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Integrating Hybrid Work in Organizations: A Strategic HRM Perspective to Pursue Vertical and Horizontal Alignment

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ABSTRACT

Technological advancements and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the transition toward hybrid workplaces. Even though the design of appropriate HRM practices is recognized as an important factor in ensuring an effective transition toward hybrid work environments, existing research has offered limited insights into how companies might strategically integrate hybrid work in a coherent HRM system of HRM to attain a competitive advantage. Indeed, extant empirical studies mainly focus on the individual level of analysis, while the discussion on hybrid work practices at the organizational level remains conceptual. This paper aims to advance this debate by relying on the theoretical perspective of strategic human resource management (SHRM). Most extant models in the field of SHRM either focus on the vertical linkages of HRM practices with corporate strategy or on the horizontal alignment of the HRM system, missing the opportunity to adopt a comprehensive approach to SHRM to explain the current transition to hybrid workplaces. In addressing these gaps, the study uses a longitudinal case study of an Italian company over 4 years of implementation of a hybrid work environment and explores HR's interventions through the lenses of the Harvard model and the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework. Specifically, the study examines how vertical and horizontal alignment of strategic hybrid work HR practices are achieved and influence employee, organizational, and societal outcomes, providing valuable insights for companies approaching this new way of working and for HR managers and professionals.

1 | Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a driver of unprecedented changes in work habits, lifestyles, and business strategies, accelerating the digital transformation of work (Nagel 2020). Since the pandemic, remote working has evolved in hybrid work arrangements, defined as working hours flexibly split between a company site and another location, often a home office (Trevor and Holweg 2022). To manage this phenomenon, some companies have invested in technology, developed policies, and trained managers to handle teams across spaces effectively

(Felstead et al. 2002; Pillai and Prasad 2022). Nevertheless, currently, an increasing number of companies are returning to their offices, legitimizing their choice based on the need for direct collaboration, the nature of their work, and concerns about productivity and data security (Fan and Moen 2023; Lawler McHugh and Vinas 2024).

Indeed, the transition to hybrid work introduces unique challenges for organizations. A first category stems from the diffusion of hybrid work, which has triggered changes in labor market conditions and stakeholders' expectations. In this

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Practitioner Notes

- What is currently known?
 - The transition to hybrid workplaces has been accelerated by technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Effective HR practices are crucial for a successful shift to hybrid work environments.
 - Existing research primarily focuses on individual-level challenges, while organizational-level strategies remain underexplored.
 - Strategic HRM models typically emphasize either vertical alignment with corporate strategy or horizontal coherence within HRM systems, lacking a comprehensive approach.
- What this paper adds?
 - A longitudinal case study of an Italian company implementing hybrid work over 4 years, providing empirical insights.
 - An integrated SHRM perspective that combines both vertical (corporate strategy alignment) and horizontal (HR system coherence) dimensions.
 - The integration of the Harvard model and the AMO framework to examine HR interventions in hybrid work environments.
 - A detailed analysis of how strategic HR alignment influences employee, organizational, and societal outcomes in hybrid workplaces.
- The implications for practitioners
 - The findings show that an effective implementation of hybrid work is aligned with contingency factors.
 - HR departments play a proactive role in the design and implementation of coherent bundles of practices for a hybrid workplace.
 - HR professionals are required to implement across the management a shared understanding of, and commitment toward the new ways of working.

regard, survey evidence shows that 75% of workers favor a hybrid model (McKinsey and Company 2022), and LinkedIn data show a 21% increase in EU job postings offering flexible work options (LinkedIn Economic and Graph 2024). These labor market dynamics compel organizations to reconsider their working arrangements to attract candidates. Nevertheless, divergent interests among organizational stakeholders (employees, employers, labor unions, etc.) may generate misalignment in the implementation of such work mode in organizations (Bancou 2024; Bloom et al. 2024; CIPD 2023; Dale et al. 2024), giving rise to competing priorities rather than a clear strategic direction.

A second category of challenges concerns the implications of hybrid work in the re-conceptualization of the spatial, temporal, and technological dimensions of work (Lauring and Jonasson 2025). Indeed, hybrid work introduces significant challenges for organizing collaboration, autonomy and control, and necessary behaviors and skills. Specifically, the fragmentation of work modes in hybrid arrangements reduces regular contact among co-workers (Haas 2022) and limits informal encounters (Kantola et al. 2025) that foster trust and social bonding (Trevor and Holweg 2022). Moreover, by enabling work to be performed

outside the shared space and time of direct supervision, hybrid work increases employees' perceived discretion in completing tasks with direct implications on the control that managers are expected to exert in the workplace (Becker et al. 2022; Hackston 2022; Lauring and Jonasson 2025). Finally, beyond digital skills needed to manage the technological dimension of work, studies show that behaviors such as effective time management and adaptability have become increasingly important predictors of performance (Allen et al. 2024), alongside a heightened emphasis on communication, and self-management skills (Henke et al. 2022).

Overall, these insights suggest that hybrid work may have various influences at HR level, affecting for instance talent acquisition, coordination and control, and training. Indeed, various scholars advocate for a fundamental redesign of HR practices suited to the complexities of hybrid work (Lauring and Jonasson 2025; Meijerink et al. 2021). In this regard, recent research suggests that the transition to hybrid work constitutes a fundamental organizational transformation that cannot be addressed solely through incremental adjustments to HR practices, but instead requires a coherent hybrid work strategy that deliberately designs, implements, and institutionalizes hybrid work across the organization. For instance, Buła et al. (2024) suggest that the success of hybrid work models does not lie in the technology tools or type of work arrangement itself (e.g., office-first, remote-first), but rather in how well the hybrid work model is integrated into the company's operations. Against this backdrop, we rely on the strategic human resource management (SHRM) approach, to expand both theory and practice regarding the influence of hybrid work's contingencies in shaping hybrid work HR strategy and the influence of the related HR practices in effectively supporting a hybrid work environment.

Wright and McMahan (1992) defined SHRM as “[...] the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals” (p. 298). This lens is particularly useful in better understanding hybrid work design and implementation as it allows to match “human resource management approaches with this new reality and offer [ing] solutions tailored to the new problems that improve people's well-being and businesses' long-term viability” (Sachdeva et al. 2024, 886). A core focus of SHRM literature is linking HR practices to an organization's strategic goals (vertical alignment) considering those situational factors that shape HR practices and their influence on HR-related outcomes, as well as organizational achievements (Beer et al. 1985; Bondarouk and Brewster 2016). In the context of hybrid work, this contingency perspective on HR practices facilitates the consideration of situational factors specific to this new way of working (e.g., labor market expectations, the pervasive use of digital technologies), and of conflicting stakeholders' interests (need for flexibility and wellbeing vs. productivity, collaboration and innovation).

However, when investigating the extent to which a hybrid work model is integrated into the company's operations (Buła et al. 2024) this contingency perspective (vertical alignment) alone does not provide the theoretical basis for understanding

the systematic combination of HR practices that may be needed to support a hybrid work model, defined by the SHRM literature as “horizontal alignment”. In this case, a configurational approach, which focuses on the analysis of the synergistic effects produced by the interaction between bundles of HR practices on organizational performance (Gerhart 2007; Gooderham et al. 2008; Wright and McMahan 1992), may offer a deeper understanding of the necessary abilities, the adequate motivation, and the opportunities to participate (i.e., AMO model, Appelbaum et al. 2019; Bos-Nehles et al. 2023; Boxall and Purcell 2003; Jiang et al. 2012) that organizations need to implement a hybrid work environment.

