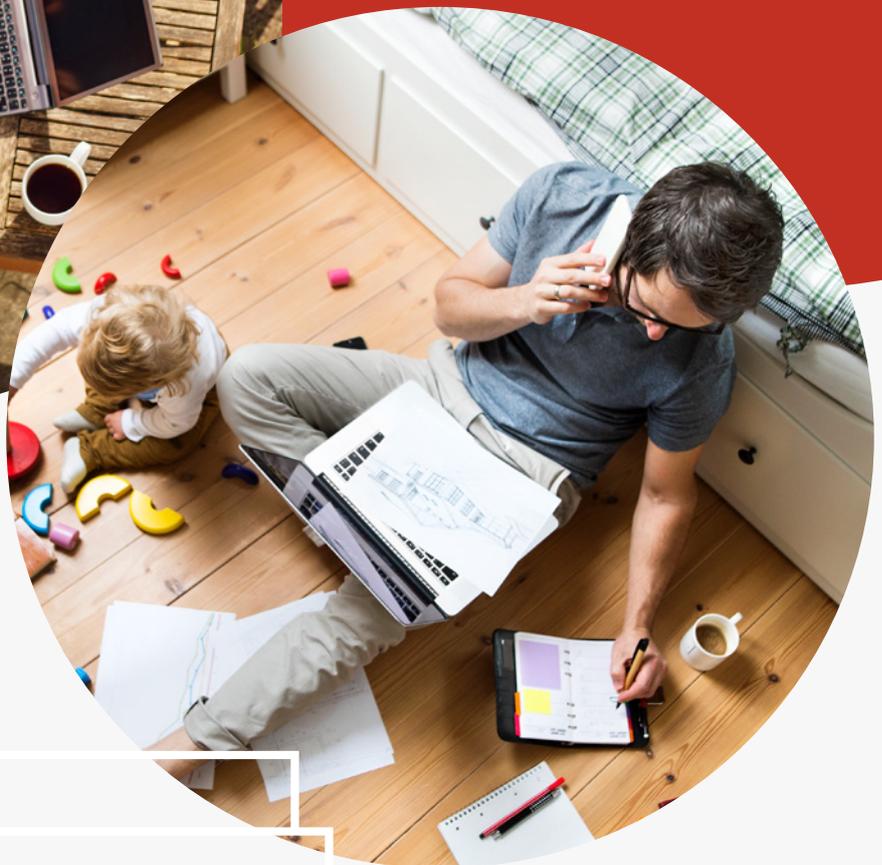


# MAKING HYBRID WORK HUMAN



WRITTEN BY

**ECONOMIST  
IMPACT**

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

*Making hybrid work human* is a multi-phased research programme, conducted by Economist Impact and sponsored by Google Workspace, studying emerging models of work. This summary brief is the first of a series of outputs from this project, and uses insights obtained through desk research and expert interviews to define hybrid work, explore current trends through the lens of history, and offer preliminary findings and recommendations for businesses to harness the opportunities of hybrid work while minimising risks. Future outputs from this project will elaborate on this brief, exploring the sustainable future of hybrid work in more depth.

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# INTRODUCTION

**Over the past eighteen months, the world's understanding of the nature of work has changed dramatically. Work-from-home (WFH) practices alongside other flexible work arrangements have spread across the world, largely due to social restrictions implemented by countries globally in response to the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>**

Now, as more countries begin to recognise covid-19 as an endemic disease, optimism has been rising about lifting restrictions and an imminent return to economic normality.<sup>2</sup>

However, it appears as if the nature of work itself—the way we perform it—might never return to its pre-covid state. Many believe that a hybrid model of in-person and remote working is here to stay, despite consistently vague definitions of the term “hybrid work” and uncertainty about the relative benefits of each specific model.<sup>3</sup> Organisations appear eager to leverage the benefits of remote work, such as tapping into a broad, diverse talent pool, even as they worry about losing the benefits of in-person, collaborative work.<sup>4</sup>

Both the hopes and worries around hybrid work are valid, as demonstrated by previous flexible work adoptions. Indeed, hybrid work is not new. It can be traced back to the 1960s (and arguably earlier) and has taken on various forms.<sup>5</sup> The uneven adoption (and occasional unwinding) of hybrid work arrangements over the past sixty years suggests benefits for employers and employees, but also risks and potential downsides.<sup>6</sup>

Whether organisations can capture the best of both worlds—remote and in-person—remains to be seen. These outcomes will be determined to a large extent by how they design and implement their hybrid models.

