



THE DARK SIDE OF REMOTE WORK: A CRITICAL REVIEW AND A CALL TO ACTION TO ADDRESS REMOTE WORK INEQUALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This paper critically examines how remote and hybrid work, though widely celebrated for increasing flexibility and sustainability, can reproduce or exacerbate structural, organizational, and psychological inequalities among employees.
Background	While remote work is often associated with positive outcomes, mainstream discussions underrepresent the disparities it can generate. This paper addresses this gap by applying a Critical Work and Organizational Psychology (CWOP) perspective to analyze inequities across access, control, and well-being.
Methodology	This is a concept-driven critical review. The selection of literature prioritized theoretical depth and relevance rather than exhaustive coverage. The analysis is interpretative and interdisciplinary, informed by work psychology, organizational studies, and labor sociology.
Contribution	The paper introduces a multidimensional critique of remote work, offering theoretical insights and practical recommendations to promote equity in remote and hybrid work environments.
Findings	Remote work access is stratified by job level, socioeconomic status, and digital infrastructure. Organizational control, biased monitoring, and visibility bias reinforce hierarchies. Individual disparities, such as psychological capital, caregiving burdens, and digital competence, further marginalize certain groups.

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Recommendations for Practitioners	Organizations should adopt role-based eligibility, provide equitable resources, use outcome-based evaluations, and support caregivers and mental health needs.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future studies should assess the long-term impact of remote work on marginalized groups and examine how emerging technologies affect workplace equity.
Impact on Society	The findings highlight the risk that remote work may deepen societal inequalities if equity is not a central design goal.
Future Research	Research should explore intersectional impacts and the ethical integration of AI and digital tools in remote work.
Keywords	remote work, hybrid work, work from home, workplace inequalities, critical work psychology

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped global work environments, accelerating the adoption of remote work as an operational necessity. Initially implemented to comply with health guidelines, remote work has evolved into a standard practice across various industries, offering flexibility, enhanced work-life balance, and reduced commuting times for employees (Ferreira et al., 2021; Reunamäki & Fey, 2023). Additionally, remote work contributes to sustainability by decreasing the environmental impact associated with daily commutes (Sutton-Parker, 2021).

By 2024, remote work integration had become more strategic. Approximately 22 million employed adults in the U.S. worked entirely from home, representing about 14% of the adult workforce, with projections estimating this figure will rise to 32.6 million by 2025. Furthermore, 33% of U.S. employees with remote-capable jobs preferred to work fully off-site, 8% prefer on-site only, and nearly 60% favor a hybrid arrangement (SuperSaas, 2024). These trends are also supported by recent projections from Gallup (2024), which indicate that employees will increasingly adopt full- and partial-offsite working arrangements. The data highlights a broader shift in workplace norms, with remote and, even more so, hybrid work emerging as a sustainable and desirable option across various industries.

Despite its benefits, the adoption of remote work has not been uniform across sectors, job roles, or demographic groups (Ferreira et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). For instance, employees in management, professional, and related occupations are significantly more likely to have access to remote work compared to those in service or manufacturing roles (Jaworek, 2018; Mutebi & Hobbs, 2022). Employees in higher-level roles often enjoy greater autonomy and support within remote work models, while employees covering lower-level roles may face stricter oversight, fewer resources, and limited opportunities for advancement (Lange & Kayser, 2022; Perry et al., 2018). Moreover, the transition to remote work has been influenced by organizational size, technological capacity, and geographic location. Larger organizations with pre-existing digital tools and flexible work policies are better positioned to implement remote arrangements than smaller enterprises (Donati et al., 2021; Donnelly & Johns, 2021; Staples, 2001; Zapata et al., 2024). Geographically, urban and high-income regions with greater broadband access and tech-savvy workforces report higher adoption rates compared to rural or underserved areas, further emphasizing digital inequities (Reddick et al., 2020; Zahnd et al., 2022). The environmental benefits of remote work are also pronounced in areas with high adoption rates, where reduced commuting significantly lowers urban carbon emissions, illustrating the contribution of remote work to sustainability goals (Tao et al., 2023).

However, as digitalization – and consequently, remote and hybrid work – continues to evolve, so too do the challenges associated with its widespread adoption (Warhurst & Hunt, 2019). While the flexibility offered by remote arrangements has garnered positive attention, unintended consequences –

including disparities in access, monitoring practices, and employee well-being – warrant closer examination. This differentiation raises critical ethical, operational, and social questions about inclusivity and equality in the future of work (Bal et al., 2019).

Given the growing body of literature on remote work in recent years, it is essential to critically reflect on existing knowledge within Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) and, more broadly, in the fields of Management and Organizational Behavior. Applying a Critical Psychology Perspective in Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) (Dóci et al., 2023; Islam & Sanderson, 2022; Tommasi et al., 2024), this critical review (Grant & Booth, 2009) aims to highlight and reflect on both longstanding and emerging inequalities, as well as power imbalances between social groups. In the context of remote and hybrid work adoption and management, these disparities may contribute to discrimination, marginalization, unfair socioeconomic treatment, and unequal opportunities for underprivileged or disadvantaged workers (Hornung, 2025).