While prior research has focused on either horizontal or vertical alignment treating the two as separate tracks (Kehoe 2021; Werbel and DeMarie 2005), in this study we aim to address this gap answering the following research questions: *How do contingency factors related to the rise of hybrid work influence the hybrid work HR strategy, and how does the hybrid work HR strategy unfolding into HR practices shape the implementation of hybrid work?*

In studying the transition toward hybrid work, we propose the analysis and interpretation of a qualitative case over a 4-year period adopting the lenses of the contingency and the configurational perspectives (Lengnick-Hall et al. 2009) as complementary SHRM approaches (Kehoe 2021). Our study aims to provide: (i) an understanding of the role of contingency factors in shaping the hybrid work HR strategy and related practices; (ii) a comprehension of the bundles of HR practices to implement a hybrid workplace; (iii) a definition of the main outcomes derived by these HR practices.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, it advances the emerging literature that in recent years has tried to investigate the different facets of the hybrid work phenomenon, adopting an organizational level of analysis through the lenses of SHRM. As highlighted by a recent literature review (Lauring and Jonasson 2025), hybrid work has been studied primarily through an individual-level lens, with only a few conceptual studies addressing specifically the role of HRM in contributing to the emergence of hybrid work models (Petani and Mengis 2023; Verma et al. 2023). Secondly, answering the call for a reconsideration of SHRM (Kehoe 2021), the study extends the discussion of the integration of contingency and configurational perspectives of SHRM to better understand the design and implementation of hybrid work environments and their impact on HR outcomes and organizational performance. Finally, the research advances the understanding of ability-motivation-opportunity-enhancing practices that may be implemented to support hybrid work and the mutual reinforcement across these three bundles.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section revises the recent literature on hybrid work, highlighting the main gaps and positioning the phenomenon within the SHRM field. The methodology section describes in detail the rationale for adopting a case study approach and describes the criteria that guided the selection of the single case along with the data collection and analysis techniques. The results section illustrates the transition toward a hybrid work model undertaken by the

case analyzed, providing evidence of the attainment of a vertical alignment between the HR strategy and the contingency factors, and of the horizontal fit among the HR bundles and their impact on performance. Finally, in the discussion, theoretical and practical implications are presented. The paper concludes by describing the limitations and implications for HR professionals, and outlining further lines of research.

2 | Literature Background

2.1 | Hybrid Work and HRM Challenges

In recent years, scholars have highlighted the limited extent to which HRM research has adapted to the evolving nature of work. Despite significant changes in how and where work is performed, much of the field remains anchored in traditional assumptions, with a continued emphasis on physical and analog workplace settings (Harney and Collings 2021; McPhail et al. 2024; Snell and Morris 2021; Lauring and Jonasson 2025).

As hybrid work arrangements become more widespread, they drive significant changes in the surrounding contextual environment. First, the rise of hybrid work has shifted expectations and dynamics of the labor market that organizations need to consider to remain competitive. Recent surveys show more than 75% of Gen Z and Millennials who are currently in remote or hybrid roles would consider looking for a new job if their employer asked them to work on site full-time (Deloitte 2023). Moreover, the evolution of the labor market toward a greater attention to work-life balance makes it more difficult to attract and retain candidates, making it necessary for companies to formulate a new workplace value proposition and the related HR talent acquisition and retention practices as a vital part of an organization's strategy (Wigert et al. 2023). Second, the increasing adoption of hybrid work arrangements also reveals divergent interests and perspectives among internal and external stakeholders. Employees may prioritize flexible work arrangements to pursue an improved work-life balance and greater autonomy, whereas employers and leaders tend to emphasize accountability, and the visibility needed to manage performance and sustain organizational control, being concerned by productivity and collaboration reduction (Buła et al. 2024; CIPD 2023; Teng-Calleja et al. 2024). Indeed, prior studies acknowledge that splitting working hours between a physical and virtual location might alter social dynamics, encouraging an individualistic attitude toward the work that generates concerns among companies about the impact on cohesiveness, productivity, and innovation (Bancou 2024). Externally, stakeholders such as labor unions may resist hybrid work arrangements out of concern that remote practices could lead to workforce reductions or job insecurity over time. Additionally, government bodies may find themselves navigating the tension between protecting employee rights to flexible work and supporting employers' operational and economic imperatives. As it happens in other specific settings, these conflicting expectations can generate internal and external tensions that hinder the coherent development of HR practices (e.g., Vekeman et al. 2025). As a result, HR activities may become fragmented or selectively oriented, reflecting competing priorities rather than a clear strategic direction.

Beyond the aforementioned changes in the labor market and stakeholders' competing interests, a second challenge posed by hybrid work is related to the dynamic switches between traditional and non-traditional work modes. These concern the "modality (analog/face-to-face vs. digital/virtual), location (office/co-located vs. nonoffice/distributed), and temporality (constrained/synchronous vs. unconstrained/asynchronous)" (Lauring and Jonasson 2025, 1) with which the work is organized. First, hybrid work tends to be characterized by discontinuity and (dis)rhythm (Kantola et al. 2025), which refer to the changed nature of coordination where social interaction is often limited and preplanned (Waizenegger et al. 2020), thereby challenging the formation and maintenance of high-quality social relations. As communication becomes more fragmented and task-oriented (Waizenegger et al. 2020), it is also more difficult to interpret one's activity in context, to be exposed and internalize the organization's norms, values and expectations (Haas 2022). In this regard, the increasing use of collaboration technology showed mixed results on preserving social connectedness, due to higher perceived quality in face-to-face communication (Braun et al. 2019), and potential loss for spontaneous conversations (Mitchell et al. 2023).

Moreover, although employees may experience greater scheduling autonomy as they can plan what tasks they will perform in which location (Knight et al. 2025), even the jobs with greater remote feasibility tend to be trapped in an autonomy-control paradox (Putnam et al. 2013), according to which the greater the autonomy employees possess, the harder they work, and the more organizations control, and extend into their lives, provoking unintended ripple effects (Wheatley et al. 2023). Hybrid work is commonly associated with a perceived loss of managerial control stemming from reduced direct observability; however, advances in digital technologies concurrently afford novel and potentially more pervasive mechanisms of control.

Accordingly, besides the development of digital literacy at all organizational levels (Deschênes, 2024), hybrid work implies a shift in the behaviors and skills required to effectively manage partial remote settings (Allen et al. 2024; Verma et al. 2023), with heightened centrality of time management, adaptability and communication (Henke et al. 2022).

Scholars agree that HR actors should ensure HR practices relevance and effectiveness in suiting the aforementioned specificities of hybrid work (Lauring and Jonasson 2025; Meijerink et al. 2021). For instance, organizations are called to proactively address communication gaps and discontinuity of social relationships through the design of deliberate rituals and practices to preserve company culture and knowledge sharing (Loncar et al. 2025). Scholars underline a needed shift in the performance management paradigm toward trust-based management, continuous employee development, and regular two-way feedback (Mangla 2021), consistently with the higher autonomy quest that accompanies hybrid work environments. Preliminary evidence also shows a reconsideration of training needs for both employees and managers, as creating and maintaining a productive and supportive working climate can be substantially more complicated when operating in different work modes (Meijerink et al. 2022).

