00	1.00	6
8	Work-life balance	6.50	1.00	7
6	Fairness and equity	7.00	0.00	7

## Delphi Phase Two

### *Distribution of Survey Two*

The second phase consisted of a survey with 23 crucial items selected from a previous study and represented items without consensus. Qualtrics was used to administer the second survey round, and the survey link was dispersed to the participants. As in the initial survey, participants were requested to evaluate the significance of each critical item about fostering a culture of belonging among women working in a hybrid environment. Additionally, the median response from the first survey was provided alongside each item (Median = 5.50). Participants were requested to evaluate each of the remaining items and compare their median rating, making revisions as necessary.

The 20 participants who had participated in the first survey were sent an email containing the second questionnaire. They were granted 4 days to finish the study, and a reminder was sent on the third day to those who had not responded. A final reminder was sent to those who had not completed the second survey on the day the survey was due. The 20 participants responded to the second survey. No new participants were added at this stage.

### ***Round Two Analysis***

The median, IQR, and mode for each of the remaining items were determined upon gathering all the data. An item was considered to have attained individual consensus if its IQR was 20% or less than the range. Among the 23 items, eight reached a consensus rate of 35% for this round. Consequently, of all the 60 critical items, 45 reached a consensus, leading to a rate or agreement of 75%. For a final agreement to be reached, a consensus on 85% of the items was necessary; therefore, the second survey did not yield a final consensus. Calculations for median IQR, mode, and consensus status for each item are found in Table 8.

**Table 8**

#### *Round Two Consensus Items*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Decision</b>
11	Flexible work schedule	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
31	Opportunities for face-to-face collaborations	5.00	1.00	5	Consensus
34	Office hours for drop-in opportunities	5.00	1.00	5	Consensus
35	Incorporate town halls or large group meetings	5.00	0.75	5	Consensus
23	The company provides health and wellbeing resources	6.50	0.75	6	Consensus
50	Provide training on unconscious bias	6.50	1.00	7	Consensus
56	Make space for ideation and strategy	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
29	Access to better technology	6.00	0.00	6	Consensus

Table 9 shows the items that reached a consensus, ordered by their significance level as assessed by the expert panel ( $N = 20$ ). The importance level was evaluated using the median score, where a score of 7 signifies utmost importance and a score of 1 is unimportant. These

eight additional consensus items were removed from the third survey. After the second round concluded, 75% of the items had achieved consensus based on their IQR scores. Nonetheless, a stability analysis was conducted since a consensus for 85% of the items was necessary for a final agreement. This analysis examined the changes in median, mode, and IQR scores for items that did not reach consensus in the first round compared to the outcomes from the second round.

Table 9 presents the stability report and the variance between rounds one and two.

**Table 9**

*Round Two Stability Analysis*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Decision</b>	<b>Diff in Median</b>	<b>Diff in IQR</b>	<b>Diff in Mode</b>
9	Caring colleagues	No Consensus	0.50	0.25	0.00
32	Child care assistance	No Consensus	1.00	0.00	0.00
33	Virtual Social Hours	No Consensus	0.50	1.00	1.00
12	Companies focus on employees wellness	No Consensus	0.00	0.75	0.00
15	Employees have a lot in common with leaders	No Consensus	1.50	0.00	1.00
18	Office budget for celebratory events	No Consensus	0.00	0.00	0.00
36	The ability for workers to dictate which days of the week they will they come in person	No Consensus	0.50	0.50	0.00
37	Open-office layout	No Consensus	0.00	0.00	0.00
22	Respecting workers commitments outside of work (caregiving, volunteer, social engagements)	No Consensus	1.00	1.00	0.00
42	Annual climate study and reporting	No Consensus	0.50	0.25	1.00
44	Require Micro-aggression training	No Consensus	2.50	0.75	3.00

Item #	Items	Decision	Diff in Median	Diff in IQR	Diff in Mode
46	Assess all roles equally across employees	No Consensus	1.00	0.25	1.00
55	Have 1:1 in person meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	No Consensus	0.50	0.00	1.00
27	Offer financial support to save dependents education	No Consensus	1.00	0.00	1.00
59	Rotating office times for entire teams or departments rather than individual employees	No Consensus	1.00	0.00	1.00

In the stability analysis, 15 items did not achieve consensus. Between the first and second rounds, three items showed no change in the median, seven showed no variation in their IQR scores, and seven exhibited no change in mode. The study introduced the first stability index, the Median Stability Index (MeSI), which revealed that 20% of the items experienced a median shift from the first to the second round. The IQR Stability Index (IQRSI) showed that 13% of the items had a change in their interquartile range across the rounds. Similarly, the Modal Stability Index (MoSI) demonstrated that for 13% of the items, the mode shifted from the first to the second round. Since two indices failed to meet the 10% stability criterion, a third Delphi round was necessary to achieve a final consensus. Table 10 outlines the stability criteria used.

**Table 10**

*Round Two Stability Criteria*

<b>% of unstable items such as total # of items =</b>	<b>25.00%</b>
Stability Criteria 1 (>85% of total items stable) =	75.00%
Stability Criteria 1 (MeSI<15%) =	20.00%
Stability Criteria 2 (IQRSI<15%) =	13.00%

<b>% of unstable items such as total # of items =</b>	<b>25.00%</b>
Stability Criteria 3 (MoSI<15%) =	13.00%

### **Delphi Phase Three**

#### *Distribution of Survey Three*

A survey comprising 15 crucial elements was carried out in the third phase. These items were identified from the Round 2 survey as those that had not yet achieved consensus. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, and the link was distributed to the participants. Participants were once again requested to assess the significance of each crucial item in fostering a culture of belonging among women working in hybrid teams (e.g., open-office layout; Median = 3.50). The participants were instructed to review the remaining items, compare their individual and median ratings, and make necessary revisions.

The 20 participants who participated in surveys one and two received an email asking them to complete the final survey in 4 days. On the third day, a reminder was dispatched to individuals who hadn't yet submitted their survey responses. On the survey's due date, one last reminder was issued to those who had not replied. All 20 individuals who were contacted finished the third survey. At this point, no additional participants were introduced to the group.

#### **Round 3 Analysis**

After obtaining the results, the median, IQR, and mode for each item were calculated. If the IQR was less than 15% of the range, the item was considered to have reached individual consensus. Six out of 15 items met this criterion. With 50 critical items having achieved consensus, the consensus rate for the 60 total critical items reached 85%, reaching a final consensus. Calculations for median IQR, mode, and consensus status for each item can be found in Table 11.

**Table 11***Round Three Consensus Items*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Decision</b>
9	Caring colleagues	6.00	0.00	6	Consensus
12	Companies focus on employees wellness	6.00	0.75	6	Consensus
18	Office budget for celebratory events	5.00	1.00	5	Consensus
36	The ability for workers to dictate which days of the week they will they come in person	6.00	1.00	6	Consensus
55	Have 1:1 in person meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	5.50	1.00	6	Consensus
59	Rotating office times for entire teams or departments rather than individual employees	5.00	1.00	4	Consensus

Once Round 3 was complete, the items that achieved consensus based on the IQR score amounted to 85%. It was also mentioned that the final consensus was reached during this round. However, the remaining nine items which did not reach consensus were subjected to stability analysis. This analysis paralleled with the median, mode, and IQR score differences of these no consensus items from Round 2 to their outcomes in Round 3. Table 12 displays the stability report that presents these differences between the two rounds.

**Table 12***Round Three Stability Analysis*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Decision</b>	<b>Diff in Median</b>	<b>Diff in IQR</b>	<b>Diff in Mode</b>
32	Child care assistance	No Consensus	0.00	1.00	0.00
33	Virtual Social Hours	No Consensus	1.00	1.00	2.00



Item #	Items	Decision	Diff in Median	Diff in IQR	Diff in Mode
15	Employees have a lot in common with leaders	No Consensus	0.50	0.00	0.00
37	Open-office layout	No Consensus	0.00	0.50	1.00
22	Respecting workers commitments outside of work (caregiving, volunteer, social engagements)	No Consensus	0.00	0.00	0.00
42	Annual climate study and reporting	No Consensus	0.00	0.00	1.00
44	Require Micro-aggression training	No Consensus	0.00	0.50	1.00
46	Assess all roles equally across employees	No Consensus	0.00	0.75	1.00
27	Offer financial support to save dependents education	No Consensus	0.00	0.00	0.00

At the close of the stability analysis, it was revealed that nine individual items were still unable to reach consensus. The MeSI indicated that the proportion of items experiencing a change in the median from the second to the third round was 3.00%. Meanwhile, the IQRSI noted an 8% change in the IQR for the remaining items, and the MoSI showed that the mode changed for 10% of the remaining items. Table 13 displays the stability criteria met by the three indices, indicating that the study achieved the final stability and consensus.

**Table 13**

*Round Three Stability Criteria*

<b>% of unstable items such as total # of items =</b>	<b>15.00%</b>
Stability Criteria 1 (>85% of total items stable) =	85.00%
Stability Criteria 1 (MeSI<15%) =	3.00%
Stability Criteria 2 (IQRSI<15%) =	8.00%
Stability Criteria 3 (MoSI<15%) =	10.00%

## Final Consensus

After completing the three surveys, 51 of 60 critical items achieved individual consensus.

Table 14 displays the list of items that met consensus, sorted in descending order of their importance based on the median score, along with their corresponding Likert-Scale ranking.