The broader objective of this article is to problematize a selected body of literature on remote and hybrid work, drawing attention to ethical and moral (axiological) issues that conventional positivist, functionalist, or social constructivist approaches may have overlooked or underemphasized in theoretical and model development (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). For these reasons, this critical review explores the complexities of remote work adoption through three critical dimensions: structural inequalities, organizational challenges, and individual well-being. It first examines systemic disparities such as differentiated access to remote work based on job level, unequal distribution of material resources, and the impact of home environments on productivity. Next, it examines organizational challenges, including the difficulty of monitoring employee well-being in remote settings – here intended as a responsibility shouldered by organizations – and the implications of visibility bias for career advancement. Finally, it addresses individual psychological factors, highlighting the toll of remote work and the burden on caregivers. After exploring these intersecting issues, this paper proposes specific areas of focus for organizations, emphasizing the importance of engaging in a dialectical dialogue with employees to uncover hidden inequalities and promote equity, inclusivity, and overall well-being in remote and hybrid work environments. The actionable recommendations derived from these critical reflections aim to ensure fair access to resources, mitigate systemic and organizational biases, and provide support mechanisms for workers at all levels and across socioeconomic groups.

METHODS

This study follows the methodological approach of a critical review, a research strategy that aims to identify the most significant contributions in the field, critically evaluate their conceptual value, and explore how existing research frames, legitimizes, or omits key issues related to the investigated phenomena (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). Unlike systematic methodologies that emphasize exhaustive mapping or aggregation of empirical findings, critical reviews adopt an interpretative and reflexive approach, interrogating conceptual tensions, epistemological assumptions, and underexplored dimensions of a given topic.

The selection of sources was concept-driven, focusing on works that provide theoretical significance, heuristic value, and critical depth. Rather than applying predefined inclusion criteria or systematic search protocols, sources were identified based on their capacity to challenge, refine, or expand existing debates. In line with critical review conventions, no formal quality assessment was conducted, as the emphasis is placed on the conceptual contribution of each selected work rather than on standardized evaluation metrics (Grant & Booth, 2009).

The synthesis of the literature was narrative and conceptually driven, allowing for a dialectical engagement with existing scholarship rather than a purely descriptive or statistical synthesis. Given that critical reviews inherently involve subjective interpretative elements, this study does not claim to provide an exhaustive or definitive synthesis of the field. Instead, it serves as a starting point for further

theoretical evaluation and empirical investigation, highlighting key areas where future research can expand or refine existing understandings.

Furthermore, the study draws on Critical Work and Organizational Psychology (CWOP) as an analytical perspective, particularly in examining how power dynamics, inequalities, and normative assumptions shape academic and policy discourses on work (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). This lens was integrated within a broader interdisciplinary framework, engaging insights from work and organizational psychology, management studies, and labor sociology.

This review contributes to the advancement of theoretical discussions on remote work, offering a structured conceptual critique that reassesses dominant frameworks. The key findings are discussed in the following sections, while new research directions and management implications are outlined in the final part of the paper.

RESULTS

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Differentiated access to remote work based on job level

A first and notable inequality in remote work policies is the differentiated access granted based on job level. First, the nature of the job significantly impacts eligibility for remote work (van den Broek & Keating, 2011). Higher-level positions, such as managerial or specialized roles, often enjoy greater flexibility due to the innate autonomy these roles provide. Their responsibilities typically involve decision-making, strategic planning, and task structuring, which enable them to operate independently and adapt to remote work environments with ease. In contrast, employees covering lower-level roles frequently experience limited autonomy, as their roles are primarily task-driven and closely aligned with predefined instructions or processes. These positions are often subject to direct oversight and a reliance on structured workflows, making it less feasible for them to benefit from remote work arrangements (Kaduk et al., 2019).

Second, the requirement for physical presence tends to align with job level, with lower-level roles more often requiring on-site work and higher-level positions typically allowing for remote arrangements. Despite exceptions, such as remote customer service for lower-level jobs or site-specific leadership roles for employees in higher-level roles, the general trend holds. Lower-level work frequently involves tasks such as customer interaction, equipment use, or operational support, which inherently require a physical presence. By contrast, higher-level roles often center around decision-making, strategic planning, or virtual collaboration, which can be conducted remotely. This alignment reinforces the association between job level and access to remote work, perpetuating a divide that links low-level positions with remote work presence and high-level positions with remote work absence (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021; Kaduk et al., 2019).

Third, organizational support for remote work also differs significantly by job level, further exacerbating role inequalities. Employees covering higher-level tasks, particularly in management, are typically provided with stronger organizational backing (Pokojski et al., 2022). This stratification, driven by unequal resource distribution and access, not only perpetuates workplace inequalities but also risks eroding organizational cohesion and productivity (Staples, 2001).

While some roles genuinely require physical presence, advances in digital communication platforms present opportunities to mitigate these inequities. Positions traditionally seen as location-dependent, such as customer service, administrative, and clerical jobs, can now often be adapted for remote work through structured workflows and modern tools (Matli & Wamba, 2023).

Expanding access to remote work across all levels, with equitable organizational support, can help reduce these disparities and foster greater inclusivity.

Material resource inequalities

The disparities in access to technology and resources between employees in high- and lower-roles represent a significant barrier to equity in remote work. Employees in higher-level roles often benefit from advanced setups that include ergonomic furniture, high-speed internet stipends, and specialized tools designed to optimize productivity in remote environments. These provisions provide a clear advantage, enabling employees in higher-level roles to transition seamlessly and perform efficiently in remote settings. Conversely, employees covering lower-level roles are frequently left to rely on personal devices and self-funded internet connections, resulting in “resource inequality” that limits their ability to work effectively (Matli & Wamba, 2023; Rohwer et al., 2024). Without equitable access to necessary resources, remote work may inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities.