While so far the literature has provided a general understanding of the influences of contingency factors and the need to redesign HR practices to meet hybrid work characteristics, there is a growing recognition that in order to fully leverage the potential of hybrid work arrangements organizations must conceptualize hybrid work as an integral element of their overall strategy and develop coherent, aligned HRM systems to support the transition toward these emerging modes of working (Lauring and Jonasson 2025; Radonić et al. 2021; Snell and Morris 2021). This means that if on one side hybrid work is conceived as an exogenous factor altering employee experience and in turn traditional HR practices, on the other side, the reconsideration of HR practices should not be only reactive, but proactive in designing consistent HR systems that address the aforementioned challenges and allow the effective implementation of hybrid work models in organizations. In order to explore this influence, we rely on the contingency and combinational approaches proposed within the SHRM framework and illustrated in the following section.

2.2 | SHRM and Hybrid Work

In delving into the hybrid work phenomenon through the lens of the SHRM, we conducted an analysis of the extant literature in order to identify those theoretical models that may provide a suitable guidance for collecting and interpreting the findings emerging from the field research. Literature on strategic HRM proposes the adoption of a contingency approach to support firms in responding quickly to environmental demands and attain a sustainable competitive advantage (de and Pablos 2005). A widespread model to represent how organizations use their human resources in accordance with their strategic needs is the Harvard model (Beer et al. 1985), which is considered a good representation of the reality of HRM in organizational life, with significant reflections on organizational outcomes (Bondarouk and Brewster 2016). Prior studies applied it for instance within the Australian context to conceptualize how changes in stakeholder interests, combined with situational factors, influence public sector HRM policy choices and subsequently impact HRM outcomes for various public sector employees (Brunetto et al. 2011). Other scholars applied it to shed light on the dynamic relationship between HR practices and technological advancements (Bondarouk and Brewster 2016). This model is particularly valuable because it explains how employee interests (such as adaptability to new working conditions) combined with changes in situational factors (like cultural transitions) lead to HRM policy choices (particularly regarding job design, training, performance management, etc.), which in turn have long-term consequences (such as productivity, job satisfaction, etc.) (Beer et al. 1985; Verma et al. 2023). As recently outlined by Verma et al. (2023), its application in the context of a sustainable hybrid work environment could guide a more contextualized analysis of the design of HR practices, considering a broader perspective on stakeholders, and their effect on HR strategy and organizational achievements.

The model includes five interrelated components (Beer et al. 1985), which together offer a comprehensive tool to understand and guide HR practices. Especially in the context of

hybrid work arrangements, each of these dimensions becomes particularly relevant. First, while most HRM studies tend to adopt the perspective of a single stakeholder (owner) (Bondarouk and Brewster 2016), the Harvard model underscores the necessity of considering the expectations of different actors, such as: employees, unions and community when delineating HRM interventions. This approach is in line with the reconsideration of good HR practices as those that not only promote organizational effectiveness, but also sustainable outcomes such as long-term individual well-being (van de Voorde et al. 2012). As previously mentioned, in a hybrid work environment, stakeholders may hold different perspectives and expectations (Bloom et al. 2024; CIPD 2023; Dale et al. 2024; Bancou 2024). Thus, this lens helps understand how these different interests are combined or balanced when designing fair and effective hybrid work arrangements.

Second, the model highlights other situational factors, such as workforce demographics, management philosophy, organizational strategy, labor market conditions and societal value that may shape HRM policy choices (Beer et al. 1985; Brunetto et al. 2011). Scholars highlighted changes in the external context that directly influence the feasibility and design of hybrid work policies. For instance, in the face of technological prominence in organizations, scholars highlight that workforce characteristics should include digital literacy and adaptability to remote technologies (Deschênes, 2024). Similarly, the management debate highlights a shift in management philosophy from control-oriented models to those emphasizing trust and target-driven performance (Paliszkiwicz 2012). These contextual variables must be carefully analyzed, as they directly impact on how hybrid work can be effectively incorporated in organizations.

As a third component, the Harvard model emphasizes HRM policy choices as the concrete mechanisms through which strategic intent is operationalized. In hybrid settings, this may involve for instance decisions related to employee's autonomy in work scheduling, recruiting digitally competent staff, reward systems (e.g., aligning performance incentives with outcomes rather than physical presence), and work systems (e.g., redesigning jobs to accommodate remote collaboration) (Bloom et al. 2024; Dale et al. 2024). These policy choices are critical in determining the success of hybrid models and must be coherently aligned with both stakeholder interests and environmental contexts.

The fourth dimension, HR outcomes, relates to the immediate impact of HR practices on employees, such as employee commitment, fit between individual and organizational goals, improved competence, and cost-effective utilization of human resources (Deschênes, 2024). These outcomes not only signal the success of HR interventions but also provide feedback for ongoing policy refinement.

Notwithstanding its contribution in explaining how contingencies influence the strategy and in turn the HR practices and outcomes, one limitation that can be ascribed to the Harvard model is the poor understanding of how the HR practices that derive from the analysis of the external and internal environment form a coherent configuration or bundle that reinforces the pursuit of positive performance. In this regard, the configurational

perspective on strategic HRM offers a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how HRM systems serve as mediating mechanisms between organizational strategy and outcomes (Jiang and Messersmith 2018). The ability–motivation–opportunity (AMO) framework has become a central lens for understanding how HRM systems generate performance (Appelbaum et al. 2019; Boxall and Purcell 2003; Jiang et al. 2012), helping to illuminate the “black box” of HRM bundles (Bos-Nehles et al. 2023).

The ability-enhancing dimension reflects the investment in HR practices intended to improve the knowledge, skills, and competencies of employees. This category comprises training, career development initiatives, and hiring policies that bring new skills. In a hybrid workplace, the ability-enhancing practices might be particularly salient since new technical skills are required to perform daily tasks on digital infrastructures, and relational competencies are necessary to facilitate new kinds of interaction (Allen et al. 2024; Verma et al. 2023).

The motivation-enhancing dimension refers to HR practices related to directing, energizing, and sustaining the behavior or the willingness and desire of employees to perform a task. Motivation is fostered through HR practices such as performance appraisal, compensation, and incentive systems that enhance perceptions of fairness and career progression, thereby supporting trust, reciprocity, a positive organizational climate, and employee engagement (Bos-Nehles et al. 2023). These practices are key in hybrid work models, where scholars advocate trust-based employment relationships should be promoted along with a redesigning of performance management and rewards systems based on tangible outcome indicators (Kulik 2022).

Opportunity-enhancing practices are designed to empower employees to use their abilities and motivation to achieve organizational objectives. Literature includes employees' participation in decision-making, the use of communication channels from the firm to employees, job design that enhances autonomy, and the development of supporting relationships and team working (Bos-Nehles et al. 2023). During the transition toward a hybrid workplace, the provision of opportunity-enhancing practices might have a salient role, for instance, through a job redesign that increases the level of task autonomy, the restructuring of office spaces and the equipping of digital working tools to support communication.

Recent research increasingly shows that these dimensions are mutually reinforcing rather than isolated. Studies highlight how they interact dynamically, with one dimension often acting as antecedent or catalyst for the others (e.g., De Wind et al. 2015; Kettinger et al. 2015). For instance, opportunity-enhancing practices such as IT support can strengthen employees' abilities, which then foster motivation climates (Kettinger et al. 2015), while autonomy (opportunity) has been shown to enhance commitment (motivation), which subsequently drives extra-role behaviors (Knies and Leisink 2014).