**Table 14**

*Items Meeting Final Consensus*

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Likert-Scale Ranking</b>
2	Leadership behavior	7.00	0.00	Critically important
6	Fairness and Equity	7.00	0.00	Critically important
19	Inclusive Leadership	7.00	1.00	Critically important
25	Diversity within leadership roles	7.00	1.00	Critically important
4	Growth and Opportunity	7.00	1.00	Critically important
47	Have a strong and clear sexual harassment policy signed off by employees upon starting work	7.00	1.00	Critically important
48	Enact a whistleblower policy that protects against retaliation	7.00	1.00	Critically important
60	Get the right hybrid workplace tools (ex. zoom, teams, slack, asana, etc)	7.00	1.00	Critically important
23	The company provides health and wellbeing resources	6.50	0.75	Very Important / Critically Important
49	Create systems that elevate voices of historically disenfranchised individuals	6.50	1.00	Very Important / Critically Important
51	Ensure that facilities are free of gender and ability privilege with accessible and safe spaces for all	6.50	1.00	Very Important / Critically Important
8	Work-life Balance	6.50	1.00	Very Important / Critically Important
50	Provide training on unconscious bias	6.50	1.00	Very Important / Critically Important

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Likert-Scale Ranking</b>
3	Peer Relationships	6.00	0.00	Very Important
29	Access to better technology	6.00	0.00	Very Important
9	Caring colleagues	6.00	0.00	Very Important
38	Events centered on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging	6.00	0.75	Very Important
1	Organizational Culture	6.00	0.75	Very Important
10	Meaningful work	6.00	0.75	Very Important
13	Providing meaningful feedback	6.00	0.75	Very Important
16	The company shows high accountability	6.00	0.75	Very Important
20	Leaders giving credit publicly for employees contributions	6.00	0.75	Very Important
21	Empower team members to make decisions	6.00	0.75	Very Important
26	Expanding time-off policies for health care tasks	6.00	0.75	Very Important
12	Companies focus on employees wellness	6.00	0.75	Very Important
17	Clear Mechanisms of reporting violations	6.00	1.00	Very Important
24	Relevant and reliable health benefits	6.00	1.00	Very Important
14	Access to mentors	6.00	1.00	Very Important
28	Workers are comfortable at voicing their opinions	6.00	1.00	Very Important
39	Cultural Awareness Events/Celebrations	6.00	1.00	Very Important
43	Promotion transparency with employees	6.00	1.00	Very Important
45	Require anti-bias training for everyone in the company	6.00	1.00	Very Important
5	Work Environment/Set-up	6.00	1.00	Very Important

<b>Item #</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>IQR</b>	<b>Likert-Scale Ranking</b>
52	Create policies to support new parents and menstruating people	6.00	1.00	Very Important
53	Ensure meetings are not dominated by few voices	6.00	1.00	Very Important
54	Have 1:1 virtual meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	6.00	1.00	Very Important
58	Acknowledge virtual meeting fatigue	6.00	1.00	Very Important
7	Safety at work	6.00	1.00	Very Important
11	Flexible work schedule	6.00	1.00	Very Important
56	Make space for ideation and strategy	6.00	1.00	Very Important
36	The ability for workers to dictate which days of the week they will they come in person	6.00	1.00	Very Important
57	Schedule intentional activities to increase connections and engagement	6.00	1.00	Very Important
30	More visible promotions	5.50	1.00	Moderately Important / Very Important
55	Have 1:1 in person meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	5.50	1.00	Moderately Important / Very Important
41	Annual reports to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging efforts	5.50	1.00	Moderately Important / Very Important
35	Incorporate town halls or large group meetings	5.00	0.75	Moderately Important
40	Support Groups	5.00	1.00	Moderately Important
31	Opportunities for face-to-face collaborations	5.00	1.00	Moderately Important
34	Office hours for drop-in opportunities	5.00	1.00	Moderately Important
18	Office budget for celebratory events	5.00	1.00	Moderately Important

Item #	Items	Median	IQR	Likert-Scale Ranking
59	Rotating office times for entire teams or departments rather than individual employees	5.00	1.00	Moderately Important

### Coding

A thorough thematic analysis was conducted to address the RQ2, which asked, “Can these critical factors be used to develop a theoretical framework to understand a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?” This analysis, underpinned by intercoder reliability, involved an initial grouping of concepts into consensus-driven themes, followed by an iterative review process. Engaging a pair of peer reviewers, as recommended by Bernard et al. (2017) and Lavrakas (2008), ensured the robustness and reliability of the coding process. The 51 critical factors identified through this meticulous method reached a consensus and were systematically categorized into definitive themes. These themes include (a) organizational culture, (b) leadership behaviors, (c) peer relationships, (d) growth and opportunity, (e) work environment, and (f) fairness and equity. Each theme was defined and explored to elucidate how they collectively shape women's experiences in hybrid work settings. This exploration provides a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to a culture of belonging, thus laying the groundwork for developing a comprehensive theoretical framework that addresses the unique dynamics of women's inclusion in hybrid workplaces.

### *Organizational Culture*

Organizational culture encompasses a company's shared values, attitudes, behaviors, and practices. This culture significantly influences how members interact and make decisions, especially in hybrid work environments (Kahlow et al., 2020). Critical items like health and wellbeing resources, work-life balance policies, and transparent promotion processes are pivotal

in shaping organizational culture (Gálvez et al., 2020). These elements are especially vital in creating a culture of belonging for women, who generally face unique challenges in hybrid work environments (Aleem et al., 2023). This theme is integral to answering RQ1 and RQ2, where we seek to understand the constituents of a culture of belonging. These aspects of organizational culture provide a foundation for developing a theoretical framework that encapsulates the nuances of women's experiences in hybrid workplaces. A positive organizational culture is paramount in promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion for women (Haggins, 2020). This theme directly aligns with the dissertation's overarching aim by highlighting how cultural aspects within an organization can either hinder or encourage a sense of belonging for women in hybrid work settings.

### ***Leadership Behaviors***

Leadership behaviors encompass the actions and attitudes of leaders that influence their followers. In the context of hybrid workplaces, these behaviors are crucial in shaping the experiences and perceptions of women employees. Leadership behaviors such as inclusive decision-making, providing constructive and meaningful feedback, and ensuring diverse representation in meetings significantly impact women's experiences (Mey et al., 2021). These behaviors demonstrate a commitment to gender inclusivity and an understanding of the unique challenges faced in hybrid work environments (Serpell et al., 2023). These leadership behaviors are essential in answering the RQs related to crucial factors contributing to a culture of belonging. They illustrate how leadership styles and practices can either facilitate or impede the development of such a culture. Effective leadership behaviors are key to producing an inclusive and supportive work environment (Ashikali et al., 2021). This theme underlines the prominence of leadership in nurturing a culture of belonging and inclusion for women in hybrid workplaces.

### ***Peer Relationships***

Peer relationships in the workplace involve social connections and interactions among colleagues. These relationships are especially significant in hybrid work environments with limited physical interactions (Afflerbach, 2020). Factors such as caring colleagues, support groups, and opportunities for face-to-face collaboration, even in a hybrid setting, enhance peer relationships (Durakovic et al., 2022; Petitta & Ghezzi, 2023; Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). These elements contribute to a supportive work environment, making it easier for women to feel a sense of belonging and connection (Allen et al., 2021). This theme contributes to understanding the culture of belonging in hybrid workplaces, as outlined in the research questions. It highlights how peer support and interactions are critical in creating a conducive work atmosphere for women. Strong peer relationships are a cornerstone in fostering a culture of belonging. This theme aligns with the dissertation's aim by emphasizing the role of interpersonal relationships in making women feel included and valued in hybrid work settings.

### ***Growth and Opportunity***

Growth and opportunity refer to the availability of career development opportunities and the potential for organizational advancement. This theme is particularly relevant for women in hybrid workplaces, where opportunities for visibility and growth may differ from traditional office settings. Access to mentors, meaningful work, and professional development programs are crucial for women's growth and opportunity (Byrd, 2022; Lin et al., 2019). These factors ensure women in hybrid environments have equal access to career advancement and personal development (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021). The theme of growth and opportunity is directly connected to the research questions, as it explores the factors necessary for creating a strong belonging culture, particularly in the context of professional advancement. Highlighting growth

and opportunity is integral to making women feel valued and included in the workplace (Coleman, 2020). This theme demonstrates how providing equal opportunities for career advancement is essential in furthering a sense of belonging among women in hybrid work environments.

### ***Work Environment***

The work environment incorporates the workplace's physical, social, and psychological conditions. This environment plays an essential role in swaying employee experiences and well-being in hybrid work settings. Elements such as a safe and comfortable work environment, access to necessary technology, and intentional activities for engagement impact the overall work environment (Kapoor et al., 2021). These factors are especially important in ensuring that women in hybrid workplaces have a positive work experience (Arora & Kumari, 2022). This theme is key to answering the research questions, as it deals with the factors that influence the work environment and, consequently, the sense of belonging among women. Creating a supportive work environment is essential for fostering women's feelings of inclusion in a hybrid workplace (Petitta & Ghezzi, 2023). This theme underscores the importance of creating a workplace that is physically, socially, and psychologically.

Despite potential overlap among critical items, the assigned codes were considered distinct and nonoverlapping. Initially, the researcher presented their coding scheme and categories to two peer reviewers. These reviewers were both third-year Ph.D. students possessing an in-depth understanding of qualitative research and coding techniques. The reviewers remained anonymous from each other. They were asked whether they agreed with the researcher's overall themes and designated codes. After completing their assessments, both reviewers agreed on the principles provided, leading to an agreed decision on the coding. Table 15 showcases the themes



and their corresponding critical items. All elements were derived from the first round, and no added elements were introduced from the second round's open-ended question.

**Table 15**

*Consensus Items and Assigned Codes*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Category</b>
The company provides health and wellbeing resources	Organizational culture
Work-life Balance	Organizational culture
Organizational Culture	Organizational culture
The company shows high accountability	Organizational culture
Expanding time-off policies for health care tasks	Organizational culture
Clear Mechanisms of reporting violations	Organizational culture
Relevant and reliable health benefits	Organizational culture
Promotion transparency with employees	Organizational culture
Flexible work schedule	Organizational culture
The ability for workers to dictate which days of the week they will they come in person	Organizational culture
More visible promotions	Organizational culture
Annual reports to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging efforts	Organizational culture
Office budget for celebratory events	Organizational culture
Leadership behavior	Leadership behavior
Inclusive Leadership	Leadership behavior
Diversity within leadership roles	Leadership behavior
Providing meaningful feedback	Leadership behavior
Leaders giving credit publicly for employee's contributions	Leadership behavior
Ensure meetings are not dominated by few voices	Leadership behavior

Item	Category
Have 1:1 virtual meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	Leadership behavior
Acknowledge virtual meeting fatigue	Leadership behavior
Make space for ideation and strategy	Leadership behavior
Have 1:1 in person meetings for the employee and direct supervisor	Leadership behavior
Peer Relationships	Peer Relationships
Caring colleagues	Peer Relationships
Incorporate town halls or large group meetings	Peer Relationships
Support Groups	Peer Relationships
Opportunities for face-to-face collaborations	Peer Relationships
Office hours for drop-in opportunities	Peer Relationships
Growth and Opportunity	Growth and Opportunity
Meaningful work	Growth and Opportunity
Empower team members to make decisions	Growth and Opportunity
Access to mentors	Growth and Opportunity
Have a strong and clear sexual harassment policy signed off by employees upon starting work	Work Environment
Enact a whistleblower policy that protects against retaliation	Work Environment
Get the right hybrid workplace tools (ex. zoom, teams, slack, asana, etc)	Work Environment
Access to better technology	Work Environment
Companies focus on employee's wellness	Work Environment
Work Environment/Set-up	Work Environment
Safety at work	Work Environment
Schedule intentional activities to increase connections and engagement	Work Environment
Rotating office times for entire teams or departments rather than individual employees	Work Environment

Item	Category
Fairness and Equity	Fairness and Equity
Create systems that elevate voices of historically disenfranchised individuals	Fairness and Equity
Ensure that facilities are free of gender and ability privilege with accessible and safe spaces for all	Fairness and Equity
Provide training on unconscious bias	Fairness and Equity
Events centered on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging	Fairness and Equity
Require anti-bias training for everyone in the company	Fairness and Equity
Create policies to support new parents and menstruating people	Fairness and Equity

### Chapter Summary

To address RQ1, the study assessed the significance of critical factors contributing to women's sense of belonging within hybrid teams through a Delphi method encompassing three rounds. The initial round started with 60 essential factors and 20 participants, leading to a consensus on 62% of these factors and leaving 23 without agreement. In the second round, a survey with these 23 critical factors was sent out to the participants, all 20 of whom took part, achieving a consensus rate of 75%. The third and last round focused on the remaining 15 factors that had yet to reach a consensus. All 20 participants responded, and consensus was reached on an additional six factors. By the conclusion of the three rounds, consensus had been established on 51 items, or 85% of the total, accompanied by stability indices of a MeSI of 3.00%, an IQRSI of 8.00%, and a MoSI of 10.00%, thus confirming the study's final stability.