This disparity not only affects individual productivity but also exacerbates existing socioeconomic divides (Orr & Savage, 2021). Previous research unequivocally shows that the ability to work from home is concentrated among workers in higher socioeconomic classes, with significant disparities based on income (Nwosu et al., 2022). Remote work opportunities disproportionately benefit higher earners, exacerbating existing income gaps (Bonacini et al., 2021). Failure to address these issues risks further entrenching workplace inequities and diminishing the potential benefits of remote work as a universally accessible mode of employment.

Disparities in home environments

From both technological and economic perspectives, the physical environment in which remote work takes place further exacerbates inequality. Significant disparities in employees’ home conditions affect their ability to work effectively. Those in higher-level roles often have the financial means to create or access dedicated home offices, complete with quiet, private spaces and reliable infrastructure. In contrast, employees covering lower-level roles frequently contend with cramped living spaces, noisy environments, and unreliable internet connectivity, all of which undermine productivity and job satisfaction (Braesemann et al., 2022). For instance, employees living in shared households may face constant interruptions, making it difficult to meet deadlines or participate fully in virtual meetings. A recent study on hybrid workers found that perceptions of home office ergonomics and comfort compared to traditional office settings influence the extent to which employees engage in remote work and, consequently, their online performance (Donati et al., 2024). This unequal access to supportive remote workspaces and equipment reinforces systemic disadvantages. Employees hindered by their home environment may struggle to demonstrate their value when working remotely, further perpetuating workplace inequalities.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Monitoring employee well-being in remote working models

Remote work has become a central focus for organizations, bringing significant consequences for how employee well-being and contributions are assessed. This shift has revealed two critical inequities in monitoring practices.

First, there is the risk of a divide between remote and in-office employees. Remote workers are frequently subject to heightened monitoring, with organizations investing heavily in digital tools to track their well-being, engagement, and performance. This focus positions remote employees as a “tier one” workforce, whose contributions remain consistently visible and aligned with strategic goals. In contrast, in-office employees may operate under minimal oversight, with their contributions – often essential for operational continuity or support – receiving less attention and recognition. This imbalance risks creating implicit workplace hierarchies, where physical presence leads to invisibility and undervaluation (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Moreover, transparency in monitoring tends to privilege visibility, inadvertently sidelining employees whose roles remain less observable despite their importance (Bernstein, 2017). The issue reflects a broader visibility bias that pervades organizational life: contributions that are more easily observed tend to be more highly valued, while less observable yet crucial

forms of work are overlooked. Remote work does not eliminate this bias but reshapes it, introducing new complications in how visibility is created and rewarded. On the one hand, physical presence in the office guarantees a degree of immediate and relational visibility, rooted in proximity and everyday encounters, yet this form of visibility often remains informal and underrepresented in monitoring systems. On the other hand, remote work produces a more formalized visibility through digital traces, meetings, and monitoring tools, but it depends on deliberate efforts to make one's contributions explicit. The coexistence of these two modes risks reinforcing unequal forms of recognition, depending on how visibility is captured and valued.

At the same time, inequalities in monitoring also emerge within remote work itself, depending on role and hierarchical level. Employees in higher-level roles are often closely monitored, with a focus on their well-being, and benefit from programs that support mental health and work-life balance. In contrast, employees covering lower-level roles tend to experience more intensive monitoring, primarily centered on productivity metrics such as hours logged and tasks completed. This selective approach reinforces systemic inequalities, implicitly signaling that the well-being of such workers is less of a priority. Holland and Bardoel highlight the “dark side” of technological advancements, where pervasive surveillance disproportionately targets employees covering lower-level roles, increasing stress and the risk of burnout (Holland & Bardoel, 2016). Additionally, excessive productivity surveillance raises privacy concerns, fostering a culture of mistrust that undermines the flexibility remote work is intended to offer (Ball, 2010; Kayas, 2023).

Neglecting the well-being of employees covering lower-level roles while excessively monitoring their productivity risks not only reducing morale but also perpetuating a two-tiered workforce that undermines inclusivity. Disparities in monitoring and support reinforce control mechanisms that marginalize certain groups within organizations (Michel, 2011). Addressing these dual challenges requires a balanced and equitable approach to monitoring practices. Organizations must ensure that all employees, regardless of location or rank, receive fair recognition and support for their well-being.

Visibility bias and implications for career advancement

Remote work has introduced a significant phenomenon known as “visibility bias”, wherein employees who interact more frequently with management – whether in virtual meetings or in-person contexts – tend to receive greater recognition and, consequently, more opportunities for career advancement (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). This dynamic is rooted in the traditional reliance on proximity and interaction as markers of employee value, a bias that persists even in remote and hybrid work environments, though in different ways. In offices, managers' perceptions are shaped by co-presence and spontaneous interactions, whereas in remote contexts, visibility relies on technological mediation and intentional self-presentation. This shift transforms visibility from a by-product of physical presence into a performance of presence, benefiting employees who are confident in online interactions. Employees who regularly participate in high-visibility tasks or strategic discussions are more likely to build rapport with decision-makers, positioning themselves as indispensable to organizational success.

However, this bias disproportionately disadvantages employees in lower-level roles and those in roles that require minimal managerial interaction. For instance, individuals working in operational or back-office roles often struggle to gain visibility, as their contributions, while critical, lack the immediate strategic context that garners attention. Furthermore, employees with caregiving responsibilities or limited access to reliable technology face additional challenges in maintaining consistent visibility during virtual meetings or collaborative projects. These barriers compound their exclusion from recognition and promotion opportunities, perpetuating systemic inequities in career advancement.