Within this context, Economist Impact, sponsored by Google Workspace, is conducting a multi-phase research programme to assess the prospects for hybrid work around the world. By combining a literature review, expert interviews and a global survey, Economist Impact is aiming to identify effective practices, sidestep avoidable mistakes and ultimately develop recommendations for creating human-centred hybrid work models that will best serve organisations, employees and society at large over the long term.

This executive summary, the opening piece of this programme, is focused on defining hybrid work, contextualising current trends in terms of the history of work, presenting a mission for the research to come, and offering the earliest findings.



# WHAT IS HYBRID WORK?

**Hybrid work refers to a spectrum of flexible work arrangements in which an employee's work location and/or hours are not strictly standardised.**

Conventional wisdom suggests that hybrid work pertains only to location—if an individual is working in-person at the office, factory or some other place. This emphasis on location is evident in recent reports published by the International Labor Organisation and the World Economic Forum.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Yet a few experts interviewed in this study stress that the time element is just as important—whether or not work hours are flexible.

Harriet Molyneux, managing director at HSM Advisory, a future-of-work consultancy, describes the time-location work spectrum: “[At] one end of the spectrum is everyone in the office, nine till five, so both restricted time and location. And

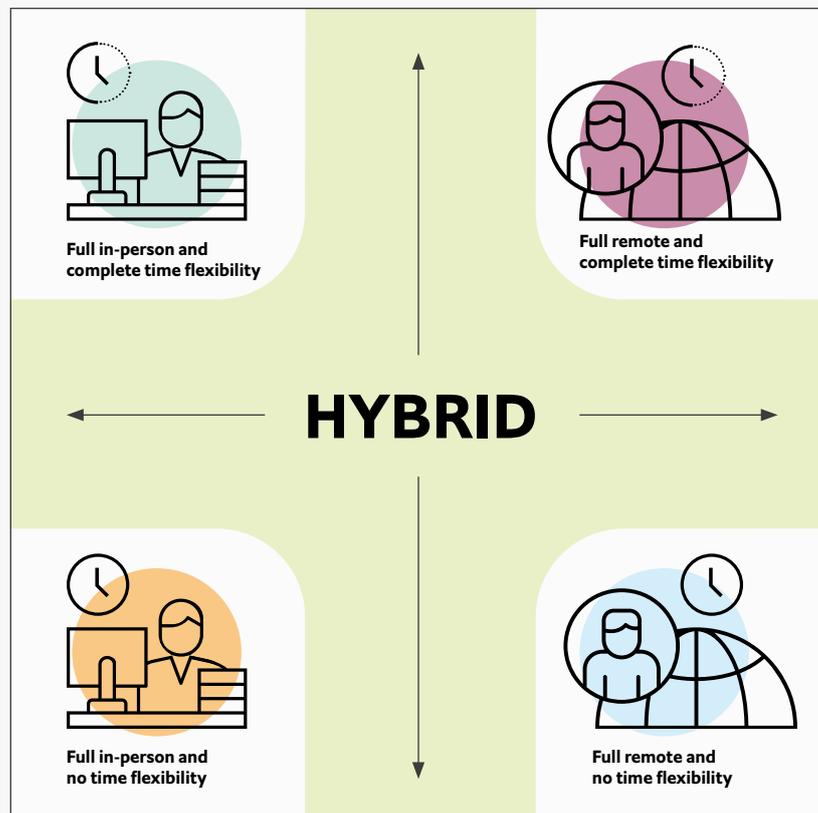
then at the other end of the spectrum is anywhere around the world at any time. So no restricted time or location. A hybrid is anything that sits in the middle of that.”

Brian Kropp, vice president at Gartner, a research and advisory firm, shares a similar view: “Hybrid work is not just about different locations, but also different timings and different schedules.”

In short, a hybrid worker's location and hours must be neither completely fixed nor completely flexible. A freelance programmer who can code by the beach with complete location and time flexibility is *not* a hybrid worker.