Intercoder reliability was used to address RQ2, which aimed to determine whether a theoretical framework or a model could be developed from the findings. The 51 items reaching consensus were organized into six categories: (a) organizational culture, (b) peer relationships, (c) leadership practices, (d) growth and opportunity, (e) work setting, and (f) fairness and equity.

Two peer reviewers were asked to assess the coding scheme. During the initial review, there was complete agreement on the assigned codes and themes.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

### Summary of the Study

Creating a culture of belonging is crucial for women working in hybrid teams, as it can improve their sense of inclusion, engagement, and overall well-being. Based on a study by Shahid et al. (2022), employees who experience a sense of belonging at work are more inclined to express their thoughts and suggestions, be more innovative, and have higher job satisfaction. On the other hand, excluded women are more prone to stress, burnout, and turnover (Thompson et al., 2022). Belonging is a fundamental component of a successful DEI strategy, as it helps to create a positive environment where all employees feel appreciated, respected, and supported. Research has shown that employee's sense of workplace belonging rises in proportion to their assessment of the variety of the workplace, fulfilling and strengthening their need for belonging (Enwereuzor, 2021). A culture of belonging among women in hybrid teams is crucial for companies. It can lead to numerous benefits, including improved retention rates, higher job satisfaction, and increased productivity. Workers with a staunch obligation to their company grow a strong sense of belonging, making them excited about their work and more inclined to get fully involved. Employees with a solid sense of belonging in their company are likelier to become essential team members and dedicate more time to the company with a higher performance output (Haldorai et al., 2020).

Additionally, fostering a culture of inclusion aids in attracting and keeping top talent. A study by Deloitte (2021) found that companies with strong DEI cultures are more likely to invite, attract, and keep high-performing employees. By fostering a setting where women are appreciated, respected, and supported, companies can increase their appeal to talented individuals looking for an inclusive and welcoming workplace.

The Delphi study analyzed crucial factors for leading hybrid teams, including how leaders assess organizational belongingness. Additionally, the study focused on enhancing workplace support for women in hybrid environments. The collected data aims to establish a best practice framework for nurturing a sense of belonging, especially among female employees, and retaining talent in rapidly changing environments. The framework will provide valuable guidance for leaders and managers navigating the challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic. The research questions aided in developing adaptable best practices for fostering belongingness in hybrid teams across industries.

Subsequent research questions were addressed to explore further the critical factors in fostering a culture of belonging among women in hybrid teams.

- RQ1: What are the critical factors for creating a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?
- RQ2: Can these critical factors be used to develop a theoretical framework for understanding a strong culture of belonging among women working in a hybrid work environment?

Researching belongingness within women in hybrid teams is crucial in DEI efforts because it emphasizes the significance of inclusivity and diversity in the organization. Women in hybrid teams face unique challenges in feeling connected to their organization, which can impact their performance, engagement, and well-being. By prioritizing belongingness for women in hybrid teams, companies can create a culture of inclusivity that values and respects the contributions of all employees.

Promoting belongingness among women in hybrid teams can also significantly impact organizational productivity. A strong sense of belonging is associated with better work

performance, lower turnover rates, and reduced absenteeism. Furthermore, organizations with a strong sense of belonging are more successful, with teams often attributing their achievements to a shared sense of belonging. By prioritizing belongingness among women in hybrid teams, companies can attract and retain diverse talent, promote employee engagement and satisfaction, and drive better performance. This underscores the need for companies to consider women's unique challenges in hybrid teams and create settings that nurture feelings of inclusion for all employees.

A Delphi methodology analysis was employed to investigate RQ1. The literature review yielded 60 critical items compiled into a questionnaire with Likert scale answers. The Likert scale was used to assess the significance level of every item in fostering a culture of belonging within women in hybrid teams. The Likert scale ranged from 1 (*not important at all*) to 7 (*critically important*). Following three rounds of evaluation, the expert panel reached a consensus on 85% of the items surveyed (51 out of 60). An assessment of median, IQR, and mode scores demonstrated that the items met the necessary index scores, and the survey achieved ultimate stability.

Once the agreement for each item and study stability was established, intercoder reliability was employed to address RQ2. During the coding process, six themes were identified.

- Organizational culture: shared ideals, attitudes, behaviors, and practices shaping how members of an organization interact and make decisions.
- Leadership behaviors: actions and attitudes demonstrated by leaders that influence the behaviors and attitudes of their followers.
- Peer relationships: social connections and interactions among colleagues at work.

- Growth and opportunity: availability of career development opportunities and the potential for organizational advancement.
- Work environment: the workplace's physical, social, and psychological conditions that influence employee experiences and well-being.
- Fairness and equity: perceived impartiality and justice in the treatment of employees within an organization.

To validate the coding process, two peer reviewers were involved, and they achieved a unanimous agreement on the thematic categorization of each crucial item that had achieved consensus. This chapter investigated the outcomes of scrutinizing the data for each research question. Additionally, Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework is introduced to explore the implications of the study and its practical use. Furthermore, suggestions for further research are also given.

## **Findings**

### ***Research Question One***

RQ1 inquired, “What are the critical factors for creating a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?” To reach a consensus on this topic, a survey of 60 crucial factors was conducted. Thus, 51 of the 60 critical factors reached a final consensus.

**Critically Important Items.** Out of the eight items that were deemed “critically important” in cultivating a sense of belonging among women in hybrid teams, one of them received an interquartile range (IQR) of zero, indicating complete agreement ( $Mdn = 7.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.00$ ). This item pertained to leadership behavior, fairness, and equity. Creating a culture of belonging is vital for women working in a hybrid environment to feel valued and included in their workplace. According to Kiazad et al. (2014), effective leadership behavior ( $Mdn = 7.00$ ;



*IQR* = 0.00), such as being supportive, respectful, and empowering, can promote positive work attitudes, enhance job satisfaction, and increase employee engagement. Leaders who demonstrate these behaviors are more likely to build a work culture where women feel respected and included, ultimately contributing to a culture of belonging. Inclusive leadership (*Mdn* = 7.00; *IQR* = 1.00) is another vital factor in creating a belonging culture. Leaders who embrace inclusivity establish a space where all individuals feel respected and welcomed, irrespective of their background or identity (Shore & Chung, 2022). They encourage diverse perspectives, create a sense of belonging, and foster a culture of innovation and creativity.

Furthermore, diversity within leadership roles (*Mdn* = 7.00; *IQR* = 1.00) is crucial for creating a culture of belonging. As Catalyst (2019) states, organizations prioritizing diversity in leadership roles are more likely to attract and retain diverse talent, contributing to a culture of belonging. When women see their gender in leadership positions, they are more inclined to feel that they, too, can succeed and thrive in their careers.

Fairness and equity (*Mdn* = 7.00; *IQR* = 0.00) are critical for creating a culture of belonging. Organizations that promote fairness and equity can bring in and keep diverse talent, contributing to a culture of belonging (Madera et al., 2019). When employees are treated fairly and equitably in the workplace, regardless of their identity or background, they are more likely to feel included and valued. Growth and opportunity (*Mdn* = 7.00; *IQR* = 1.00) are equally important for creating a culture of belonging. Employees feel driven and devoted to their organizations when given meaningful work and ongoing opportunities for professional development (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

Having a robust sexual harassment policy (*Mdn* = 7.00; *IQR* = 1.00) and enacting a whistleblower policy (*Mdn* = 7.00; *IQR* = 1.00) that protects against retaliation are essential for

creating a culture of belonging. These policies create a secure and inclusive environment for women to work and share their concerns, contributing to a culture of belonging (Reiche et al., 2023). Finally, using the right hybrid workplace tools ( $Mdn = 7.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) is critical for creating a culture of belonging. As remote work becomes increasingly popular, these tools enable workers to work effectively and efficiently, regardless of location or schedule, contributing to a culture of inclusion and flexibility (Oppong Peprah, 2023).

**Very Important Items.** Among the 34 items identified as “very important” in fostering a sense of belonging among women in hybrid teams, two of them received an interquartile range (IQR) of zero, indicating complete agreement ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.00$ ). These items pertained to access to better technology and organizational culture. In a hybrid work environment, it is essential to create systems that elevate the voices of historically disenfranchised individuals ( $Mdn = 6.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) to foster a culture of belonging for all employees. Such systems can be created by implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, encouraging underrepresented groups to share their perspectives and ideas (Kapoor et al., 2021). This practice can help build a sense of inclusivity among employees and promote an environment where everyone feels heard and valued.

In addition, ensuring facilities are free from gender and ability privilege and providing accessible and safe spaces for all ( $Mdn = 6.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) employees can also contribute to a culture of belonging. Research shows that a lack of accessible spaces and safety concerns can negatively impact employee productivity, job satisfaction, and overall well-being (Liu & Moon, 2021). Therefore, creating an inclusive work environment that provides safe and accessible spaces for all can contribute to a culture of belonging and enhance employee well-being.

Another essential factor in creating a culture of belonging for women working in a hybrid environment is providing work-life balance ( $Mdn = 6.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ). Implementing flexible work schedules ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ), expanding time-off policies for health care tasks ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ), and acknowledging virtual meeting fatigue ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can all contribute to work-life balance (Kapoor et al., 2021). Promoting work-life balance can help reduce employee burnout, improve mental health, and promote overall job satisfaction (Badri, 2019).

Relevant and reliable health benefits ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) are also essential in creating a culture of belonging. Access to health benefits, such as comprehensive medical coverage and mental health support, can help reduce employee stress, promote wellness, and increase job satisfaction (Marshall, 2020). By providing employees with relevant and reliable health benefits, companies can promote employee well-being and support their overall health, leading to a sense of belonging. Providing health and well-being resources ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ) is also essential in creating a culture of belonging for women working in a hybrid environment. Companies that provide such resources as mental health support, fitness programs, and ergonomic workstations can promote employee wellness and support their overall well-being. Such resources can also help employees balance work and personal life, increasing job satisfaction and a sense of belonging.

A company that shows high accountability ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ) is also essential in creating a culture of belonging for women working in a hybrid environment. When a company takes responsibility for its actions and decisions, it creates an atmosphere of trust and transparency, increasing employee engagement and job satisfaction (Swarnalatha & Prasanna, 2013). Employees are more likely to feel valued and supported when their employer takes

ownership of its actions and decisions. Precise mechanisms of reporting violations ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can contribute to a culture of belonging for women working in a hybrid environment. Having clear and effective mechanisms for reporting violations of company policies, such as discrimination or harassment, can help create a safe work environment and promote a sense of belonging among employees (Einarsen et al., 2020).