Overall, the AMO taxonomy might offer an insightful lens for classifying and describing the HR practices aimed at supporting the implementation of hybrid work.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design and Research Setting

In this study, we employed a qualitative methodological approach through the use of a single-case study. The method was selected due to its appropriateness in areas where empirical research is scant (Yin 2014), involving a deep dive into the case-specific context, which reflects the unique experiences of workers and managers in post-pandemic Italy (Klaser et al. 2023). Indeed, in 2019, only 570,000 workers in Italy experimented with a hybrid environment, 58% of large companies had some projects on hybrid work compared to 12% of SMEs. In 2025, it is estimated that there are 3.75 million hybrid workers in Italy; however, despite the fact that in 2023 almost all large companies had hybrid work initiatives, only 56% of SMEs, which constitute the backbone of the country's economy, implemented hybrid work (Observatory Politecnico of Milan 2025). In SMEs in particular, the transition toward a hybrid workplace might posit more challenges due to the unique characteristics of their culture, which privileges informal processes over structure, and to the limited access to resources. In these contexts, HR departments might play a salient role as organizational change agents supporting the company in the redesigning of their workplace.

This case study research is based on a medium-sized Italian family company called "LARI" (a pseudonym; it had revenue of €138 million and employed 230 individuals in Italy and abroad in 2023) operating under NACE code 10.39 (other processing and preserving of fruit and vegetables).

LARI was founded in 1923 in northeastern Italy, it is currently led by the third generation of the founder family and it is recognized as a pioneering and leading organic company in Europe. It has launched award-winning products, obtained international organic certification, penetrated global markets, acquired specialized organic companies, established overseas subsidiaries, and expanded manufacturing to three plants (two in Italy and one in a neighboring European country). LARI still maintains the features of a family company but is currently working on a growth plan based on innovation and expansion to international markets. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, to support its rapid growth, the company has started to develop a long-term business strategy i.e. expected to guide the transition from a family business to a company with a global presence, while maintaining an organizational culture strongly rooted in its core values: organic sustainability and business ethics.

The LARI case was theoretically chosen for its suitability in addressing the research questions. Before 2020, LARI was characterized by a culture heavily based on control. The shift toward hybrid work was significantly facilitated by the approach of the company to establish and maintain good working conditions prioritizing workplace wellbeing and the investment in the human resources department. Moreover, recognizing the evolving nature of work environments, after the pandemic substantial investments were made in the HR department to facilitate this transition, including hiring a new HR Director in 2021, who transformed the HR as a business partner, starting with the formulation of a hybrid work HR strategy that supports

the attainment of the business's long-term goals and implies a redesign of the internal processes and managerial capabilities. With the aim of developing LARI into a modern and digitalized workplace, the HR department championed and supported the introduction of the hybrid work model for white-collar employees and key roles in the operations department. The case allows reconstruction of the interventions implemented by the HR department from the post-pandemic period up to 2024, deepening the understanding of how the role of the human resources department has promoted strategic changes. Second, the company has externally validated its hybrid work model through various recognitions: (i) a survey was conducted in collaboration with a university research center to identify the company's best practices; (ii) LARI has been featured in interviews with local and national press discussing the implementation of the hybrid workplace, and (iii) it was nominated as a finalist in the Hybrid Work Awards for medium-sized enterprises, further endorsing its innovative approach.

3.2 | Data Collection and Research Protocol

The data collection adhered to foundational principles outlined by Yin (2014), including the use of multiple sources of evidence (Cloutier and Ravasi 2021; Farny et al. 2019) to ensure the reliability and completeness of the study through data triangulation (see Table 1). In order to better understand how the implementation of the hybrid work model unfolds over time, data was collected over a 4 year period from post pandemic to 2024.

Internal documents provided by the company (e.g., hybrid work policy, the company's presentations, materials related to the training programs and the performance management system) and media archives (e.g., articles published in newspapers, the company website's documents) were used to enhance the understanding of the company being studied, as a key source to develop our theoretical model and to triangulate data from multiple sources, providing a stronger substantiation of results (Eisenhardt 1989). The documentation collected refers to the aforementioned timeframe reconstructing the salient events and interventions that occurred during the implementation of the hybrid work model.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom video conference. Informed written consent to take part in the research was obtained from the participants in accordance with European regulations to ensure compliance and protect confidentiality.

Since 2022 we established regular contact with the HR Director, thereby facilitating the implementation of successive interview waves. The initial wave of the study was conducted with the HR Director and some members of the leadership team. This approach proved to be beneficial in familiarizing the participants with the organizational context, collecting retrospective data about the period preceding and during the pandemic, and examining the initial initiatives promoted by the HR Director following his hiring between 2021 and 2022 based on the analysis of the contingent factors that led to the definition of the

TABLE 1 | Data sources and use.

Data source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Internal document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company hybrid work policy • Company training programs • Company documents on the redesign of the performance management system • Company's surveys administered to gather information on organizational climate and suggestions for space redesign 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarize with the organizational context • Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews
Media archive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports from national observatory on smart working (2023) • Articles published in national and local press (2021–2024) • Sustainability reports available on the company website (2017–2024) • Articles published on company's social media platforms (2022–2024) • Articles published in national and local press and business magazines (2020–2024) • Reports from national research institutes (2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews
Interviews 27 h from 2022 to 2024	<p><i>Preliminary interviews</i> with HR department</p> <p><i>Focused interviews</i> with HR department, members of the management team, middle managers, and key informant employees</p> <p><i>Debriefing interviews</i> with HR department to discuss insights on the preliminary interpretation of the fieldwork</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarize with the organizational context and trust building • Design the data collection phases and support for the definition of the purposive sample (selection of the key informants to involve in the research) • Investigate the HR practices and interventions implemented to develop a hybrid workplace • Understand the different perspectives on hybrid work models • Member-checking • Integration of the purposive sample

hybrid work HR strategy. The initial round of interviews also played a pivotal role in determining the sample of participants to be included in the research project. We implemented a purposive sampling selecting individuals according to the following criteria: people who had been working in the company before the pandemic and were thus involved in a process of adaptation toward the hybrid work environment; people hired during the implementation of the hybrid workplace; respondents with different organizational perspectives in approaching change (members of the management team, middle managers, and collaborators); people with a distinct familiarity with, and openness to, hybrid working. We also selected people giving careful consideration to gender, in order to identify possible differences in terms of expectations and benefits perceived from the hybrid work HR practices. A description of the interviewees' demographic profile is illustrated in Table 2.

The second wave of interviews took place in 2023 with the HR Director, some members of the leadership team and a middle manager in order to investigate the interventions implemented

to support the transition toward a hybrid work model. The second wave represented the opportunity to reconstruct the main initiatives implemented and to integrate the purposive sample. In 2024 we engaged in the interviews of other middle managers and collaborators and aimed to enrich the perspectives of the HR practices dedicated to different levels. The last wave was also used to discuss with the HR Department the insights on the preliminary interpretation of the fieldwork.

The interviews lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours, with some participants (e.g., the HR Director and members of the management team) being involved in data collection at various points between 2022 and 2024. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, amounting to 27 h. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the research informants and subsequently transcribed.

We developed three interview protocols. The first protocol was designed for the HR department, aiming to gather data on the evolution of the implementation of HR practices related to

TABLE 2 | Interviewees' demographic profile.