The issue is further exacerbated by the lack of objective performance metrics in many organizations, where perceived presence often takes precedence over measurable outcomes. Visibility can sometimes become a substitute for value assessment in environments lacking robust evaluative frameworks, leading to subjective judgments about an employee's worth (Bernstein, 2017). Consequently,

remote employees, particularly those in lower-tier roles, are at a heightened risk of career stagnation despite meeting or exceeding performance expectations. Their efforts may go unnoticed, creating a misalignment between contribution and reward that undermines morale and organizational equity.

Addressing visibility bias requires a paradigm shift in how organizations assess performance and value. As Ng and Feldman (2014) suggest, adopting data-driven, outcome-based metrics can help mitigate the overreliance on presence as a proxy for contribution. Additionally, organizations must proactively ensure equitable participation in high-visibility tasks and decision-making opportunities, particularly for employees in traditionally marginalized roles. Without these changes, remote work risks reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them, further entrenching systemic disparities.

INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Mental health and personality traits

Remote work has revealed significant inequalities tied to mental health and personality traits, with mounting evidence showing that its benefits are disproportionately accessible to individuals with certain psychological and dispositional advantages. Studies indicate that individuals with high levels of emotional stability (low neuroticism), conscientiousness, and self-efficacy are better equipped to handle the autonomy and self-regulation demands of remote work (Evans et al., 2022; Lange & Kayser, 2022; Parra et al., 2022). These traits function as protective factors against stress and contribute to productivity and psychological well-being in decentralized work environments.

Interestingly, extraversion, typically associated with the personal need for social interaction and informal engagement, can become a double-edged sword in remote work environments. While extraverts benefit from teamwork and communication, the isolation of remote settings can reduce their opportunities for interpersonal connections, leading to frustration and disengagement (Evans et al., 2022). This seemingly contradictory finding can be explained by distinguishing between extraversion as a personal social drive and teamwork and communication as professional requirements and competencies. Whereas extraversion reflects an individual's need for frequent and informal social interaction, communication, and teamwork skills are functional abilities that enable collaboration in both offline and online contexts. While these skills facilitate digital teamwork, they do not fully satisfy the deeper interpersonal needs associated with extraversion. Conversely, individuals with higher neuroticism or predispositions to anxiety and depression often experience heightened risks of loneliness, stress, and presenteeism, where they remain logged on but are less productive, which negatively impacts their mental health over time (Shimura et al., 2021).

Prolonged isolation can exacerbate symptoms of depression and anxiety, especially for those lacking strong self-regulatory skills (Qi et al., 2023). Research has further identified that remote workers with weaker boundaries between professional and personal life are more vulnerable to burnout and mental exhaustion, highlighting the critical role personality traits play in determining the psychological impact on employees in remote work environments (Cavallari et al., 2023; Costin et al., 2023; Petitta & Ghezzi, 2023).

These disparities raise important concerns about inclusivity, as remote work may inadvertently privilege employees with advantageous mental health profiles and personality traits while sidelining those predisposed to psychological vulnerabilities.

Psychological resources

In terms of individual characteristics, psychological capital (PsyCap) (Luthans et al., 2007) represents another important source of inequality in remote and hybrid arrangements. PsyCap is a positive psychological state that enhances individual performance and well-being at work, consisting of four core psychological states: hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. These psychological resources influence the effectiveness of remote and hybrid work, particularly in relation to self-leadership and self-management, which recent studies (Costantini & Weintraub, 2022; Galanti et al., 2021) have

identified as crucial for productivity and well-being in remote settings. While disparities in PsyCap already exist in traditional work arrangements, they become particularly consequential in remote and hybrid work environments, where employees must rely more heavily on their own psychological resources to manage tasks, set goals, and navigate less structured work arrangements (Galanti et al., 2021). PsyCap varies among workers based on their social and occupational group (Dóci et al., 2023), with individuals from dominant social groups – who benefit from higher status and resources – tending to develop greater PsyCap due to early exposure to positive reinforcement, self-confidence, and optimism fostered by their social environment (Martell et al., 2012; van Dijk et al., 2020). In contrast, members of lower-status groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, often face negative stereotypes and lower expectations (Eaton et al., 2020), limiting their ability to develop PsyCap.

These disparities, already present in traditional work arrangements, may persist and amplify in remote and hybrid work settings because remote workplaces place greater emphasis on self-regulation, autonomy, and psychological resilience, making these individual differences more visible and impactful on performance outcomes (Costantini & Weintraub, 2022; Galanti et al., 2021). As argued by Dóci et al. (2023), PsyCap is not only an outcome of workplace inequality but also a mechanism that perpetuates and justifies socioeconomic stratification, challenging the notion of meritocracy in organizations that adopt remote or hybrid work arrangements. On the other hand, it should also be acknowledged that these disparities do not preclude some potential benefits of remote or hybrid work. For example, Black and Hispanic women reported reductions in decision-making power and schedule flexibility when returning to in-office work, whereas white employees gained coworker support. Similarly, Black and Hispanic men experienced declines in workplace social support after resuming office work. These findings suggest that, while underlying inequalities in PsyCap and other resources persist, remote arrangements can at the same time provide historically marginalized groups with greater autonomy, flexibility, and reduced exposure to microaggressions, potentially enhancing their well-being (Shockley et al., 2024).