Promoting transparency ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) in promotions and other opportunities can also contribute to a culture of belonging. When employees understand the criteria for advancement and are given equal opportunities for growth and development, they are more likely to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs (Mobasserri et al., 2021). By promoting transparency in promotions, companies can create a fair and inclusive work environment that fosters a sense of belonging among employees. The ability for workers to dictate which days of the week they will come in person ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment. Providing flexible work schedules can assist employees in finding a healthier balance between work and personal life, enhancing job contentment (Azar et al., 2018). Companies can create a positive work environment that promotes employee well-being and fosters a sense of belonging by allowing employees more control over their work schedules. Cultural awareness events and celebrations ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment. Celebrating diverse cultures and traditions can help foster a sense of inclusivity and belonging among employees (Kapoor et al., 2021). By promoting cultural awareness, companies can create an optimistic work environment that values and supports all employees.

Caring colleagues ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.00$ ), a positive organizational culture ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ), and meaningful work are other critical components of a culture of belonging.

Employees who feel supported by their colleagues, have meaningful work ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ), and work in a positive organizational culture are more likely to be engaged, satisfied, and productive (Liu & Moon, 2021). Empowering team members to make decisions ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ), providing access to mentors ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ), creating policies to support new parents and menstruating people ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ), promoting safety at work ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ), and requiring anti-bias training ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) for everyone in the company are other ways to contribute to a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment (Kapoor et al., 2021). These practices can help employees feel valued, supported, and empowered to bring their whole selves to work. Training on unconscious bias ( $Mdn = 6.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) is another way to promote a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment. This training can help employees recognize their biases and encourage them to challenge and overcome them, leading to a more inclusive work environment (Carter et al., 2020). Companies can provide this training through online modules, workshops, or training sessions with experts.

Peer relationships ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) are another essential factor in creating a culture of belonging for women working in a hybrid environment. Most believe horizontal recognition (peer-to-peer) gives workers the most robust sense of belonging, solidarity, and morale (Brun & Dugas, 2008). Positive relationships with colleagues can help promote a sense of belonging and increase job satisfaction (Liu & Moon, 2021). Companies can create a positive work environment that fosters employee engagement and well-being by encouraging collaboration, teamwork, and mutual support. Support groups ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging. According to a 2019 study, support groups significantly increase the intention of employees to stay (Lan et al., 2020). Affinity groups are an example of a space where employees from underrepresented groups can provide each other with social support

(Onyeador et al., 2021). Employee resource group (ERG) is also another form of support group that assists in giving minorities and women a voice and increasing their visibility within the organization (Köllen, 2021).

Incorporating town halls or large group meetings ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ) is another way to create a belonging culture. A study by White et al. (2010) showed that meeting with leadership through town halls results in contented conversation and a sense of community. Employees who feel connected to their colleagues are likelier to feel a sense of belonging (Schwartz et al., 2020). Opportunities for face-to-face collaborations ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also help create a belonging culture. Employees working together in person are likelier to build relationships and feel connected to their colleagues. In a study by Anders (2022), employees in a hybrid setting tend to feel more bonded with their peers when they can collaborate in person. Office hours for drop-in opportunities ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging. When employees know they can drop in and speak with their colleagues or supervisor, it can help build a sense of accessibility and support. In a study by Jaitli and Hua (2013), employees who feel that their organization is accessible are likelier to feel a sense of belonging.

Providing meaningful feedback ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ) is vital in creating a culture of belonging for women working in a hybrid environment. Feedback can be used to recognize employees' achievements, identify areas for improvement, and foster a positive relationship between employees and their supervisors (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Such feedback can also support employee growth and development, increasing job satisfaction and a sense of belonging. Leaders giving credit publicly for employees' contributions ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ) is another essential aspect of creating a culture of belonging. Public recognition of employees' contributions

can help foster a sense of inclusivity, appreciation, and belonging among employees (Yuan & Woodman, 2021). Employees who feel recognized for their contributions are more likely to feel valued and supported, increasing job satisfaction and engagement.

Work environment and set-up ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) are also critical factors in creating a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment. A comfortable and ergonomic workspace can help reduce employee stress, improve productivity, and increase job satisfaction (Liu & Moon, 2021). Companies can promote employee well-being and foster belonging by ensuring a safe and comfortable work environment. Access to better technology ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.00$ ) is essential for promoting a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment. Equipping employees with the most recent technology and software can enhance their efficiency and effectiveness at work, leading to increased job satisfaction (Kapoor et al., 2021).

Scheduling intentional activities to increase connections and engagement ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) is essential to creating a belonging culture in a hybrid work environment. Companies can create a positive workplace culture that promotes employee engagement and well-being by organizing team-building undertakings, social events, and other occasions for employees to engage and connect (Liu & Moon, 2021). These activities can also help break down barriers between colleagues, promote inclusivity, and build a sense of community among employees. Workers who feel comfortable voicing their opinions ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a belonging culture in a hybrid workplace. Employees who feel that their opinions are valued and heard are more likely to be engaged and invested in their work (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). Providing a safe space for employees to voice their opinions, ideas, and concerns can help promote an inclusive work environment and foster a sense of belonging. Companies prioritizing employee wellness ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 0.75$ ) can also contribute to a

culture of belonging. Employee wellness programs focusing on stress management, mindfulness, and work-life balance can help reduce burnout and improve employee well-being (Liu & Moon, 2021). By prioritizing employee wellness, companies can create an understanding work environment that promotes employee engagement, job satisfaction, and a sense of belonging.

Having 1:1 virtual meetings ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) between employees and their direct supervisor is another way to promote a culture of belonging. These meetings can help build a positive relationship between employees and their supervisors, promote employee growth and development, and increase job satisfaction (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). By providing regular opportunities for communication and feedback, companies can foster a positive work environment that promotes employee engagement and well-being. Ensuring that meetings are not dominated by a few voices ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging. When all employees are given equal opportunities to contribute and share their ideas, they are more likely to be engaged and invested in their work (Carmeli & Weisberg, 2006). By promoting equal participation in meetings, companies can create an inclusive work environment that values all employees. Making space for ideation and strategy ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging in a hybrid work environment. Employees with opportunities to contribute their ideas and perspectives are likelier to be engaged and invested in their work (Yuan & Woodman, 2021). Offering employees a forum to voice their ideas and contribute to the organizational strategy can foster feelings of ownership and inclusion.

**Moderately Important Items.** Nine items were identified as “moderately important” in fostering a sense of belonging among women in hybrid teams. According to an article by Nurlina (2022), when promotions are more visible ( $Mdn = 5.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ), they are more likely to be seen as fair and equitable, increasing employee satisfaction and commitment to the organization.



Therefore, more visible promotions can contribute to a culture of belonging within women working in a hybrid environment. Another way to create a culture of belonging is through annual reports of DEIB efforts ( $Mdn = 5.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ). These reports can help to communicate the organization's commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace, which can help to build trust and a sense of belonging among employees. A 2020 study by McKinsey and Company discovered that organizations deeply dedicated to diversity and inclusion are likelier to possess employees who experience a feeling of belonging. Providing an office budget for celebratory events ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can also contribute to a culture of belonging. When employees have the opportunity to celebrate together, it can help to build a sense of community and connection. In a study by Gallup (2017), employees who feel that their organization celebrates their achievements are likelier to feel they belong.

Having 1:1 in-person meetings for employees and their direct supervisors ( $Mdn = 5.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) is also vital in creating a culture of belonging. These meetings can provide a space for employees to discuss their concerns and goals with their supervisor, which can help to build trust and a sense of support. In a study by Gallup (2017), employees who have regular one-on-one meetings with their manager are more engaged and more likely to stay with their organization. Lastly, rotating office times for entire teams or departments rather than individual employees ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.00$ ) can contribute to a culture of belonging. When teams or departments rotate their office times together, it can help build community and support. Bloom et al. (2022) noted that spending time with coworkers and colleagues is the main reason workers show up for work.

**No Consensus Items.** Individual consensus was not reached for nine items in the survey. Three of these items related to employee well-being and achieving a work-life balance. These

items are significant as they collectively contribute to an inclusive culture, even if their impact on belonging might differ. However, these strategies may vary in effectiveness based on the specific context of the organization and its workforce.

Respecting workers' obligations outside the workplace, such as caregiving, volunteer work, and social engagements ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.75$ ), can also increase employee job satisfaction and a sense of belonging (Ernst Kossek et al., 2010). Some individuals may prioritize flexible work hours or consider outside obligations a low priority if they work in a company that values labor above all else. Providing financial support for dependents' schooling ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 2.00$ ) and child care assistance ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.75$ ) can increase employee work satisfaction and loyalty, particularly among women (Shockley & Singla, 2011). However, some individuals may prioritize investing in employee training and development over providing financial support or consider this support a low priority.

Three additional crucial items that failed to reach a consensus pertained to fostering community and establishing a culture. Organizing virtual social events ( $Mdn = 3.00$ ;  $IQR = 2.00$ ) can be an effective strategy for remote and hybrid teams to create connections and foster community (K. H. Lim & Chen, 2012). Some people may prefer in-person social contacts or have competing commitments that make it impossible to join virtual social activities. Open-office layouts ( $Mdn = 4.0$ ;  $IQR = 2.5$ ) can negatively affect employee well-being and productivity (Kim & De Dear, 2013). Some may find the open-office arrangement invigorating and favorable to teamwork, although some individuals may prefer a more secluded or enclosed workspace to help them concentrate. Conducting annual climate studies and reporting ( $Mdn = 5.50$ ;  $IQR = 1.75$ ) can help organizations identify areas for improvement and track progress over time (Grawitch et al., 2007). Some employees may perceive surveys as inefficient or time-

consuming means of getting information on employee happiness and engagement and favor other feedback collection approaches.

Two other items that failed to reach a consensus pertained to the concept of leadership and performance evaluation. According to Van Tuin et al. (2021), fostering good relationships between employees and leaders can increase job satisfaction, staff engagement, and a sense of belonging. The significance of shared commonalities between employees and leaders ( $Mdn = 5.00$ ;  $IQR = 1.75$ ) in establishing a culture of belonging within hybrid teams may vary based on leadership styles, team dynamics, and cultural values. Equally evaluating all staff responsibilities ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 2.50$ ) can generate a sense of fairness and transparency in performance reviews (Na-Nan et al., 2020). Others may believe that performance standards must be customized to the specific requirements of each position or that equal assessment is essential for promoting workplace justice and equity.