Company role	Gender	Age (2024)	Seniority in current organization (years) (2024)
HR Director	Male	46	3
CEO & Head of International Sales	Female	49	22
CFO	Male	51	18
Marketing Director	Female	56	15
Head of food Regulatory Office	Male	42	4
CSR and Sustainability Manager	Male	36	4
Marketing Manager	Male	40	3
International Sales - Customer Service coordinator	Female	30	3
Accountant	Female	35	10
Customer service employee	Female	37	17

hybrid work and the internal and external factors considered to formulate the hybrid work HR strategy in line with the changes in the company's strategic orientation. The second protocol was designed for the members of the leadership team and middle managers in order to collect information on critical events during the implementation of the hybrid work model, their leadership behaviors, the mechanisms of coordination and control adopted with the new work arrangements, and the perceived performance outcome. The last protocol was addressed to employees to investigate the decisions made at individual and unit levels for executing activities remotely and while present, perceived changes that occurred in their work, and the impact on outcomes. In line with other inductive and semi-grounded studies drawing on case study design, our semi-structured interview protocol was loosely guided by conceptual ideas considering the components of the Harvard model (Beer et al. 1985) and the AMO framework (Appelbaum et al. 2019; Bos-Nehles et al. 2023), to provide a comprehensive understanding of strategic HR practices in implementing hybrid work environments and their impacts.

3.3 | Data Analysis

The data analysis employed a combination of case study methods (Yin 2014) and thematic analysis (Naeem et al. 2023) to trace the evolution of company and HR strategies and related practices during the company's transition from a traditional to a hybrid workplace. The analysis proceeded iteratively, as emerging insights drove additional rounds of data collection and analysis.

We began our analysis by reconstructing a detailed chronology of events from the hiring of the HR Director, tracking the

actions undertaken and updating the historical reconstruction as the study unfolded. The purpose of this step was to familiarize with the phenomenon and identify the salient events and the implementation of HR practices related to the hybrid work model. From the fieldwork we elaborated a timeline that reconstructed the main interventions implemented in the company to design a hybrid workplace (Table 3).

We relied on abductive forms of analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) to elaborate the integration between the HR vertical and horizontal alignment for hybrid work. The coding of the interviews and the documents was conducted independently by each author relying on a thematic analysis technique. The coders started to read each interview transcript and collected documents creating theoretical memos that sketched out themes. Then the authors developed a concept-evidence table listing all the concepts that gradually emerged from the empirical data alongside the evidence that supports them. After each round of interviews, we repeated this process, using the newly collected data to refine and expand our analysis. The team then met to go through the coding, debating and discussing areas of disagreement.

After this first analysis of the data through memos and in vivo coding, we started to cycle between emergent themes and the relevant literature. For instance, the authors coded the single HR interventions narrated by the interviewees using in vivo codes and then derived the abstract components of the frameworks comparing them with the components of the Harvard model and the systems of AMO-enhancing practices.

The final step was the development of the conceptual model of the vertical and horizontal alignments of strategic HR practices in the hybrid workplace which was also guided by the theoretical frameworks previously introduced. A careful analysis of archival material helped us to corroborate and enrich the accounts of our informants. Preliminary versions of the case study reports were developed and sent to the company's HR Director to verify the accuracy of the information, offering a form of member check on the analysis and strengthening the credibility of the results (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

4 | Findings

The subsequent sections detail the transition of LARI toward a hybrid work arrangement, interpreting the activities implemented by the HR department according to the SHRM perspective, distinguishing between dimensions of the vertical and horizontal alignment and the impact on HR outcomes and organizational performance. Table 4 summarizes the key findings, highlighting the main themes that emerged from the fieldwork and linking them to the SHRM framework. It illustrates how relevant contingency factors challenged the company and prompted it to rethink its hybrid work HR strategy, answering in this way to the first research question. Then, we provide evidence of the strategy-aligned HR practices that were implemented and explain how the designed bundles support hybrid work implementation, addressing our second research question. The results, interpreted through the lens of the ability-

TABLE 3 | Timeline of events in LARI's implementation of hybrid work.

Year	Activities related to the implementation of the hybrid work model	Data sources
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring of the new HR director (July) • Analysis of the suggestion box (September) • Interviews with white collars and 50% of blue collars (September–December) • Meetings with the members of the leadership team (September–December) 	Interviews conducted in 2022 to the HR Director and some members of the leadership team (CEO & Head of International Sales, CFO, marketing Director; Head of food Regulatory Office)
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrades to technology infrastructure (January–June) • Training program “The Leadership Journey” (January–December 2022) • Training program “Communication and Collaboration in a Modern Workplace” (mid 2022) • Hybrid work policy (July) 	Interviews with the HR Director, CEO & Head of International Sales. Internal documents (company hybrid work policy, company training programs) Media archive (sustainability reports available on the company website)
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training program “The Leadership Journey” (January–December 2022) • Implementation of the performance management system based on “Objective and Key Results” framework (from middle 2023 – still ongoing) • Workshops and team building activities (mid 2023) • Revision of the “Key Talent Indicators” (end of 2023) • Introduction of middle management positions that facilitate the transition toward the new way of working (during 2023) 	Interviews with the HR Director, some members of the leadership team (CEO & Head of International Sales, CFO, marketing Director; Head of food Regulatory Office) and Marketing Manager. Internal documents (company training programs, company documents on the redesign of the performance management system) Media archive (sustainability reports available on the company website)
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training program “The Leadership Journey” (January–December 2024) • Implementation of the performance management system based on “Objective and Key Results” framework (from middle 2023 – still ongoing) • Training program “Leadership and a Mentoring program for Middle Managers” (January–December 2024) • Space design (from mid-2024 – still ongoing) 	Interviews with the HR Director, CSR and Sustainability Manager, Marketing Manager, International Sales - Customer Service Coordinator, Accountant and Customer service employee. Internal documents (company training programs, company documents on the redesign of the performance management system, company's surveys administered to gather information on organizational climate and suggestions for space redesign) Media archive (research reports, articles, sustainability reports)

motivation-opportunity framework, demonstrate the need for HR practices that work synergistically to reinforce both the company's overall and hybrid work HR strategies.

4.1 | Contingency Factors in Orienting the Hybrid Work HR Strategy

To design a hybrid work HR strategy in line with LARI's strategic goals, the HR department started from its inception a process of dialog and deep exploration of both the external environment in which the firm operates and the internal factors that could influence HR practices and the transition toward a modern workplace. We classified the main elements considered by the HR department into two categories, namely stakeholders' interests and external and internal conditions.

4.1.1 | Stakeholder Interests: Reconciling the Expectations of Internal and External Actors

The expectations and needs of internal and external actors reflect the importance of recognizing and integrating the diverse priorities of those who are affected by or exert influence over the organization (Lee 2011). In the context of LARI, these priorities primarily concerned the requirements and perspectives of employee groups, the family business owners and customers.

After COVID-19 ended, a high proportion of white-collar workers and managers expected that remote work experienced during the pandemic would have been integrated into the working practices. Instead, suddenly, everyone returned to the office, causing both surprise and stress. This situation sparked discussions among employees regarding their work-related expectations that were reported to the HR Director. Additionally,

TABLE 4 | Findings: The vertical alignment (from context to strategy) and horizontal alignment (within the AMO bundles).