We therefore define hybrid work as anything between full in-person work with limited time flexibility and full remote work with complete time flexibility.

Figure. What is hybrid?



# THE LONG HISTORY OF “NEW” APPROACHES TO WORK

**Over the past sixty years firms in Europe, the US, Japan and elsewhere have experimented with hybrid work, prompted by cost-cutting measures and facilitated by technological advances.**

Modern hybrid work combines elements of time- and location-flexible work models that had their genesis in the 1900s. Time-flexible work models, which pre-date location-flexible ones, first emerged during World War II, when workers producing goods, food and military equipment for the army were allowed to work in shifts rather than continuously. The aim was to maintain a steady supply throughout the war. More generally, time-flexible work models started gaining popularity in Europe and the US in the late 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

Yet it was only in the 1970s-80s that remote work took off in the US, arguably beginning in the form of WFH policies. The adoption was driven largely by rising commuting costs (in turn due to soaring gasoline prices, sparked by the 1970s energy crisis) and facilitated by the expansion of landlines, personal computers and other technologies.<sup>11</sup> Hybrid work began to seep into pockets of corporate life in Japan, the UK, Europe and elsewhere.<sup>12,13</sup>

By 1994 organisations such as AT&T and IBM, eyeing huge potential real-estate savings, had started pioneering alternative workplace models—a combination of non-traditional work practices, settings and locations that were beginning to supplement traditional offices.

Enabled by advancing technologies such as the internet, digital devices and cloud computing, the adoption of remote work, often with a hybrid approach, increased throughout the 2000s and 2010s.<sup>14</sup> This trend was further accelerated by the need to comply with equal opportunity employment policies, such as those for individuals with disabilities.<sup>15</sup>

This acceleration is evident in the data. The share of the US labour force working at home for at least one day a week increased from 7.0%

in 1997 to 9.5% in 2010.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, a 2014 study found that almost half of the managers surveyed at mid-sized manufacturing firms in the US, the UK and Germany were allowed to WFH during normal hours.<sup>17</sup>

Evidence from these pre-covid experiments in hybrid work demonstrates both the benefits and challenges for all-remote, location-flexible and time-flexible models.

**Benefits** to many organisations include operational cost savings, such as from the reduced need for office space and improved human resource outcomes. Organisations have access to a wider talent pool, partly because they can use these policies to retain older and more experienced employees.<sup>18</sup> Employees also tend to be more motivated by remote work policies and take fewer sick days. Workers enjoy greater autonomy, flexibility and in some cases better work-life balance and well-being from hybrid models.<sup>19</sup> Society, meanwhile, benefits through a reduced carbon footprint (from less commuting) and a higher labour-force participation rate, as more people, including caregivers and individuals with disabilities, can work.<sup>20</sup>

**Downsides** of past hybrid work models to organisations include the need for investment in telecommunication equipment and IT security; resistance by some workers to this equipment; and communication challenges (both technological and interpersonal) and the attendant coordination and collaboration difficulties. Workers also had to contend with heightened distrust between managers and employees.<sup>21</sup>

Because of these challenges, some firms did not enjoy (the hoped-for) productivity boosts from hybrid work models, which were instead seen as undermining innovation. Some workers suffered too.<sup>22,23</sup> When WFH policies have been firm-dictated rather than employee-driven, employee quality of life has typically declined rather than improved. This has been especially true of time-flexible models.<sup>24</sup>

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# PANDEMIC-FORCED HYBRID ACCELERATION

**Pandemic restrictions have helped improve our understanding of hybrid work, jump-starting its adoption by societies, organisations and individuals everywhere.**

The covid-19 pandemic marks a turning point in hybrid work's evolution. According to a survey carried out by the US Census Bureau in August 2020—more than a third of U.S. households reported working from home more frequently than before the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> A global employee survey conducted by McKinsey & Company in December 2020 and January 2021 also revealed that 52% of workers would prefer a more flexible working model post-pandemic—compared with 30% pre-pandemic.<sup>26</sup> Hybrid work has therefore shifted from the realm of management philosophy and occasional practice into the daily lived experience of people globally.