The last item that did not reach a consensus pertains to the mandatory implementation of microaggression training for all employees ( $Mdn = 6.00$ ;  $IQR = 2.50$ ). It implies that while there is recognition of the importance of addressing microaggressions to create an inclusive environment, there may be differing views on implementing this training effectively. Practical training can improve attitudes and conduct toward various groups. This adjustment can lead to a more inclusive and nurturing workplace, which is essential for teamwork, especially in hybrid settings. A shared knowledge and commitment to eliminating microaggressions helps team members feel appreciated, valued, and seen. While there might not be a consensus on the mandatory nature of such training, its potential impact on creating a positive, inclusive, and supportive environment for team members is significant. Organizations might need to focus on

effectively communicating the benefits of such training and implementing it in a way that addresses the concerns or reservations of those who are less convinced of its necessity.

### ***Research Question Two***

RQ2 inquired, “Can these critical factors be used to develop a theoretical framework to understand a strong culture of belonging in women working in a hybrid work environment?” To study this, intercoder reliability tests were performed on the 51 items for which a consensus was reached using Delphi analysis. Through this study, six themes have developed, with the critical components of each theme given below. Tables were created for each theme that illustrate the major variables leading to a sense of belonging highlighted by these themes and their corresponding crucial items.

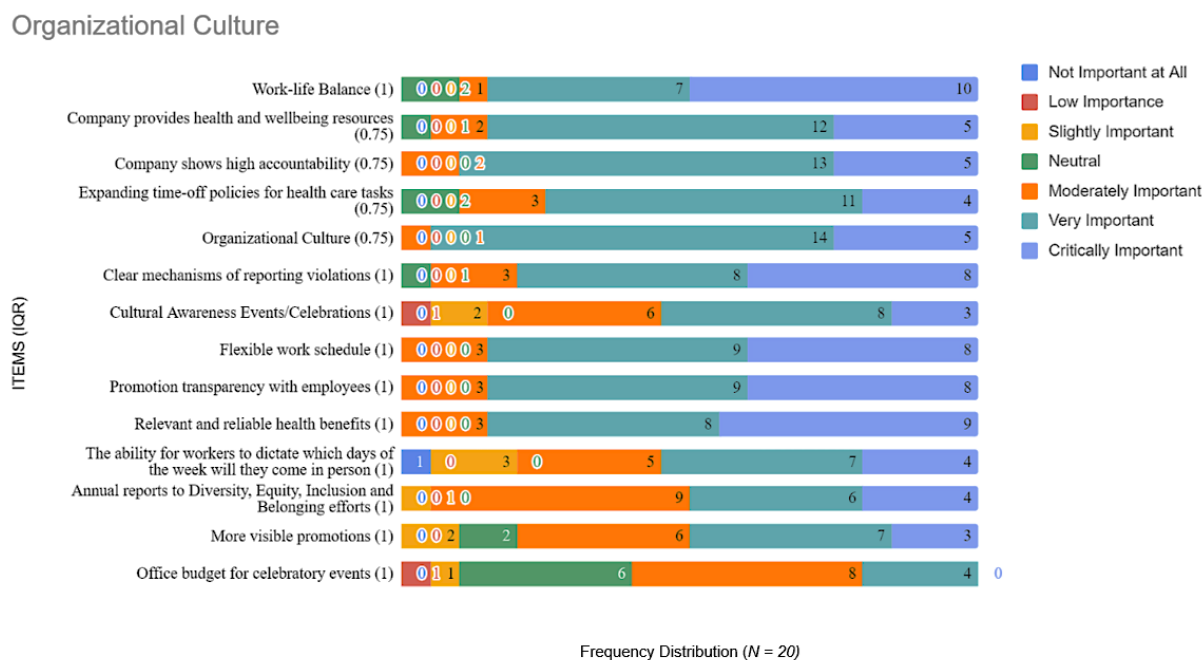
**Organizational Culture.** Items coded under the theme of organizational culture pertain to the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices that shape how members of an organization interact and make decisions (see Figure 14).

- The company provides health and well-being resources (L. Waller, 2021).
- Work-life Balance (Elhinnawy et al., 2023).
- Organizational Culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).
- The company shows high accountability (Arif et al., 2019).
- Expanding time-off policies for health care tasks (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023).
- Precise mechanisms of reporting violations (Clarke, 2000).
- Relevant and reliable health benefits (Koopman et al., 2016).
- Promotion transparency with employees' promotions (Perales, 2022).
- Flexible work schedule (Orman et al., 2023).

- Workers can dictate which days of the week they will come in person (Orman et al., 2023).
- More visible promotions (Perales, 2022).
- Annual reports on DEIB efforts (Miranda-Wolff, 2022).
- Office budget for celebratory events (King et al., 2020).

**Figure 14**

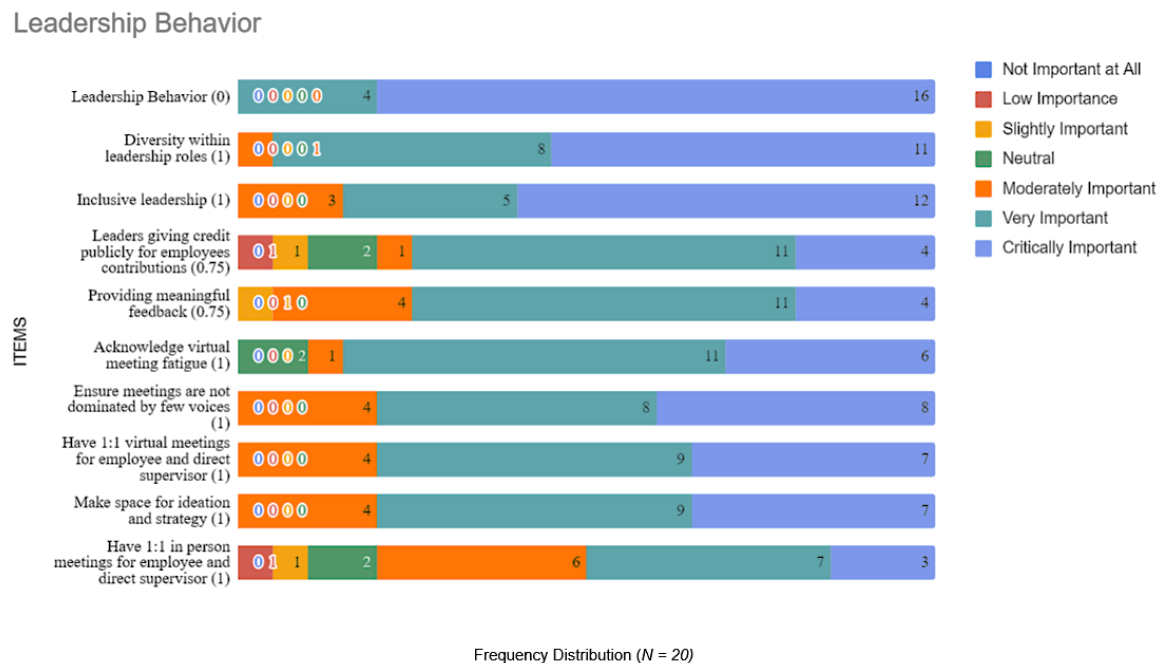
*Likert-Scale Response Distribution Coded Under Organizational Culture*



Organizational culture fosters a sense of belonging among women working in hybrid teams. Research by Allen et al. (2021) showed that a supportive and inclusive culture endorses a sense of belonging, which is vital for female employees' retention and satisfaction. Organizations that value DEI are more effective in promoting a sense of belonging. These factors contribute to building a positive and supportive organizational culture that fosters a sense of belonging and promotes employee well-being.

**Leadership Behavior.** Items coded under the theme of leadership behavior pertain to actions and attitudes demonstrated by leaders that influence the behaviors and attitudes of their followers. Figure 15 shows a bar chart depicting the following themes:

- Leadership behavior (Shore & Chung, 2022)
- Inclusive Leadership (Shore & Chung, 2022)
- Diversity within leadership roles (Chung et al., 2020)
- Providing meaningful feedback (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021)
- Leaders publicly credit employees' contributions (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021)
- Have 1:1 virtual meetings for employees and direct supervisors (Yarberry & Sims, 2021)
- Acknowledge virtual meeting fatigue (Fauville et al., 2021)
- Make space for ideation and strategy (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021)
- Have 1:1 in-person meetings for employees and direct supervisors (Cherubini et al., 2021)

**Figure 15***Likert-Scale Response Distribution Coded Under Leadership Behavior*

All the factors mentioned contribute to leadership behavior that creates a work environment that fosters a sense of belonging for women in hybrid teams. According to Carson et al. (2007), shared team leadership fosters inclusion and promotes collaboration among team members. Additionally, McCluney and Rabelo (2019) noted that women are more likely to feel a sense of belonging in a workplace where they see other women in leadership positions. By prioritizing these behaviors, leaders can create a culture of inclusion and respect, ultimately improving their team members' satisfaction and productivity (Garg, 2022).

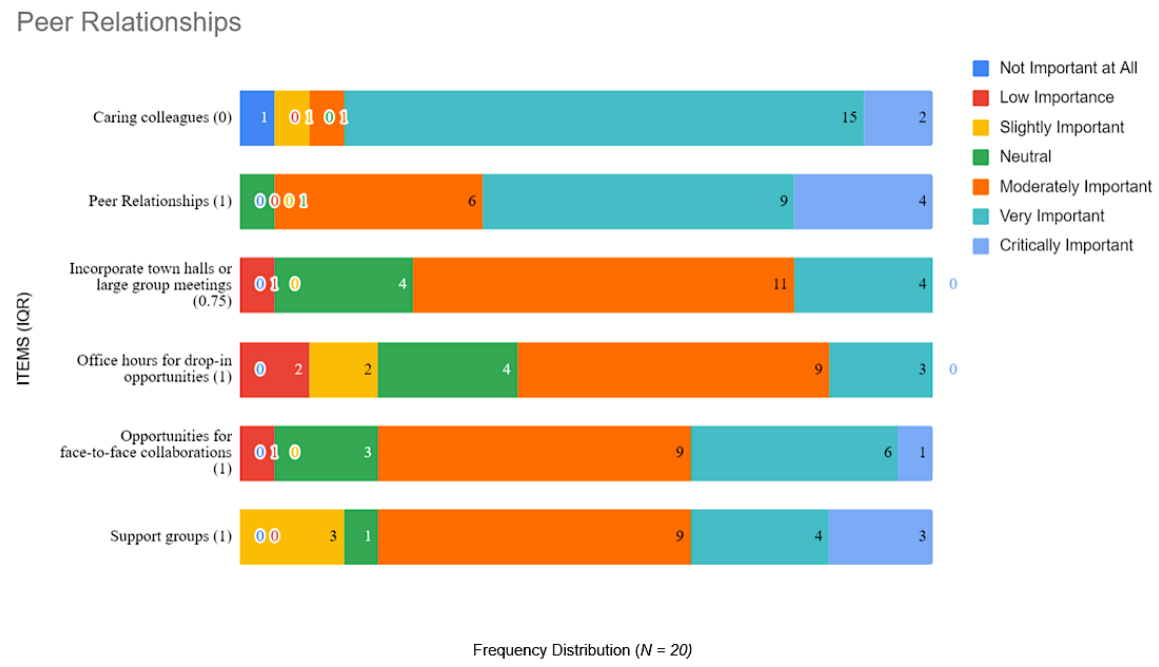
**Peer Relationships.** Items coded under the theme of peer relationships relate to social connections and interactions among colleagues at work. Figure 16 depicts the following themes:

- Peer Relationships (Crawford, 2022)
- Caring colleagues (Durakovic et al., 2022)

- Incorporate town halls or large group meetings (Rishi et al., 2021)
- Support Groups (Petitta & Ghezzi, 2023)
- Opportunities for face-to-face collaborations (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012)
- Office hours for drop-in opportunities (Gao et al., 2021)

**Figure 16**

*Likert-Scale Response Distribution Coded Under Peer Relationships*



When discussing aspects that contribute to fostering a culture of belonging within women in hybrid teams, it is crucial to draw on relevant research. For example, Ely et al. (2011) found that women often face challenges building relationships in virtual environments and may benefit from face-to-face interactions. Similarly, a report by Catalyst (2019) highlights the importance of support groups and mentorship programs for women in the workplace. By incorporating insights from such research, we can better understand how to create a supportive and inclusive culture for women in hybrid teams.