Contingency factors	Hybrid work HR strategy	Ability (A)	Motivation (M)	Opportunity (O)
Stakeholder interests Employees: Expect flexibility and better work-life balance; hybrid work supports well-being and engagement. Ownership/Top Management: Aim to boost employer branding and preserve strong internal relationships, while concerned about control, productivity, and connection. Customers: Expect sustainability and innovation; hybrid work aligns with their values and strengthens brand reputation.	Aligning stakeholder interests on hybrid work	Recruiting hybrid workers Recruiting hybrid-ready workers who take ownership and adapt well to the new work model, helping balance productivity and employee well-being.	Forming a strategic coalition Engaging early adopters with strong hybrid work aptitude and showcasing positive results to reassure skeptical top managers about productivity. Aligning customer expectations by highlighting the hybrid model's sustainability benefits. Leveraging employer branding and employee well-being to support the transition.	Creating collaborative spaces Creating collaborative spaces to balance the employees' expectations of working from home with ownership expectations of keeping a collaborative environment. Defining a hybrid work policy Providing guidelines for implementing the hybrid work model and reassures stakeholders, especially employees.
Organizational strategy and guiding values Focus on environmental and societal sustainability, family, conviviality, and valuable relationships	Aligning fundamental values to hybrid work	Training digital collaboration skills Training for collaboration in the digital environment to enhance the value of relationships.	Aligning behaviors through Objective and Key Results Align behaviors to shared goals, boosting collaboration.	Reconceptualization of workplace connection Promoting digital tools as a way to strengthen relationships and enhance collaboration.
Management approach Place great importance on relationships and productivity	Promoting a new managerial mindset toward autonomy and accountability	Developing empowering leadership Shifting from control to trust and employee empowerment.	Introducing structured feedback Fostering feedback on behaviors aligned with accountability and trust-based leadership	Introducing middle management mentoring Empowering middle managers through mentoring, fostering leadership based on trust, accountability, and role-modeling new behaviors.
Technology proficiency Limited digitalization of processes and use of advanced digital tools	Leveraging technological tools to enable seamless hybrid collaboration, enhance communication, and maintain team cohesion across physical and digital spaces	Training on technological tools Equipping employees with the skills to effectively use digital tools essential for hybrid work. Training of key users Developing specific technical skills of key users that support colleagues with limited technological literacy	Creating feedback loops on remote/hybrid meetings Providing mutual feedback in online meetings to improve their management and the engagement in hybrid settings	Equipping with enabling technology Building a technical infrastructure for seamless interaction Digitalization of processes Digitalizing processes for synchronous and asynchronous workflows

(Continues)

TABLE 4 | (Continued)

Contingency factors	Hybrid work HR strategy	Ability (A)	Motivation (M)	Opportunity (O)
Current and prospective workforce Relatively old workforce, lack of digital skills. Limited access to the job market due to geographical location.	Attracting and developing hybrid workforce	Training on communication and collaboration skills Training for collaboration in the digital environment to enhance the value of relationships. Recruiting hybrid-ready workers Attracting talent with the mindset and capabilities suited for autonomy, flexibility, and digital collaboration.	Using Key talent indicators for hybrid work Sustaining and assessing hybrid work related behaviors	Redefining career opportunities Ensuring career opportunities are not tied to physical presence, promoting equal growth based on results, skills, and impact regardless of location

feedback collected from a suggestion box shed light on the employees' desire for increased hybrid working options and a need for consistent policies across all departments, as illustrated by the HR Director:

Upon entering the company, I found a suggestion box which, it seems, had never been opened before, given the layer of dust that had accumulated. Inside, there were numerous requests for more hybrid work, greater discipline and uniformity across departments: needs that clearly emerged during the post-pandemic period

(HR Director)

This was reinforced by the fact that 35% of employees interviewed during individual initial meetings that the HR organized with all white collars and half of the blue collars potentially affected by these new ways of working highlighted hybrid working and flexible work hours as significant areas for company improvement. This feedback underscored the broader demand for an improved work-life balance, a need that has become even more pronounced in the post-pandemic landscape.

The interests of the family ownership and the top management were carefully considered before implementing the hybrid workplace. The need to meet the company's strategic goals and overcome possible tensions among multiple stakeholders' interests led the HR Director to examine how the hybrid workplace might have represented an opportunity for this category of stakeholders. One issue emerging from the interviews with the management team relates to the perceived need of increasing the company's employer branding to attract talents to meet long-term challenges. A second issue pertains to the value of employees' well-being in line with the family culture, which is characterized by open communication and interactions, where employees are cared for. A final issue concerns the possibility of

improving productivity and performance through flexible ways of working.

In the context of a premium brand characterized by a robust emphasis on innovation, environmental stewardship, and human-centric values, customers' expectations were also considered, pursuing an alignment with the core principles characterizing the business activities. Customers who are particularly sensitive to sustainability issues seek assurances that the brand addresses multifaceted dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) integrating them into business practices. Interviews and media archives related to LARI reveal that external expectations surrounding the brand significantly shaped its work policies. In particular, the adoption of hybrid work models as a means to enhance work-life balance, employee well-being, and overall satisfaction reflects a strategic commitment to social sustainability. For LARI, this alignment was crucial to reinforcing its reputation as a socially responsible and innovative leader, as emphasized in its sustainability report:

The possibility of integrating hybrid working into our activities was carefully evaluated, taking into account the benefits for employees, including improved work-life balance

(Sustainability report)

4.1.2 | External and Internal Conditions

Internal and external conditions shape the effectiveness of HR practices within an organization by defining the broader environment in which HR strategies are designed and applied. In the case of LARI, we identified a set of internal and external conditions that significantly influenced the implementation of the hybrid workplace model. Internal conditions include the organization's existing mechanisms, structure, and

culture—elements rooted in its operational history that either facilitate or constrain HR practices. Specifically, we considered organizational strategy and values, management approach, technological proficiency, and workforce characteristics as key internal conditions. On the external side, regulatory frameworks governing hybrid work and the dynamics of the labor market emerged as critical influences. These external conditions establish the parameters within which the organization must operate when adopting and refining hybrid work practices.

4.1.2.1 | Organizational Strategy and Guiding Values.

LARI's identity has been based on values such as family, conviviality, valuable relationships, and sustainability for nearly a century. These values are evident in the behavioral rules and practices guiding all activities, ensuring that ethics, social and environmental responsibility, and mutual respect are fundamental conditions of operation.

This focus on environmental and societal sustainability represented a premise for a widespread sensitivity to work-life balance and carbon footprint issues, thus promoting the adoption of consistent work policies. On the other hand, the shared values related to valuable relationships and family showed a mixed influence. Respondents described LARI as a “*big family*,” in which continuous human interaction and connection are considered important behavioral norms. This partially questioned the hybrid work transformation due to a potential lack of fit with major organizational values. For instance, the Marketing Manager recognizes:

We are a company led by an entrepreneur who lives just one minute away, sees all of us as his extended family, and is used to see everyone in the office all together

(Marketing Manager)

4.1.2.2 | Management Approach. The management approach that characterized LARI in the initial stages of the hybrid work implementation placed great importance on relationships and productivity. The entrepreneurial family and part of the top management team were concerned with maintaining team governance, and ensuring control over work performance. In the initial stage, the common sentiment was that if employees are not visible, their work cannot be effectively monitored. Thus, there was a preference for in-person operations, valuing connections and physical proximity. The lack of physical presence in the office was perceived as critical, especially by the entrepreneurial family, as explained below:

This is a company that, pre-pandemic, always operated in person. The company, both in terms of values and approach, has favored presence not out of a command-and-control logic, but because it is an entrepreneurial company that values connections, proximity to family, and the business

(HR Director)

Interviewees agreed that this initial condition represented a rigidity toward significant change. The HR strategic practices

were considered a turning point for the transformation toward a managerial philosophy based on trust and autonomy.

4.1.2.3 | Technological Proficiency. Another precondition for hybrid work implementation is the status of technological advancement of the firm. First, this included the technological equipment in terms of hardware and software made available to employees, and the extent to which they allowed for efficient and effective communication and coordination.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, LARI had not yet fully equipped all employees with standardized digital tools such as Teams, Microsoft 365, laptops, or mobile phones. As a result, several respondents reported difficulties in managing work from home effectively, often due to inadequate or inconsistent equipment. Additionally, the digitalization of internal processes was still incomplete, which limited the smooth execution of tasks in a remote environment. The transition to hybrid work had only just begun: departments like customer service had started with limited remote work, typically one day per week, but any expansion was dependent on reaching sufficient technological and procedural readiness.