There are at least three reasons why this time, unlike at any other during the past fifty years, this shift is likely to be permanent.

First, the pandemic necessitated experimentation with remote work by millions of individuals and organisations. Basic decision theory predicts that compulsory experimentation with new models of work will have persistent effects even after the new models are no longer strictly necessary, as decision-makers re-optimize working arrangements in light of newly gleaned information. Improved technology, from video conferencing and digital collaboration software to accessible hardware like high-resolution cameras, have made this experimentation possible.<sup>27</sup>

Second, workers have invested time and money into home equipment to facilitate remote work. In the US, for instance, the average worker spent 15 hours and \$561—cumulatively equivalent to 0.7% of annual GDP—in gearing up their homes, according to data from the Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes.<sup>28</sup> This means that the technological gap between home and office set-ups has, on average, narrowed considerably.

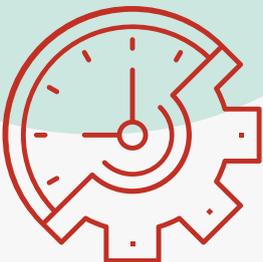
Third, the pandemic has altered cultural attitudes in ways that support a shift to hybrid work, increasing organisational and employee support for new work models. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in the US in October 2020 found that, of workers who say that their job responsibilities can mainly be done from home, only 20% were working from home all or most of the time before the pandemic; but by October 2020, 71% were. Moreover, over half say that, given a choice, they would want to keep working from home even after the pandemic.<sup>29</sup>

There are now greater incentives, financial and otherwise, for employees to engage in hybrid work. Researchers had hitherto observed an inverse relationship between wage rates and time spent working remotely: all else being equal, the greater the share of work being done remotely, the lower the employee's wage rate.<sup>30</sup> Now, given the covid-inspired enthusiasm for hybrid work, interviewees expect this gap to close, as more employees perform hybrid work with the additional support of their employers.

All this reflects a seminal mindset shift in the concept of hybrid work. Previous incarnations always positioned the office as the “true” place of work, around which remote or flexible employees would have had to revolve. That is no longer the case. Many employees today operate with a “hybrid-first” mindset. The office has lost some of its natural centrality in these contemporary hybrid work models.<sup>31</sup>

Given the better-than-expected remote work experiences and the reduced stigma attached to hybrid work, there is now greater societal acceptance.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, what was once seen as the privilege of a few—the ability to have a flexible work location and hours—is now considered by many as a right. Organisations that do not pro-actively extend such flexibility may be perceived negatively by workers.<sup>33</sup>

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# WHAT'S DIFFERENT THIS TIME?

**Never has hybrid work been adopted at such scale across industries, organisations, job functions and employees. Potential risks include the loss of human connection, and threats to equity and fairness in the workplace.**

Because the potential for hybrid work differs significantly depending on occupation, job scope, industry and country, there is already a proliferation of different hybrid work models being used today; we expect this diversity to grow.

Proponents of hybrid work believe it can harness the best from all the different models of work. It can offer the benefits of remote work for organisations and employees, such as cost savings and autonomy, respectively, while maintaining the advantages of in-person work, such as collaboration and social interaction.<sup>34</sup> By incorporating time-flexible or even role-flexible approaches, such as part-time with full benefits, hybrid work will offer quality-of-life improvements for employees.<sup>35</sup> All this, proponents believe, will lead to productivity gains.

Optimism around hybrid work must be tempered with an understanding of the potential challenges to contemporary hybrid work, which can be substantially more serious than those of the past.

**The first set of challenges revolve around the loss of human connection**—the fact that many interactions are moving from the physical to the virtual realm.

Fewer traditional office interactions—such as before and after meeting walks; coffee breaks; water cooler discussions; and in-person collaboration with managers and teams—can cause employees to feel socially and professionally isolated, as they perceive themselves as disconnected from colleagues and the company itself.<sup>36</sup>

A corollary of this is collaboration and coordination failure.<sup>37</sup> Widespread hybrid work will necessarily involve communication channels of varying quality and consistency. This raises some fundamental questions about how employees will work together. How, for instance, should employees in the office, who can share a meeting room, best interact as a group with their remote colleagues? Which employees need to be working at the same time, and for how long must they overlap? These and other questions will have to be suitably addressed by organisations before widespread hybrid work can be implemented successfully.