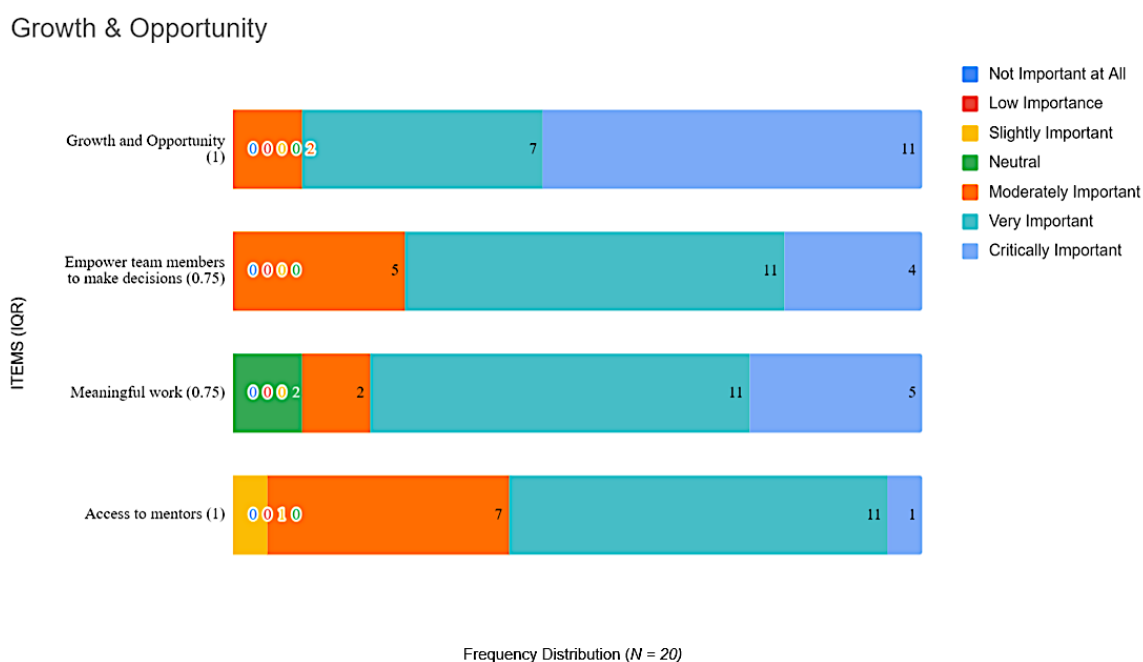


**Growth and Opportunity.** Items coded under the theme of growth and opportunity on the availability of career development opportunities and the potential for organizational advancement. Figure 17 shows a bar chart with the following themes.

- Growth and Opportunity (Lin et al., 2019)
- Meaningful work (Byrd, 2022)
- Empower team members to make decisions (Gaynor et al., 2022)
- Access to mentors (Lin et al., 2019)

**Figure 17**

*Likert-Scale Response Distribution Coded Under Growth and Opportunity*

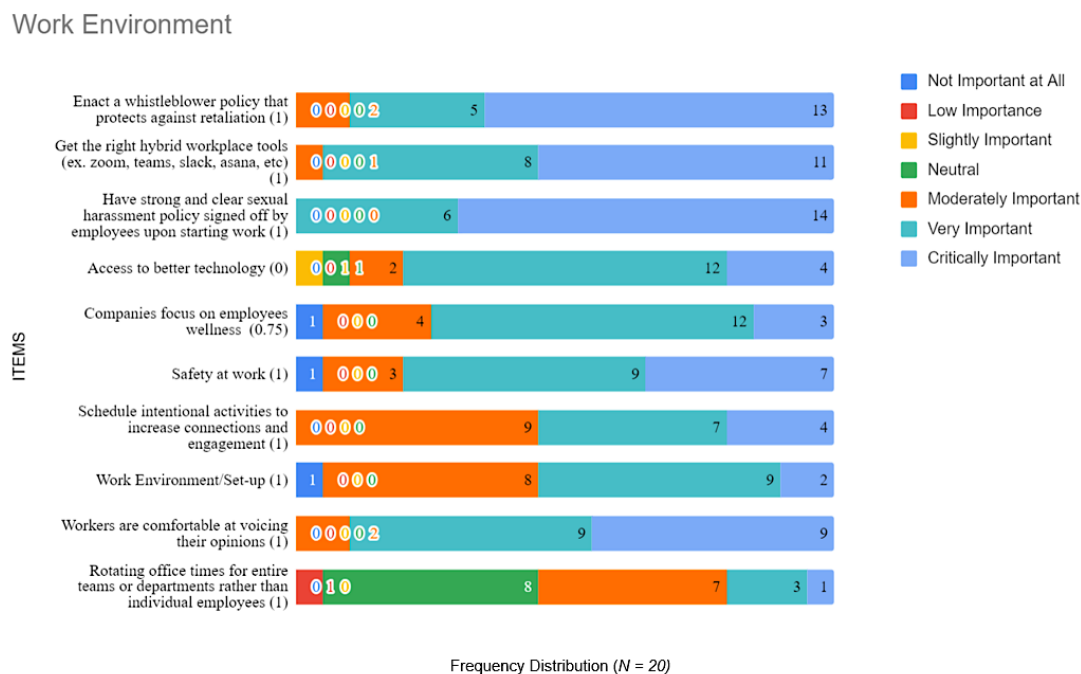


These factors are essential for well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity in the workplace. Previous research indicated that these elements positively influence employee retention and creativity and reduce turnover intention. Opportunities for professional development and advancement, encouraging mentorship and networking also contribute to a

sense of belonging among women (Lin et al., 2019). Organizations can create a supportive and inclusive work environment by implementing these practices, resulting in belonging for women working in hybrid teams.

**Work Environment.** Items coded under the theme of work environment relates to the physical, social, and psychological conditions of the workplace that influence employee experiences and well-being. Figure 18 shows the following themes in the form of a bar chart:

- Have a strong and clear sexual harassment policy signed off by employees upon starting work (Perry et al., 2021)
- Enact a whistleblower policy that protects against retaliation (Zachariah et al., 2022)
- Get the right hybrid workplace tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Slack, Asana, etc.; Leonardelli, 2022)
- Access to better technology (Gratton, 2021)
- Companies focus on employees wellness (Juchnowicz & Kinowska, 2021)
- Workers are comfortable at voicing their opinions (Leonardelli, 2022)
- Work Environment/Set-up (Gratton, 2021)
- Safety at work (Lenka, 2021)
- Schedule intentional activities to increase connections and engagement (Gratton, 2021)
- Rotating office times for entire teams or departments rather than individual employees (Bloom et al., 2022)

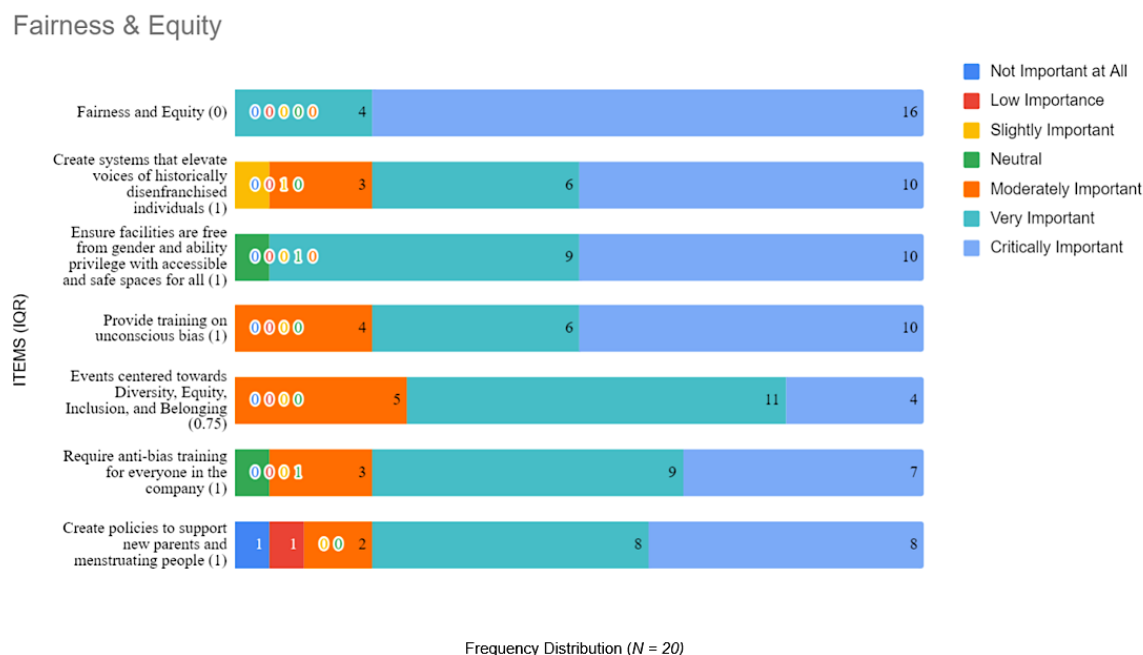
**Figure 18***Likert-Scale Response Distribution Coded Under Work Environment*

Per Sonnenschein et al. (2022), a well-designed work environment and setup can help decrease stress and increase job satisfaction, contributing to a sense of belonging among hybrid employees. This includes physical factors, such as adequate lighting, comfortable furniture, and appropriate temperature; social factors, such as positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors; and psychological factors, such as autonomy and meaningful work. A culture of belonging can be fostered through policies and practices prioritizing employee well-being and inclusion, such as adaptable work arrangements and support for work-life balance. Providing employees with essential resources and assistance to perform their jobs effectively, such as access to the right hybrid workplace tools and better technology, can also contribute to a sense of inclusion and fairness in the workplace.