4.1.2.4 | Current and Prospective Workforce. LARI's labor force consists of about 230 employees, mostly employed full time, 32% of whom are females. The majority of employees and middle managers are between 30 and 50 years old, while the majority of top managers are older than 50. The relatively old age of employees and managers was initially considered challenging, mainly due to the need to establish new digital habits. Although they did not feel troubled by change, managers acknowledged that they had to go through an intense learning phase to acquire new skills and technological tools. Closing the digital skills gap has not been easy for everyone, especially older employees. As reported by a middle manager:

Implementing these tools was neither simple nor automatic. The transition was, and still is, challenging, especially when we have to reorganize a complex archive and redesign routines. The main difficulty is not the technology itself, but the different levels of digital familiarity across the workforce: colleagues with longer tenure, including some senior roles, often need more time and support to adopt the new applications. We are also learning to use additional tools that could further improve our efficiency

(Sustainability and CSR Manager)

Due to its peripheral location, distant from major urban centers, LARI has historically faced limited access to the broader labor market, particularly for specialized professional profiles crucial to its strategic evolution. While in the past most employees were sourced locally, the company's ambition to foster innovation and enhance organizational agility necessitated attracting talent from a wider geographic area. In this context, the adoption of hybrid work arrangements emerged as a strategic lever to broaden the recruitment pool and appeal to high-skilled candidates beyond the immediate region.

Moreover, the evolving expectations of the younger workforce have significantly reshaped the recruitment landscape. Hybrid work is now seen by many early-career professionals not as a perk, but as a baseline requirement for achieving work-life balance. As one senior executive noted:

We have never had particular difficulty finding people interested in working with us, because we have a good employer reputation in the market (...), however, in recent years we witnessed a change in younger generations' mentality, and, probably, if we had not offered the possibility of hybrid work, many of them would not have accepted the job

(Marketing Director)

This shift in preference highlights the evolving expectations of the modern workforce and the importance for LARI of adapting its work policies to fit with the external conditions.

4.1.2.5 | Legal Norms. Concerning the legal frameworks, in Italy, Law No. 81/2017 establishes the basic rules for remote work, allowing employees to work outside the traditional office environment. This law outlines the essential elements to be included in an individual agreement between employer and employee if both parties choose this work model. Once signed, the agreement must be sent electronically to the Ministry of Labor within 5 days of starting remote work. The mandatory elements in the agreement cover: the conditions for off-site work; rest periods and disconnection measures; necessary equipment and safety protocols; non-discrimination in career advancement and pay; protection against workplace injuries and occupational diseases; and the duration, which may be fixed-term or indefinite. These provisions ensure that hybrid work meets standards of equity, safety, and clear organization, while also supporting flexible management for companies and employees.

4.2 | Vertical and Horizontal Alignment of the Hybrid Work HR Strategy

By mapping the vertical alignment (from context to strategy) and horizontal alignment (within the AMO bundles), as illustrated in Table 4, in this section we show how the hybrid work model is not implemented through isolated initiatives, but through an integrated configuration of HR practices that reinforce each other in supporting the overall strategic goals.

4.2.1 | Aligning Stakeholder Interests on Hybrid Work

The initial contextual setting at LARI was characterized by different stakeholders' perspectives, those of employees, customers, and ownership, each bringing distinct yet interrelated priorities. Employees, particularly from younger generations, expressed a clear preference for greater flexibility and a healthier work-life balance. As one employee noted, "No, I no longer want to live this life of being away from home for 5 days." Simultaneously, customers increasingly expected LARI to embody principles of environmental, social, and economic

sustainability. From this perspective, the adoption of hybrid work practices was not only compatible with but instrumental to the company's identity as an innovative and socially responsible image. Ownership, in turn, recognized the importance of enhancing employer branding and prioritizing employee well-being, yet remained cautious about potential downsides, particularly the risk of declining productivity and weakened interpersonal connections across the organization.

To support the organizational change the HR Director recognized the need to reconcile this complex set of stakeholder interests. The HR Director actively promoted the *formation of a strategic coalition* to motivate and coordinate the transition toward hybrid work. The process began with initial discussions among select members of the leadership team, directors from each department who had already embraced hybrid practices informally within their own units. Their positive experiences with flexible working arrangements provided a valuable basis for their advocacy.

The coalition was subsequently expanded to include leaders from departments struggling with talent attraction, highlighting hybrid work as a strategic solution to competitive labor market challenges. Through a deliberate and patient approach, skeptical executives were gradually persuaded during the initial stages of implementation, once empirical evidence of positive outcomes emerged. Digital tools simplified communication and enabled leaders to connect with team members across locations with the immediacy of in-person interaction and shared calendars improved transparency around availability and mitigated concerns about accessibility in distributed teams. As the HR Director explained:

To overcome resistance to change, we adopted a patient approach, demonstrating by example that work can also be done effectively in hybrid mode. We tried to show the tangible benefits of hybrid work, gradually encouraging a change of mentality.

This strategic use of internal examples and practical evidence played a critical role in shifting managerial mindsets, aligning stakeholder expectations, and legitimizing hybrid work as a viable model for achieving organizational goals.

Once internal alignment was achieved, LARI focused on *creating collaborative spaces*, both physical and digital, to operationalize the hybrid model and account for initial worries related to diminished relational ties. The HR department has invested in workspace reconfiguration, recognizing the strategic importance of physical environments in fostering meaningful in-person interactions. To this end, a collaborative design workshop was organized, involving employees directly in the redesign of office spaces. The workshop focused on evaluating key elements such as desk configurations, coworking areas, and the integration of natural elements to enhance well-being and usability. As the Food Regulatory Affairs Manager observed:

Physical spaces are assuming a different role. There are fewer fixed desks and more flexible design of workstations and conference rooms. Even if I have my

own workstation, when I am not there, it can be occupied by others. This organization responds to the growing need for shared space and larger meeting rooms across functions.

This participatory approach to space design marked a shift in how the organization conceptualizes the workplace, not as a static environment, but as a dynamic hub for collaboration, social connection, and cross-functional engagement. Once internal alignment on the hybrid model had been established, LARI prioritized the creation of both physical and digital collaborative spaces to fully operationalize the new way of working. These environments were intentionally designed to support employees' need for autonomy and flexibility, while also responding to the ownership's emphasis on maintaining a cohesive and collaborative organizational culture. By enabling spontaneous interactions, shared decision-making, and the continuation of team rituals, these redesigned spaces became critical infrastructure for sustaining relational dynamics in a hybrid setting, reinforcing the organization's commitment to adaptability, inclusion, and employee well-being.

As the transformation progressed, attention shifted toward reinforcing the organization's capabilities. The transition to a hybrid workplace was further facilitated by a hiring practice that prioritized the *recruitment of hybrid workers*, talents familiar with new ways of working. Informed by both the analysis of external stakeholder interests and evolving labor market trends, the HR Director and line managers gave preference to candidates who demonstrated openness to change and prior experience in hybrid environments. As stated by the Sustainability and CSR Manager:

In the selection process, we aim to identify candidates who are already oriented towards hybrid work, preferring those with an open mindset towards change. This approach has helped establish a more flexible and innovative work culture. Despite resistance from some more traditional managers, the open attitude and readiness for change among new hires have facilitated the adoption of this new working modality.