**The second set of challenges involve equity issues.** Consider, firstly, that even the ability to work remotely is a privilege. Some tasks require physical presence. Remote work potential for certain jobs (such as caregiving, retail services and essential IT services requiring specialised fixed equipment) is non-existent.<sup>38,39</sup> Unfortunately, a significant number of these jobs are filled by workers from socio-economically disadvantaged groups (in relation to the overall workforce). Hybrid work has thus far benefited primarily workers in higher education and income brackets and this will likely continue.

For instance, the Pew Research Center's survey of workers in the US in October 2020 found that while 62% of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher could do their work from home, only 23% of those without a four-year university degree could. Similarly, while a majority of upper-income workers can do their work from home, most lower- and middle-income workers cannot.<sup>40</sup>

Related to the disparity in education and income levels is unequal access to technology and suitable home office set-ups.<sup>41</sup> Modern technology offers unparalleled flexibility for workers, who have more options than



ever when it comes to where and when they work. However, this could place those with limited ability to use or access appropriate technological tools at a disadvantage.

Similarly, limited access to WFH spaces and poor internet connectivity in developing countries—as well as in some rural locations in developed countries—can severely impact performance and productivity of workers in those areas.<sup>42</sup>

According to Sandhya Karpe, senior research advisor at The Conference Board, working from home is often challenging for many in Asia because of poor connectivity and/or confined, shared living spaces. “Multigenerational family structures are common in some countries where you’re often cohabitating with parents, siblings, grandparents and/or in-laws.” These “social and cultural factors”, she says, could result in an uneven playing field for employees who are now working out of their homes.

Remote work experiments during the pandemic have also brought to light intergenerational disparities with respect to hybrid models. Senior and established employees are reportedly doing better compared with younger workers and new hires. Younger employees have reported feeling more stressed, less motivated, less productive and more isolated. They are seemingly more affected by the loss of informal knowledge sharing, networking opportunities and passive learning moments.<sup>43,44</sup>

Yet older employees also face their own challenges. They are usually less tech-savvy, which can impact their remote work productivity, especially in the absence of digital and tech training.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of gender equity, although multiple experts Economist Impact interviewed worried about the possibility of hybrid work exacerbating existing gender gaps, the impact of hybrid work (rather than fully-remote work) on gender equity remains unclear. On the one hand, working remotely can potentially allow those with household responsibilities to become more productive, by allowing them to spread out their housework across the day and ultimately get more personal time.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, thanks to gender norms and societal expectations, greater work flexibility for women has historically often translated into increased time spent on caregiving and household responsibilities, while increased flexibility for men has led to greater productivity and improved work-life balance.<sup>47,48</sup>

**The third and final set of challenges concerns fairness.** Without a consistent and clear

corporate culture (and sufficient training), hybrid models risk creating performance gaps between employees more commonly in the office versus those mostly outside. Without appropriate safeguards, frequent in-person workers may gain advantages over others in terms of visibility and recognition, as well as access to information and resources.<sup>49</sup>

Hybrid models also threaten compensation fairness. Unfairness can result from the absence of support plans or additional compensation structures for workers who cannot be granted the same degree of flexibility as other colleagues.<sup>50</sup> The practice of “equal pay” may also lead to de facto unfairness under hybrid work models due to disparities in the costs of living between employees working from different locations.<sup>51</sup> Some argue, for example, that employees living in low-cost cities and towns should be paid less.

### **The challenges above pose a serious threat to employees and organisations.**

For employees, the lack of workplace connections can lead to extreme isolation, stress and anxiety, ultimately impacting employee mental health and physical well-being. In hybrid models, as with fully remote arrangements, it can be difficult to foster social connections at work, especially if employees rarely interact with the same coworkers in the office. Hybrid work models can also perpetuate the “always on” mentality of remote work. This can lead to severe burnout or team dysfunction.<sup>52</sup>

All this can take a toll on a worker’s health, according to Jodi Oakman, an associate professor of ergonomics, safety and health at La Trobe University. “If clear communication channels are not established, if your manager doesn’t trust you, it’s really stressful because you’re trying to guess what you might need to do to undertake your job. These issues can lead to the development of neck or back pain or some other musculoskeletal pain.”