**Fairness and Equity.** Items coded under the theme of fairness and equity pertain to the perceived impartiality and justice in an organization's treatment of employees. Figure 19 shows a

bar chart that depicts the number of participants for each coded analysis contributing to the following overall themes:

- Fairness and equity (Lalas et al., 2019)
- Create systems that elevate the voices of historically disenfranchised individuals (Johnson, 2022)
- Ensure facilities are free from gender and ability privilege with accessible and safe spaces for all (McGuire et al., 2022)
- Provide training on unconscious bias (Roberts, 2020)
- Events centered towards Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (Adejumo, 2021)
- Require anti-bias training for everyone in the company (Rudman & Mescher, 2013)
- Create policies to support new parents and menstruating people (Azeez et al., 2021)

**Figure 19***Likert-Scale Response Distribution Coded Under Fairness and Equity*

Fairness and equity initiatives are essential for nurturing a sense of belonging among women in hybrid teams. According to Zeidan and Itani (2020), employees can feel a sense of belonging when organizations are perceived as fair and equitable, leading to positive behaviors and outcomes such as engagement and retention. Policies that promote work-life balance, such as adaptable work arrangements, can help reduce work-life conflict and increase job satisfaction (Aziz-Ur-Rehman & Siddiqui, 2019). Providing training and development opportunities relevant to job and career goals can also help women feel valued and supported by their organization (Yarberry & Sims, 2021).

**Authors Observation**

Notably, the alignment between the factors that achieved a consensus during the research and the insights extracted from the existing literature on fostering a sense of belonging for women in a hybrid work environment reinforces the credibility and relevance of the study's

findings, underscoring the significance of these factors in promoting a sense of belonging within such work settings. However, it is worth emphasizing the unexpected nature of the process that led to this consensus. Surprisingly, it took three rounds of the Delphi method to reach a consensus on these factors, despite the wealth of supporting information within the existing literature that unequivocally highlights their critical role in fostering a culture of belonging in hybrid work environments.

Furthermore, these findings prompt us to consider that addressing belonging-related issues may demand more comprehensive and innovative approaches. It becomes increasingly evident that the remedy for these concerns may extend beyond traditional training and established protocols. Belonging is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and our study suggests that fostering it may require a deeper understanding of individual experiences, organizational culture, and systemic factors that influence it. Therefore, to effectively promote a culture of belonging within a diverse and evolving work environment, exploring unconventional strategies and adopting a more holistic perspective becomes crucial. This unexpected journey toward consensus highlights the complex interplay between empirical research and individuals' diverse perspectives and priorities within the workplace, demonstrating that even well-established principles may require multiple iterations to achieve consensus in a practical context.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study further explains the existing literature on creating a sense of inclusion among women who work in hybrid teams. A 2020 study by García-Rodríguez et al. showed that a strong organizational culture valuing diversity and inclusion increases job satisfaction and employee retention rates. Research also demonstrated that leaders who exhibit inclusive behaviors, such as aggressively seeking various opinions and providing opportunities for all team members, foster a

more inclusive and inviting workplace (Warren et al., 2019). Literature also presented that excellent interactions with coworkers can increase job satisfaction and decrease employee turnover (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). According to research, individuals who see growth prospects and feel valued by their business are more likely to be interested in their jobs and dedicated to their firm (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Previous studies showed that establishing a physically, socially, and psychologically secure workplace enhances employee well-being and engagement (Teo et al., 2020). Finally, the literature demonstrates that employees who see justice and equity in their organization's treatment are likelier to be engaged and devoted to their work (Kang & Sung, 2019).

The study suggests that companies can improve their DEIB strategies by considering the critical aspects identified by experts to establish a culture of belonging among women in hybrid teams. To foster a sense of belonging, leaders can exhibit inclusive behavior by providing feedback, actively listening, and creating a psychologically safe environment. Collaborating, communicating, and promoting career development initiatives can enhance peer relationships and support women's growth. Additionally, organizations can prioritize flexible work arrangements, safe workspaces, work-life balance, and fairness and equality in their promotion and reward systems to promote a respectful and inclusive culture. By implementing these initiatives, companies can create a more inclusive workplace and ensure all team members feel welcome and valued. Overall, DEI strategies aim to establish a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace in which all team members feel respected, supported, and able to thrive. Creating a sense of belonging among women working in hybrid teams is a crucial step in accomplishing this objective.

### **The C.O.R.E Belonging Framework**

The researcher developed Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework to present the study results, as shown in Figure 20. The acronym "C.O.R.E" was derived from the six categories identified in the intercoder reliability analysis to form this framework, which stands for (C) culture, (O) opportunity, (R) relationships, and (E) environment. Throughout the Delphi analysis, each category includes essential items that achieved at least a "moderately important" ranking. The framework visualizes how these four themes and key factors each contribute to the feeling of belongingness. The more these items are present in an organization, the stronger their culture of belonging will become.

A tiered evaluation approach balanced critically essential and less critical factors within Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework. Delphi analysis factors with high consensus were considered necessary and given increased attention in the framework. Conversely, less significant components were included but less prominent, producing a complex framework reflecting how diverse elements influence belonging. This balance was achieved by assigning weight to the factors based on their importance. This allowed the framework to prioritize the most influential aspects of belonging while recognizing less critical elements' roles.



**Figure 20**

*The Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework for Women in Hybrid Work*



*Note.* The Harley's C.O.R.E highlights the fundamental themes and aspects promoting a belonging culture among hybrid team-working women.

Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework is depicted as a circle to emphasize its holistic nature (Lima, 2017) and to highlight the interconnection and equal importance of its four components: culture, opportunity, relationships, and environment. The continuous shape of the circle emphasizes the dynamic and continuing nature of nurturing belonging (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022), and its enclosing quality stands for a sense of security and inclusion (Lepp & Zorn, 2002). Since it is universally acknowledged (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006), the circle's centrality emphasizes the importance of the person or group's experience and everyone's desire to belong. The circle's natural adaptability (Hisakata et al., 2016) also fits the framework's dynamic and robust nature in various scenarios. Each theme and essential component is detailed.

### ***Culture***

Culture includes the shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms that shape how people interact in the organization. Collaboration, creativity, and employee development are valued in a culture that increases prospects for professional progress and fosters learning and skill development for individual advancement (Dong et al., 2017). Additionally, a supportive and inclusive work environment strengthens solid interpersonal relationships between coworkers, managers, and mentors, which enhances collaboration and collaborative projects (Attle & Baker, 2007). Workplace facets are affected, including the atmosphere, attitudes, and general workplace rules (Judge et al., 2006). A healthy corporate culture can increase employee satisfaction and success by prioritizing well-being, providing work-life balance, and maintaining a welcoming workplace (Sheppard, 2016). Therefore, companies frequently carefully create a culture that embodies their values, encouraging excellence and constructive interactions across these domains (Fullan, 2004).

### ***Opportunity***

Opportunities are the chances or possibilities for career advancement and personal growth within the organization. A company that prioritizes career growth and continual learning creates a nurturing and encouraging workplace atmosphere and offers employees avenues to advance their careers (Jayasingam et al., 2016). A culture of optimism, inspiration, and loyalty to the organization's goals evolves when employees see opportunities for professional advancement and personal growth (Mappamiring & Putra, 2021). With the understanding that their collaborative efforts would advance each employee's career, such a perception encourages employee teamwork (Bankins et al., 2023). A culture that sincerely supports opportunity frequently promotes ongoing education and innovation. This sparked Employee creativity and

adaptability, encouraging their enthusiasm to adopt new tools and technology (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). As a result, this promotes a dynamic and forward-thinking organizational environment that, when effectively incorporated, may increase employer satisfaction and general productivity by creating healthy relationships and a welcoming workplace (G. Ozcelik, 2015). Through these opportunities, individuals can thrive, discovering a profound sense of belonging inside the organization that fosters their growth in both professional and personal domains (Rampen et al., 2023).

### ***Relationships***

Relationships are the connections and interactions between individuals within the organization, including colleagues, managers, and mentors. Internal relationships shape an organization's culture, opportunity, and work environment (Zeb et al., 2021). Positive relationships—trust, open communication, and collaboration—often lead to a unified company culture that upholds common values and standards (Pathiramage et al., 2020). Employees usually match their behavior with the culture's positive vibes, improving the atmosphere and creating a space where coworkers and superiors support each other's professional and personal growth (Men & Yue, 2019). Thus, this supportive network indirectly improves possibilities and creates a positive, collaborative work atmosphere in physical and virtual offices. It also boosts productivity and employee well-being, strengthening the company's culture and commitment to opportunity (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021). In contrast, strained or unfavorable connections can negatively affect the workplace, hinder prospects, and even undermine the culture, stressing the importance of relationships in shaping the organizational ecosystem (Wang et al., 2020). These meaningful connections and exchanges create a deep sense of belonging among colleagues, managers, and mentors, creating a more unified and supportive work environment (Byrd, 2022).

## ***Environment***

The environment incorporates the physical and virtual surroundings, including the tools, technologies, policies, and practices that facilitate productivity, health, and well-being. It covers concrete elements like lighting, furniture, and office layout, as well as intangible elements like company culture, communication channels, and policies regarding remote work. Together, these components affect how workers view their workplace, enhancing their feeling of community (Myerson & Ross, 2022). A well-designed physical workspace can help in-person employees feel at ease and like they belong, promoting a good environment that promotes engagement and cooperation (Sullivan & Bendell, 2023). On the other hand, the virtual environment becomes even more important for hybrid workers, who switch between working remotely and in person.

Using efficient virtual tools, communication platforms, and adaptable rules guarantees that distant workers experience a sense of integration and connection with the company (Stoian et al., 2022). This is why a supportive work environment—physical or virtual—is essential to fostering community among staff members, irrespective of how they choose to work (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). In a time of changing work arrangements, it is critical for businesses aiming to establish inclusive and supportive work environments to comprehend the complex interactions among these aspects (Babapour Chafi et al., 2021).

This framework aims to help organizations enhance their diversity, equity, and inclusion policies by including belonging activities. This framework can be a visual guide to help organizations develop initiatives to establish a culture of belonging. Existing research on belongingness is extensive; therefore, Harley's C.O.R.E Framework highlights the most critical aspects and streamlines the process for companies by focusing on women working in hybrid teams.

## Applications of the C.O.R.E Belonging Framework

In the current discourse surrounding the evolution of workplace dynamics, the hybrid work model has emerged as a significant point of discussion. This model, which combines on-site and remote work environments in a way that works well together, requires a thorough look at how organizations ensure that all employees feel welcome and like they belong. Drawing from the foundational principles of Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework, this section will present a series of detailed recommendations. These are based on the critical factors identified in Chapter 4. They are meant to deal with the complex problems in a hybrid workplace and ensure that on-site and remote workers are fairly involved and represented.

### *Culture*

Table 16 represents the activities for culture under the Harley C.O.R.E model.