Soft skills, digital skills, digitalized skills

Similar to psychological resources, differences in workers' *soft skills* contribute to inequality in remote and hybrid work environments. Soft skills, such as teamwork, problem-solving, conflict management, effective communication, and adaptability, are essential for workplace success, even though they are not directly linked to technical job tasks (Marin-Zapata et al., 2022). These skills influence performance in both traditional and remote settings, but they may be particularly critical in remote and hybrid work environments, where employees must coordinate digitally, communicate proactively, and self-manage without direct supervision. Workers with lower interpersonal abilities may struggle to build trust or communicate effectively online, as competencies such as teamwork, collaboration, and leadership are typically developed in face-to-face contexts where informal encounters and spontaneous exchanges are more readily available. Furthermore, since these skills are developed through various life experiences, including family interactions, social engagements, and extracurricular activities, individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who have greater exposure to social environments that foster these skills may gain a significant advantage in professional settings.

In remote and hybrid work environments, the reliance on digital communication and self-management also amplifies the effect of *digital skills* disparities (Henke et al., 2022). Digital skills represent a distinct set of competencies that serve as prerequisites for participation in remote and hybrid work environments. Those lacking digital literacy may face barriers to using collaboration tools and platforms, which in turn prevents them from fully engaging in digital teamwork. Digital natives and professionals in tech-driven fields, such as software development or data analysis, are more adept at using remote collaboration tools, while older workers or those from non-tech backgrounds (e.g., manufacturing or administrative roles) may require additional training to remain competitive (Henke et al., 2022; Tramontano et al., 2021). While basic digital literacy may have been less critical in traditional office settings, in remote work, it becomes a core determinant of employability and performance. A

study on homeworking during the pandemic (Donati et al., 2022) found that workers with prior remote work experience adapted more easily to mandatory Work From Home (WFH) arrangements. These findings suggest that individuals who had already developed remote work competencies possessed extra job resources that helped them navigate the constraints of mandatory WFH and adjust their work-family integration. This illustrates that skills and competencies specifically developed for remote work act as additional job resources, amplifying pre-existing inequalities.

In addition, recent research underlines the importance of *digitalized skills*, defined as non-digital competences that, when carried out in digital contexts (e.g., remote or hybrid work), are deeply transformed in order to be effective (Peiró & Martínez-Tur, 2022). The authors identify four groups of such competences: digitalized professional competences, digitalized core cognitive competences, digitalized transversal competences (such as communication), and digitalized leadership competences. This line of research demonstrates that it is not sufficient to merely transfer knowledge and attitudes from analog to digital situations, as critical changes occur in the way these competences are performed (p. 193). From the perspective of inequality, this distinction is crucial. While gaps in digital skills create barriers to access, and gaps in soft skills hinder relational effectiveness, deficits in digitalized competences risk excluding individuals who do possess both but fail to adapt them to digitally mediated contexts. For instance, a manager may possess strong leadership skills and adequate digital literacy, yet struggle to exercise effective e-leadership in virtual teams. Similarly, employees may master collaboration tools but still be unable to build trust or negotiate meaningfully online. These mismatches generate a third layer of inequality: not simply between those who have or lack certain competences, but between those who can reconfigure their competences in digital settings and those who cannot, making it crucial for organizations and policymakers to invest in training and competency development programs that bridge these gaps. Without targeted efforts to enhance soft, digital, and digitalized skills among disadvantaged workers, remote and hybrid work risks becoming yet another barrier to career, further marginalizing disadvantaged employees and consolidating structural inequalities in the workforce.

Caregiving responsibilities and the strain of remote work

Remote work offers undeniable benefits for employees with caregiving responsibilities by providing the flexibility to manage both professional and personal obligations. Caregivers, such as parents or those attending to elderly or disabled family members, can better balance tasks like school drop-offs, medical appointments, or home care schedules without the stress of commuting. This flexibility fosters greater autonomy and work-life balance, often alleviating some of the pressures associated with caregiving roles (Toscano et al., 2022). For many, remote work serves as a valuable tool in balancing the dual responsibilities of work and caregiving, allowing them to remain physically present for their families while continuing to make professional contributions.

However, this benefit may also be accompanied by significant challenges and inequalities. Individuals in non-remotizable jobs, such as healthcare workers, teachers, or retail employees, often have limited flexibility to manage caregiving responsibilities, which can exacerbate stress and inequities. On the other side, those with the possibility of working remotely may face heightened expectations to take on more caregiving tasks, as their physical presence at home can be misinterpreted as increased availability (Allen et al., 2015). This can lead to an imbalance within households and further entrench gender roles, as women are more often expected to shoulder the bulk of caregiving responsibilities.

Additionally, remote caregivers face unique professional challenges. The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life can lead to burnout and feelings of being perpetually “on call”. Without a clear separation, caregivers may struggle to focus fully on either role. Remote work can also perpetuate professional inequalities, as caregivers may be perceived as less committed or capable due to their dual roles, which can impact career advancement and inclusion in key projects (Richardson & Kelliher, 2015). Organizations must address these issues by implementing equitable policies, such as flexible work hours, caregiving stipends, and performance evaluations that take into account these dynamics.

DISCUSSION

To address these disparities, organizations should implement a comprehensive and equitable framework that reimagines the design of remote work policies. This framework focuses on four key areas that significantly impact equity and effectiveness in remote work. By focusing on role-based eligibility, equitable resource allocation, balanced recognition, and support for diverse employee needs, our approach not only bridges existing gaps but also fosters a more inclusive and resilient work environment. In articulating these recommendations, we try to distinguish established best practices from novel contributions. Some elements build on prior findings, ensuring consistency with the literature, while others represent new insights introduced by this study. Each dimension, outlined below, plays a vital role in ensuring remote work policies are fair, adaptable, and accessible to all employees.

