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What do young employees learn when the boss works from home? Hybrid work, learning and workplace innovation

Ezra Dessers, Mikkel Barslund (HIVA Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven, Belgium)

The pandemic already feels distant. Most of us have returned to familiar routines. Yet one shift has remained: we work from home more often, and not always at the same time or in the same place as our colleagues and managers. Since hybrid work became widespread, learning and growing at work no longer happens automatically. For young people in particular, a strong start depends on how organisations deliberately arrange guidance, collaboration and proximity. Hybrid work is therefore not only a matter of flexibility, but a question of workplace innovation: how work is designed so that performance and quality of work reinforce one another.

Before COVID, remote work was limited to a small minority. Today, around a third of employees in Belgium work from home sometimes or most of the time, with clear differences between sectors. Across the European Union as a whole, the share is lower than one in four, with substantial differences between countries. Remote workers remain a minority. Not every job can be done remotely. Many roles in industry, retail or care require physical presence. Others, such as administrative, IT or research functions, allow greater flexibility. In some organisations, a large share of staff works partly at a distance. The result is simple: colleagues see each other less often, and informal contact with managers or more experienced co workers becomes less frequent. Where hybrid work becomes the norm, organisations face a structural question: how to sustain collaboration, learning and cohesion when physical proximity is no longer self evident.

Learning without proximity

Much workplace learning is informal. It happens because you are present and involved in daily work. You overhear how colleagues handle clients. You ask a quick question. You check what is expected. You observe how more experienced staff approach complex tasks. These small interactions are rarely planned, yet they are central to learning the craft.

When work shifts online, such moments become less frequent, especially for starters. Research shows that physical proximity is associated with more feedback and knowledge sharing, and that remote work reduces these interactions, particularly for less experienced employees. Even regular online meetings do not fully replace spontaneous contact.

Onboarding proves crucial. A relatively short initial period with consistent presence in the workplace can lead to stronger long term outcomes in productivity, retention and wellbeing. The main risk is not that young employees cannot perform tasks from home. It is that the learning layer of a career becomes thinner: the stage where you learn by participating, observing and adjusting in real time.

Hybrid work is therefore more than a logistical choice about where work happens. It is a strategic choice about what organisations leave to chance and what they deliberately design. This is where workplace innovation comes in. Hybrid work requires organisations to rethink how work is structured, how collaboration is organised and how learning is supported. Planning shared office days, designing onboarding trajectories, embedding mentoring and creating predictable moments for feedback are not administrative details. They are deliberate innovations in work organisation that

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shape both performance and employee development. By involving employees in shaping these arrangements and aligning leadership, HR practices and infrastructure with hybrid realities, organisations can ensure that starters continue to build skills and relationships, even when daily proximity is reduced.

Hybrid work in an AI context

Hybrid work is unfolding at the same time as artificial intelligence is reshaping occupations. Although the long term effects of AI remain uncertain, early evidence suggests that younger workers may feel the impact first. In some sectors, the first visible effects appear in recruitment rather than in dismissals, with entry level roles in highly automatable occupations becoming more limited.

This may narrow entry opportunities for starters, especially in knowledge intensive fields where hybrid work is already widespread. At the same time, AI can also serve as a support tool, helping less experienced employees perform complex tasks more effectively. Young workers who learn to work productively with AI may strengthen their position rather than weaken it.

Both dynamics increase the importance of structured learning and guidance. If AI takes over routine tasks that once served as learning opportunities, organisations need to think more carefully about how starters acquire judgement and expertise. Integrating new technologies into work design without undermining professional development is therefore another dimension of workplace innovation.

What can starters and organisations do

Hybrid work can blur boundaries, especially for young employees still discovering what good performance looks like. Mentorship becomes more important, not only to transfer skills but also to communicate norms about expectations, workload and healthy limits. Strengthening such practices is part of workplace innovation: shaping leadership and support structures so that flexibility and technology do not undermine development.

Organisations can take several concrete steps. First, plan shared presence consciously. If learning from one another matters, teams should be present in the office at predictable times. Second, organise learning actively at the start of a career through buddy systems, shadowing and explicit moments when questions are welcome. Third, design work so that people who depend on one another are not unnecessarily separated, and ensure that new technologies, including AI tools, support rather than replace meaningful learning experiences. Give teams enough autonomy to coordinate their rhythms and adapt arrangements where needed.

Young employees are not passive in this process. They can choose office days that overlap with their manager and key colleagues, seek feedback regularly and create space for informal interaction. They can also invest in learning how to use new technologies critically and responsibly. In doing so, they actively participate in shaping effective hybrid and digitally supported practices.

What young people learn when their boss works from home depends largely on how hybrid work and technology are organised. With deliberate work design, shared responsibility and thoughtful guidance, hybrid work can support both productivity and meaningful development. That is the promise of workplace innovation in a hybrid and digital age.

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