For organisations, scattered communication channels and inequitable access to resources and opportunities can undermine coordination, collaboration and efficiency, ultimately damaging organisations’ overall productivity and affecting their financial bottom lines. Another consistent problem with hybrid arrangements is the difficulty in fostering a strong corporate culture.<sup>53</sup> Part of this problem is the dichotomy of cultures in both workplaces. It’s neither remote nor onsite—but rather somewhere between.<sup>54</sup> This, coupled with challenges around accountability, fairness, equity and impaired human connections, can threaten the very fabric of the organisation’s culture and existence.

“IF COMMUNICATION CHANNELS ARE DISTORTED, IF YOUR MANAGER DOESN’T TRUST YOU, IT’S REALLY STRESSFUL BECAUSE YOU’RE TRYING TO GUESS WHAT YOU MIGHT NEED TO DO TO SATISFY THEM.”

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# SUCCESS ACHIEVABLE THOUGH NOT GUARANTEED

**The success of hybrid work models depends on an organisation's flexibility, the agency it affords its employees and its management's cultural adaptability.**

Will organisations be able to reap the benefits of hybrid work? Experts interviewed for this programme actually expect many organisations to fail at hybrid work or, at the very least, tinker relentlessly before finding an approach that works for them.

However, through thoughtful design of their hybrid work models, organisations can position themselves for success. While specific, granular recommendations will be developed only in the following phases of this programme, Economist Impact has identified some general guidelines in this first phase.

Given the variety of possible arrangements across the hybrid work spectrum, it is important for organisations to approach implementation the same way they would new product development: with flexibility, open-mindedness, a holistic view of individuals and their teams, and a willingness to constantly iterate. Interviewees expect current hybrid work models to evolve even over the next year. Ms Molyneaux at HSM Advisory says she will be “enormously surprised” if any of the current hybrid work models being implemented now (“including ours, by the way”) look exactly the same in twelve months’ time.

Moreover, hybrid work models should be based on employee preferences and prioritise employee-driven flexibility. For instance, because time flexibility is more feasible than location flexibility for many workers—such as “frontline workers” who must perform their jobs in-person or many contract workers—it is important for employers to not only think about the “where” and the “when” of hybrid work, but also the “how” (for instance, is it really necessary for individuals to overlap work schedules). Interviewees expect hybrid models that let employees shape their own choices regarding where and when they work will be more successful in the long run and are more likely to be sustainable versus those that lean towards top-down mandates on flexibility.

Culture and management styles must reflect the new hybrid environment. Firms that operate with a traditional office-based mindset or blindly combine remote and in-person work without considering the requisite organisational and operational changes risk failing in their attempts at hybrid work. “We cannot take the old set of processes, apply them to hybrid and expect them to work,” says Prithwiraj Choudhury, associate professor of technology and operations management at Harvard Business School, “We need to rethink basic management practices—how people socialize, how information is shared, and how communication is conducted—in the context of hybrid work.”



# CONCLUSION

**This ongoing hybrid work revolution is, at the risk of hubris, probably unlike any other in our lifetimes. Everything from the way we commute to the way we interact with others—near and far, colleagues and strangers alike—is changing.**

All this will have an indelible impact on our lives. Among other things, our built environment will change, as neighbourhoods, cities and regions adapt to suburban WFH and to new daily commuting patterns.

While we're aware that change is occurring, the contours of it are still unclear. As our interviewees stress, one of the most important qualities that will help organisations and workers navigate the hybrid work revolution is adaptability.

This is because our understanding of hybrid work is still in its infancy.

In 1920 Max Weber, a German sociologist, said that the separation of the worker's place of work from their home had "extraordinarily far-reaching" consequences. A century later, the shift of work back to a home (or hybrid) setting will similarly have a profound impact on organisations, workers and societies across the world. Those who remain nimble and open-minded are the ones most likely to benefit from it.

Over the coming months, Economist Impact will be exploring all these issues in greater depth through a series of expert blogs, a global survey and finally a briefing paper that will tie the whole research programme together. Stay tuned—from wherever you're working.



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