ROLE-BASED ELIGIBILITY

Central to an inclusive remote work framework is a role-based approach to eligibility. Traditional remote work policies often favor high-level positions, leaving lower-level roles overlooked. This bias may stem from outdated assumptions about task complexity or supervision needs. While earlier research has pointed out that remote work opportunities tend to be stratified by job level, actionable solutions to democratize eligibility have remained limited. We advance this discourse by advocating for a systematic review of job functions across the organization to identify untapped opportunities for remote work, even in roles that have been historically deemed unsuitable. By systematically analyzing job functions, organizations can identify overlooked opportunities for remote adaptability across various roles. For example, building on recent insights, administrative support and customer service positions can transition to remote work through structured workflows and digital tools (Toscano et al., 2024). Such roles may require specific technological solutions, like secure access to databases or task management platforms, to maintain productivity. Organizations may also need to provide tailored training to ensure employees can navigate remote systems effectively. Over time, this may reduce the perception of remote work as a privilege tied to seniority, promoting inclusiveness.

Furthermore, broadening eligibility may enhance operational resilience (e.g., ensuring business continuity during disruptions) and help attract a more diverse talent pool by focusing on job functions over hierarchical structures. In this review, we build on prior scholarship, which identified the exclusion of lower-level roles from remote work as a problem, and we suggest reshaping workplace culture around fairness and adaptability.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND HOME ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES

Equity in remote work may depend heavily on addressing resource disparities that affect employees across distinct levels. To solve this issue, organizations may consider providing universal access to essential equipment, such as laptops, monitors, and ergonomic furniture, to ensure all employees are adequately equipped. Home office stipends may also help employees tailor their workspaces to meet their specific needs, potentially covering upgrades to internet connectivity, noise-canceling headphones, or lighting enhancements. Standardized training on remote work tools may further bridge skill gaps, especially for employees unfamiliar with certain platforms or technologies.

Such measures may foster fairness and enhance organizational productivity. Regular reviews of resource distribution may ensure disparities are addressed and employees feel equally supported, regardless of their role.

In addition to resource allocation, organizations should recognize that not all employees have access to conducive home work environments. Shared spaces, unreliable internet connections, and noisy surroundings can significantly hinder productivity and well-being. To address these challenges, organizations should consider offering subsidies for home office improvements, providing access to co-

working spaces, or implementing flexible scheduling. Such accommodations allow employees to balance work and personal demands more effectively, fostering a supportive and equitable remote work culture.

BALANCED RECOGNITION

Visibility bias – the tendency to reward employees who are more visible to managers – poses a significant obstacle to equity in remote work. Employees who frequently interact with decision-makers or work on high-profile tasks are more likely to receive recognition and advancement opportunities. Conversely, employees in lower-visibility roles, despite their critical contributions, often struggle to gain similar acknowledgment.

Scholars have long criticized this reliance on “face time” over results (e.g., Bernstein, 2017), and some have called for a shift to outcome-based evaluations (Ng & Feldman, 2014). In line with these calls, our recommendations advocate for a transition to outcome-driven performance metrics that evaluate employees based on results rather than physical or virtual presence. We emphasize that key performance indicators (KPIs) should be role-specific, measurable, and transparent to ensure fairness. Managers require training to assess performance objectively, focusing on impact and deliverables rather than subjective impressions of effort. While the notion of outcome-based evaluation is grounded in existing research, we propose instituting rotation programs or cross-functional projects that deliberately include staff from traditionally marginalized roles. This deliberate broadening of participation not only mitigates visibility bias but also diversifies perspectives in organizational decision-making. Additionally, we recommend mentorship programs that pair lower-level employees with senior leaders, as well as leadership training that emphasizes fair recognition practices. Mentorship can ensure that high-quality work by less visible employees does not remain unnoticed, as mentors advocate for their mentees’ contributions. Similarly, leadership training programs should emphasize recognizing contributions equitably and fostering a culture where effort and results are valued over proximity or perceived status.

Balanced recognition is not a one-time adjustment but an ongoing commitment. Regular reviews of performance evaluation practices, combined with employee feedback, can help organizations maintain fairness and inclusivity in remote work settings. By shifting the focus from presence to outcomes and providing equitable opportunities for visibility, organizations can cultivate a culture that fairly rewards contributions and fosters long-term employee engagement.

WELL-BEING AND CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES

Remote work policies may also need to prioritize mental health and overall well-being to help employees thrive in remote environments. Mental health challenges, including disparities in emotional resilience, anxiety management, and boundary-setting, may reflect broader systemic inequities. Without intentional policies, these challenges may exacerbate stress, burnout, and feelings of isolation, particularly for employees who lack access to supportive resources.

We suggest organizations may consider providing universal access to mental health services, such as virtual counseling, employee assistance programs (EAPs), and wellness initiatives. Providing these resources may ensure that employees at all levels have access to support in managing stress, navigating work-life challenges, and addressing their personal mental health needs. Wellness programs could include guided meditation sessions, fitness challenges, or access to mental health apps, tailored to the diverse needs of a remote workforce.

Training in boundary setting and time management may also be an essential component of remote work policies. Employees often struggle with blurred lines between work and personal life, leading to longer work hours and diminished personal time. Workshops on time-blocking, workload management, and establishing clear boundaries may empower employees to take control of their schedules and prioritize self-care. These efforts can reduce mental fatigue and foster a healthier work-life balance.