**Table 16**

#### *Activities for Culture*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Establish Inclusive Leadership Training Programs</b>	<b>Employee Wellness Initiatives</b>	<b>Cultural Awareness and Celebrations</b>
Steps	Find training providers who specialize in inclusive leadership and form partnerships with them. Plan frequent training sessions for both in-person and remote leaders (e.g., every two or three months). Provide distant leaders with access to online training modules so they may take part. Employee input can be gathered through focus groups or questionnaires to track and evaluate the training's efficacy.	To find out what they need and like in terms of wellbeing, survey your staff. Provide both virtual resources (online therapy sessions, virtual fitness classes) and on-site amenities (e.g., a workout facility, relaxation places). Give remote workers the freedom to visit wellness clinics in their area and cover the fees.	Establish a virtual cultural calendar so that staff members can discuss and discover various cultural celebrations and holidays. Plan online webinars or workshops about various cultures that are instructed by staff members or outside speakers. Encourage staff members who are based there to celebrate in the workplace, and

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Establish Inclusive Leadership Training Programs</b>	<b>Employee Wellness Initiatives</b>	<b>Cultural Awareness and Celebrations</b>
			broadcast activities live for those who are not there

### *Opportunity*

Table 17 represents the activities for culture under the Harley C.O.R.E model.

**Table 17**

#### *Activities for Career Growth*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Transparent Career Growth Pathways</b>	<b>Mentorship Programs</b>	<b>Empowering Teams</b>
Steps	Provide a digital platform or intranet website where workers may view defined career routes and the competencies needed to progress. Organize virtual town halls or webinars for professional development every 2 years to review opportunities and criteria for promotions.	Using a virtual platform, junior staff members are paired with senior mentors to ensure frequent check-ins. Set up online "coffee chats" where staff members can speak casually with mentors about their professional goals and obstacles.	Provide digital suggestion boxes or platforms so that groups can present projects or ideas. Contributions might be honored and recognized through special "spotlight" pages on the company intranet, monthly newsletters, or weekly virtual team meetings.

### *Relationships*

Table 18 represents the activities for culture under the Harley C.O.R.E model.

**Table 18**

#### *Activities for Relationships*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Regular 1:1 Meetings</b>	<b>Team-Building Activities</b>	<b>Open Communication Channels</b>
Steps	The process of setting up one-on-one meetings can be made simpler and more automated by using scheduling software like Calendly.	Plan monthly online team-building events, such as online workshops, quiz	Use tools like Teams or Slack to create open channels for

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Regular 1:1 Meetings</b>	<b>Team-Building Activities</b>	<b>Open Communication Channels</b>
	Provide policies that highlight the significance of these gatherings, along with a predetermined schedule that addresses performance reviews, feedback, and well-being inspections.	evenings, or remote escape rooms. If there are remote workers who live close to one another, think about sponsoring local team gatherings.	comments or recommendations. Make sure managers receive training on how to react to criticism quickly and productively.

### *Environment*

Table 19 represents the activities for culture under the Harley C.O.R.E model.

**Table 19**

### *Activities for Hybrid Workplace*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Hybrid Workplace Infrastructure</b>	<b>Inclusive Facilities</b>	<b>Expanded and Flexible Policies</b>
Steps	Whether the staff is based locally or remotely, ensure they have access to a spectrum of digital collaboration tools and receive training on how to utilize them. Update and maintain these tools frequently in response to user input and evolving requirements.	Perform accessibility audits for on-site facilities to find areas that need improvement. Use captioning services or other technologies for virtual meetings to make sure everyone is included.	Provide all policies in an easily readable digital format that is available to all staff members. Review and revise these policies frequently considering employee input and evolving situations.

Managing a hybrid workplace requires fundamentally rethinking corporate culture, opportunity, relationships, and environment in the ever-changing modern workplace. The suggestions made using Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging Framework emphasize how important it is that people thrive in these settings rather than merely adapt. This approach does not simply acknowledge a hybrid model's physical and virtual dualities. Still, it actively leverages them, ensuring every on-site or remote employee experiences a profound sense of belonging and value.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

### ***Experiences of Women in Hybrid Teams with Intersecting Identities***

To foster inclusive work environments that meet the needs of all team members, it is essential to comprehend the experiences of women who possess overlapping identities in hybrid teams. These individuals often encounter multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization, negatively impacting their sense of belonging and inclusion (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Thus, understanding their experiences can assist organizations in developing effective strategies. Additionally, such research can aid companies in identifying and removing structural barriers that prevent women with overlapping identities from fully participating and succeeding in the workplace, ultimately promoting gender equity.

### ***Effective Leadership Approaches for Hybrid Teams***

As remote work and hybrid work models become increasingly common (Phillips, 2020), leaders must adapt their management strategies to effectively oversee geographically dispersed teams with different degrees of in-person and virtual interactions. Further research in this area can aid in identifying the most effective leadership strategies for hybrid teams. One potential focus of such research could be exploring how leaders can communicate effectively with remote team members, establish clear objectives and goals, and foster a sense of community and inclusion for all team members, regardless of their physical location or degree of in-person interaction.

### ***DEIB Measures***

DEIB measures can assist in ensuring that all employees, regardless of their work paradigm, experience an equivalent level of inclusion and belonging. With the emergence of hybrid work models, it is crucial to establish DEIB measurements that can be reliably used



across a variety of work patterns. This is especially crucial because hybrid work models might introduce additional obstacles to inclusion (J. Singh et al., 2021) such as virtual communication difficulties, that may not exist in traditional work forms. Research can investigate how DEIB measurements may differ based on the firm's size, the industry, or the work paradigm.

### **Final Thoughts**

This research has revealed critical insights into organizational dynamics and the evolving needs of the workforce. A key takeaway is the nature of change as an inevitable aspect of organizational life, as highlighted by Obholzer and Roberts (2019). The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified this, disrupting traditional work modalities and accelerating the transition to remote operations. As the world recovers, organizations continue to confront the repercussions, particularly in addressing the evolving needs of their workforce years after the initial lockdown. Furthermore, the complexity of fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace cannot be overlooked. Our findings indicate that despite a comprehensive body of literature, the factors contributing to women's sense of belonging in hybrid teams cannot be universally applied or equally valued by all. This variation underscores the limitations of blanket solutions and the inadequacy of current organizational policies and culture to meet diverse individual needs, pointing to the necessity of a more personalized approach in policymaking.

The research also emphasizes the importance of continuous support for marginalized groups beyond the hiring process. Establishing robust support systems is critical to enabling all employees, especially new hires, to thrive. The omnipresence of these pre- and post-pandemic challenges affirms the ongoing need for progress in DEI initiatives. The introduction of frameworks like Harley's C.O.R.E Belonging helps advocate for marginalized groups' needs by

providing specific criteria and resources that may not be readily available in standard business operations.

This research journey has been an esteemed academic endeavor, enhancing my understanding of how a culture of belonging can be nurtured among women in hybrid teams. It has paved the way for future research opportunities in this significant yet still developing field, an honor that holds the promise of continued academic contribution.

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## APPENDIX A

## CITI Certificate



Completion Date 03-May-2022  
Expiration Date 02-May-2025  
Record ID 48746984

This is to certify that:

**JAM HARLEY**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification  
through CME.

**Graduate & Professional Schools HSR**

(Curriculum Group)

**Graduate & Professional Schools - Psychology Division Human Subjects Training**

(Course Learner Group)

**1 - Basic Course**

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Pepperdine University**

**CITI**  
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wc2f97dc1-4327-4884-9234-be05e16922cc-48746984](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wc2f97dc1-4327-4884-9234-be05e16922cc-48746984)



## APPENDIX B

### IRB Approval Form

Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

#### NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 28, 2023

Protocol Investigator Name: Jam Harley

Protocol #: 22-09-1948

Project Title: Fostering a Culture of Belonging in Hybrid Teams

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Jam Harley:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

## APPENDIX C

## Sample Recruitment Letter

**Sample Recruitment Script Template**

Dear [Name],

My name is Jam Harley, and I am a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study examining critical factors for fostering a strong sense of belonging in women working in hybrid teams, and you are invited to participate in the study.

If you agree, you are invited to participate by completing a survey over the course of 3 distinct cycles that will involve submitting survey responses on critical factors to workplace belonging. The survey is anticipated to take no more than 30 minutes for each cycle. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. Confidentiality will be maintained using a series of security measures, including password protected email communication using university firewall protections, deidentification of data using pseudonyms as well as compartmentalization of the various data elements, keeping all information separate. If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at [REDACTED]

Thank you for your participation,

Jam Harley

Pepperdine University | Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Doctoral Candidate

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## APPENDIX D

## Informed Consent Form



## IRB TEMPLATE SOCIAL- BEHAVIORAL ADULT PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

**IRB #: TBD****Formal Study Title:** Fostering a Sense of Belonging in Hybrid Teams**Authorized Study Personnel:**

Principal Investigator: Jam Harley

**Key Information:****If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:**

- (Males and Females) between the ages of (18-90)
- Procedures will include (Contacting participants using the recruitment script, informed consent, data collection via questionnaire, analysis of data, documentation of findings)
- The completion of the questionnaire 3 times.
- The total time commitment of 90 minutes (30 minutes for each cycle).
- There is minimal risk associated with this study
- You will not be paid any amount of money for your participation
- You will be provided a copy of this consent form

**Invitation**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a leader in the human resource / diversity, equity, and inclusion division. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

The purpose of this study is to determine challenges faced by women employees who are working in a hybrid model, along with measures that leaders use to gauge their employees' sense of belonging. The information generated in answer to the research questions, along with content from the literature review, should yield best practices that leaders can adapt to successfully foster a sense of belonging within their hybrid teams. This will help analyze how to capitalize on employees' sense of belonging, and how that can be applied to a hybrid work environment.

**What will be done during this research study?**

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire for a total of 3 cycles. Each cycle will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. You will be asked a series of questions aimed at figuring out how industry experts perceive certain behaviors. While the research will take approximately 26 to 52 weeks, your participation will only take 90 minutes over the course of several weeks.

**How will my data be used?**

Your questionnaire responses will be analyzed, and aggregated in order to determine the findings to the established research questions.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

This research presents minimal risk of loss of confidentiality, emotional and/or psychological distress because the questionnaire involves questions about your leadership practices. You may also experience fatigue, boredom, or anxiety as a result.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this study.

**What are the possible benefits to other people?**

The benefits to society may include better understanding of leadership strategies used within your industry. Other emerging leaders might also benefit from any additional recommendations that are shared through this process.

**What are the alternatives to being in this research study?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. There are no alternatives to participating, other than deciding to not participate.

**What will participating in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

There will be no compensation for participating in this study.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be deidentified and stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and until the study is complete.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

**What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

***For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.***

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(310)568-2305

Email: [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu)

**What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**Documentation of informed consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.



**Participant**

**Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

(First, Last: Please Print)

**Participant**

**Signature:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature

Date