Flexibility in policies may further address the unique needs of caregivers, who often juggle professional and household responsibilities. For many, working from home provides the valuable ability to juggle professional and family obligations, a benefit noted in prior studies (e.g., remote arrangements enabling caregivers to be present for their families). However, research also reveals that these benefits are not evenly experienced (e.g., Allen et al., 2015). Individuals in jobs that cannot be done remotely (e.g., healthcare, teaching, retail) have far less flexibility, intensifying stress and inequity among caregivers. Even those who can work remotely may face heightened expectations to handle more caregiving tasks simply because they are at home. This dynamic can reinforce traditional gender roles and increase the total burden on remote-working caregivers. Moreover, remote caregivers encounter unique professional challenges: the blurring of work–life boundaries often leads to burnout and a sense of being perpetually “on call”; there is also evidence that caregivers risk being perceived as less committed or capable due to their dual roles. Such perceptions can negatively impact their career advancement and inclusion in key projects (Richardson & Kelliher, 2015). These nuanced challenges have been recognized in the literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2015; Richardson & Kelliher, 2015), but concrete organizational responses have been underdeveloped. We recommend equitable policies tailored to caregivers: companies should consider offering caregiving stipends to help cover childcare or eldercare expenses, and institute flexible scheduling options (such as split shifts or asynchronous hours) so that caregivers can meet both personal and professional obligations without penalty. Additionally, performance evaluations may need to reflect these dual responsibilities, ensuring caregivers are not unfairly penalized or overlooked for advancement due to their unique challenges.

Regular mental health check-ins and employee surveys may help organizations identify trends and areas of concern within their workforce. By collecting this data, companies can implement targeted initiatives to support employee well-being and adapt their policies to meet evolving needs.

In summary, holistic well-being initiatives in remote work environments may need to address the full spectrum of employees’ mental, emotional, and personal challenges. Access to mental health services, boundary-setting resources, and flexible caregiver policies can help reduce disparities, build resilience, and promote a healthier and more equitable workforce.

The considerations raised in this paper highlight the need for organizations and policy makers to focus on transparent performance assessment criteria and recognition systems that support the continuous development of workers’ skills in remote and hybrid working environments, recognizing that the types of skills, abilities, and psychological characteristics that these organizational systems deem attractive and necessary may be unevenly distributed across people. To support this need, research should examine how structured performance recognition systems, learning programs, and targeted skills development initiatives can ensure that the learning opportunities provided are tailored to the diverse needs of workers, particularly those from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Such knowledge could help organizational leaders to manage and promote a more equitable and supportive remote working environment, reducing the risk of inequalities based on differences in skills due to workers’ cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING REMOTE WORK INEQUALITIES

The transition to equitable remote work policies involves multiple challenges, each rooted in longstanding organizational and cultural practices. Structural inertia often slows progress, as established hierarchies and traditional work models resist meaningful change. Policies that prioritize senior roles are deeply ingrained in organizational frameworks, making reforms both complex and time-consuming. Leadership, accustomed to in-office oversight, frequently expresses concerns about maintaining control and ensuring productivity, creating resistance to broader policy shifts.

Technological disparities highlight another challenge. While certain employees have seamless access to the tools required for remote work, others lack the basic infrastructure needed to work efficiently.

This imbalance exacerbates productivity gaps and creates dissatisfaction, particularly when efforts to address these issues compete with limited organizational budgets or logistical constraints.

Financial limitations create further obstacles, particularly for smaller organizations. Expanding remote work policies and providing resources requires substantial upfront investment, which may be difficult to prioritize in the face of competing operational needs. Even where funds are available, balancing long-term benefits against immediate costs often delays decision-making or results in incomplete measures.

Cultural attitudes also present significant hurdles. Many industries continue to associate physical presence with commitment and productivity, especially for roles traditionally viewed as requiring close supervision. This mindset makes managers hesitant to fully embrace remote work, often applying different standards to employees based on visibility rather than outcomes. Such resistance reinforces inequities and complicates the adoption of consistent practices across an organization.

Finally, a lack of consistent evaluation practices limits sustained progress. Organizations rarely prioritize audits to assess the effectiveness of remote work policies or identify systemic inequities. Without regular reviews, disparities in resource allocation, performance recognition, or well-being initiatives persist, undermining efforts to create a fair and inclusive work environment.

FUTURE OF REMOTE WORK: OPPORTUNITIES AND INNOVATIONS

As remote work evolves, it presents opportunities for innovation and inclusion. Technological advancements, workforce diversification, and a redefinition of work-life balance are reshaping the possibilities for equitable workplace practices. Emerging technologies have the potential to revolutionize the remote work experience. For example, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) platforms can simulate office environments, fostering collaboration and inclusivity across distributed teams (Giusino et al., 2021). Similarly, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered analytics can help organizations monitor workload distribution and proactively identify well-being concerns. If implemented thoughtfully, these innovations can enhance both productivity and employee satisfaction, particularly benefiting historically disadvantaged groups, such as neurodiverse workers and individuals with disabilities (Parker & Grote, 2022; Wiklund, 2022). However, the impact of technology on work is complex and context-dependent, requiring careful consideration of multiple interrelated factors to optimize its benefits in work design.

The relationship between an actor's ability to influence outcomes and achieve desired results (control) and the degree of accountability, particularly in AI adoption, is critical, as it is closely linked to transparency and predictability in organizational processes (Grote et al., 2024). Effective integration and governance of new technologies in the workplace require extensive information sharing and perspective-taking among stakeholders, fostering integrative negotiations that align control and accountability among organizational actors (Parker & Grote, 2022). Therefore, managing the digital and technological transformation of work necessitates a comprehensive approach, considering the social, managerial, and technical aspects of work (Bednar & Welch, 2020). A socio-technical perspective can help create healthier and more productive work environments, ensuring that technologies such as VR, AR, and AI are integrated in a way that actively supports employees' well-being and performance (Parker & Grote, 2022). In other words, technology adoption in remote and hybrid work should be guided by human-centered work design, emphasizing transparency and fairness to mitigate negative impacts on employees and prevent the reinforcement or emergence of technology-induced inequalities based on cognitive or psychological traits rather than cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Remote work also enables organizations to diversify their workforce by tapping into geographically and socioeconomically diverse talent pools. Flexible work arrangements allow companies to attract employees from underrepresented groups, including individuals with disabilities, caregivers, and

those living in rural areas. This workforce diversification not only broadens the talent base but also contributes to more inclusive and representative workplace cultures.

Additionally, the widespread adoption of remote work is redefining traditional boundaries between work and personal life. While this shift presents challenges, such as the risk of overwork, it also provides opportunities for organizations to lead cultural changes. Encouraging employees to set clear boundaries, implementing company-wide breaks, and supporting personal development initiatives can help improve work-life balance. Organizations that prioritize these changes are likely to see higher levels of employee engagement and satisfaction.

A broader reflection on the future of remote work and its ethical and social implications must also consider recent political and managerial trends, particularly in Western labor markets. On one hand, business statistics (Gallup, 2024; SuperSaas, 2024) indicate a growing preference for a “new normal”, characterized by increased opportunities for hybrid and remote work. On the other hand, a growing number of employers, influential tech corporations, and political actors (Isidore, 2022; Wieczorek, 2024) advocate for a return to on-site work, citing benefits such as improved coordination and greater oversight of employee behavior and productivity. While this paper does not take a stance on these contrasting trends, it is crucial to critically examine their potential consequences, particularly their impact on socioeconomically disadvantaged workers.

Current macroeconomic shifts, combined with structural workplace inequalities, risk widening disparities in access to remote work opportunities. Research by Fan and Moen demonstrated how gender, ethnicity, and life-course stage influence job conditions as work arrangements fluctuate between remote, hybrid, and on-site settings (Fan & Moen, 2025). Their findings suggest that pre-existing systemic inequalities have intensified in the post-pandemic era, leading to differentiated effects on job outcomes and working conditions upon returning to traditional office work. For example, Black and Hispanic women reported significant losses in decision-making power and schedule flexibility when transitioning back to in-office work, whereas white employees experienced increased coworker support. Similarly, Black and Hispanic men saw a decline in workplace social support upon resuming in-office work. These findings underscore the unpredictable, unintended, and uneven effects that changes in remote and hybrid work policies can have on employees’ well-being, performance, career prospects, and work-life balance, depending on demographic and life-stage factors.

Given these challenges, and in line with the International Labor Organization’s framework (International Labour Organization, 2021), which calls for human-centered strategies and evidence-based policy development to address inequalities, we urge political and organizational leaders to prioritize the design and implementation of sustainable remote and hybrid work policies. Achieving this objective requires a fundamental shift in priorities, moving away from an exclusive focus on continuous productivity growth, rooted in dominant neoliberal-capitalist ideology, toward a model that centers human dignity and well-being (Bal & Dóci, 2018). At the organizational level, a key strategic move is the radical rethinking of the Human Resource Management (HRM) function (Bal & Brookes, 2022). This requires challenging the prevailing notion of HRM as a peripheral or instrumental function serving corporate profit motives, while neglecting employees’ social and psychological needs. Instead, as an alternative to the neoliberal hegemonic perspective (Bal & Dóci, 2018), HRM should be redesigned to systematically respect, protect, and promote the dignity and sustainability of all relevant stakeholders, both within and beyond the organization. From this perspective, it is essential to assess and address the broader implications of organizational policies, including the implementation of remote and hybrid work, on employee well-being and satisfaction.

Operatively, HRM redesigning in remote work settings can be achieved through stakeholder involvement and proactive interventions by HR practitioners. For instance, organizations transitioning to sustainable hybrid work models could establish Remote Work Equity Task Forces, comprising HR professionals, employee representatives, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) specialists, and exter-

nal labor policy experts. These task forces could conduct regular impact assessments to identify disparities in access to remote work opportunities and ensure that company policies do not disproportionately disadvantage underprivileged groups. Additionally, HR professionals could collaborate with external training providers and government-funded digital literacy programs to offer targeted upskilling initiatives, ensuring that all employees, regardless of socioeconomic background, can fully participate in remote and hybrid work environments. By embedding such initiative-taking, inclusive strategies into HRM processes, organizations can help bridge systemic inequalities and foster a more equitable and sustainable future of work.

CONCLUSION

This critical review has examined the multifaceted implications of remote work, highlighting its potential to transform workplace practices while also revealing systemic inequities. Key findings have identified challenges related to structural barriers, resource disparities, visibility bias, and inadequate support for well-being, underscoring the need for equity-focused frameworks to guide policy development and implementation.

The findings offer both theoretical insights and practical applications. Organizations can apply these frameworks to design inclusive remote work policies, focusing on equitable resource allocation, outcome-based evaluations, and support systems for mental health and caregiving responsibilities. Regular equity audits and integration into broader diversity and inclusion strategies are critical for fostering long-term sustainability and inclusivity.

Beyond organizational practice, the review also identifies areas for future research, including longitudinal studies on the impacts of equity-driven policies and the role of emerging technologies in mitigating disparities. Together, these efforts can ensure remote work evolves as a driver of fairness, sustainability, and innovation in the global workforce.

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