This recruitment strategy not only strengthened internal alignment with the hybrid model but also alleviated leadership concerns regarding productivity and cohesion, reinforcing a workplace culture grounded in adaptability and forward-thinking values.

After addressing these aspects related to recruiting hybrid workers and creating collaborative spaces, in July 2022 a *Hybrid Work Policy* was released. The formalization of the policy was accompanied by seminar sessions for both managers and employees to illustrate the changes in terms of job flexibility and to highlight the new types of behaviors and leadership styles necessary to effectively operate in the hybrid workplace. The policy was designed to be an inclusive and flexible guideline that considers the needs of various departments and specific constraints. It regulates the short working week and the hybrid work that combines 60% in-office presence and 40% remote

work. The 60:40 ratio emerged naturally based on the needs and habits of departments and employees, as well as observing similar practices in other companies. Employees are expected to operate in this new way of working while maintaining the ability to conduct periodic evaluations, for instance, every 6 months, to assess the use of the model across departments and make necessary adjustments. Employees are free to choose their location when they work remotely as long as some criteria are met, namely having a safe and comfortable workstation, a high-speed Internet connection, and a quiet space for sensitive communications.

4.2.2 | Aligning Fundamental Values to Hybrid Work

Following the alignment of stakeholder interests, there was a need for ensuring that this new way of working remained fully aligned with the company's core strategic values. The hybrid transition was understood as a critical opportunity to reaffirm and extend the organization's long-standing commitments to valuable relationships, innovation, and environmental and societal sustainability. However, maintaining these values within a hybrid work model required a deliberate and structured approach across three key dimensions, developing capabilities, strengthening motivation, and leveraging new opportunities, to embed strategic alignment at all levels of the organization.

To strengthen the value of relationships and collaboration in hybrid work, LARI focused on equipping employees with *digital collaboration skills* essential for sustaining internal cohesion and effective teamwork. Importantly, the HR Director deliberately framed these initiatives not as technical instructions but as strategic learning opportunities, emphasizing how digital technologies could enhance employees' ability to coordinate joint projects and collaborate across functions.

To reinforce shared purpose and behavioral coherence in a dispersed setting, LARI introduced a performance management framework based on *Objectives and Key Results*. Implemented in 2023 by the HR department, this framework represented a shift from a top-down model to a participative, goal-oriented approach suited to hybrid work dynamics. Importantly, this system was not confined to a single function but was developed through an interfunctional logic that grouped employees into three cross-departmental "missions", client (Sales, Marketing, R&D), product (Production, Logistics, Purchasing, Quality), and enablers (HR, Finance, Accounting, IT). Each mission designated a leader responsible for representing the team during monthly and quarterly reviews. Strategic objectives were formulated collaboratively within these missions and linked to specific, measurable key results used to assess progress. This structure helped ensure alignment between individual tasks and collective goals, maintaining a cohesive direction even when teams met remotely only twice per month. The clarity and visibility offered by Objective and Key Results were particularly valuable where physical proximity and spontaneous communication were limited. Through this system, LARI fostered a culture of accountability, adaptability, and continuous improvement. As emphasized by the Sustainability and CSR Manager:

Management is encouraging a cultural change, promoting autonomy and emphasizing that the important thing is to achieve goals regardless of where you work.

This approach not only promoted collaboration across functions but also reinforced innovation and strategic alignment, two key pillars of LARI's business model.

Recognizing that collaboration and cohesion are no longer bound to physical spaces, LARI actively embraced a *reconceptualization of workplace connection*, one in which digital tools play a central role in fostering meaningful relational ties. Rather than treating technology as a mere operational enabler, the organization deliberately cultivated an organizational mindset that views digital communication as social infrastructure, a foundation for culture, inclusion, and innovation within a hybrid environment.

The adoption of platforms such as Microsoft Teams became pivotal in supporting this shift. The platform was strategically positioned as the primary channel for company-wide communication and coordination, replacing fragmented practices such as the use of personal messaging apps. As one employee noted:

With the introduction of Teams as the main platform, company communications have moved there, abandoning the use of WhatsApp for work-related matters. This change has significantly improved communication efficiency within the company, also facilitating the management of phone contacts without having to go through the switchboard for every call.

Beyond communication efficiency, shared calendars and meeting functionalities facilitated a smoother coordination of work routines and interactions, particularly in hybrid settings where asynchronous planning is essential. The Marketing Director highlighted how these features streamlined internal collaboration:

Since I am a very organized person, my calendar is always super updated. [...] I open the calendar, see when you're available, and schedule the meeting. [...] It's much simpler to use even for communication, avoiding making 100 phone calls to someone who may not answer.

This systematization of visibility and accessibility, who is working, when, and on what, proved vital in enabling trust, autonomy, and accountability. It also enhanced the sense of connection among dispersed teams, as another employee reflected:

The adoption of systems like Teams, which make you feel a bit more connected to everyone and give you visibility on everyone's work presence, has helped make the transition from five days in the office to three and two smoother.

Moreover, the use of virtual meetings dramatically reduced coordination costs while enhancing managerial oversight. As the Marketing Manager explained:

Meetings that used to take literally a day, if not two days, now take 1 hour—maximum 1 hour and a half—organising them via call. The hybrid model helped reduce unnecessary occupation of our people, and I can follow them much better.

LARI's experience illustrates how intentional use of digital platforms can transcend spatial boundaries and reinforce a cohesive, responsive, and relationship-rich work culture. By embedding digital tools into daily practices, the company has not only maintained but enhanced connectivity and efficiency within its hybrid operational model.

The strategic alignment enabled by digital collaboration skills, outcome-driven performance systems, and digitally supported relational dynamics laid the groundwork for a more profound cultural shift within LARI.

4.2.3 | Promoting a New Managerial Mindset Toward Autonomy and Accountability

As the hybrid model became embedded, it became evident that sustaining this transformation required more than technical or structural adaptation, it necessitated a rethinking of management philosophy. Traditional models based on direct supervision and physical presence were no longer tenable. In their place, LARI began promoting a new managerial mindset anchored in trust, autonomy, and distributed responsibility. This cultural evolution unfolded across three interrelated levels: developing leadership capability, creating opportunities for middle management mentoring, and reinforcing behavioral alignment through feedback and recognition mechanisms.

To enable this shift from control to trust, LARI invested in *empowering leadership development programs*. In particular, the HR Director promoted and designed a comprehensive training program titled "*The Leadership Journey*", launched in 2022 and still ongoing. The program was created to cultivate a mindset shift away from micromanagement and to reinforce core leadership competencies such as trust-building, delegation, empowerment, and relationship-building with collaborators.

The initiative unfolded in multiple phases:

- In 2022, the focus was on *strategic enablement*, engaging the leadership team in the dissemination and implementation of a shared organizational strategy through actionable plans. The program also emphasized team cohesion, encouraging leaders to build deeper interpersonal connections and empowering them with the skills required to take ownership of strategic tasks, collaborate effectively with peers, and steer the organization through change.

- In 2023, the program evolved to include the design and rollout of a governance system for setting, activating, and monitoring quarterly Objectives and Key Results across cross-functional business missions. This step was pivotal for embedding a goal-oriented culture and aligning leadership behavior with the company's strategic ambitions.
- In 2024, efforts were consolidated, with a particular focus on scaling empowerment practices and expanding strategic capabilities throughout the organization. The training supported structural evolution, governance refinement, and skills development, preparing LARI to face emerging challenges with agility.

The program stimulated deep reflection among the leadership team about their roles and their relationships with team members. As the Marketing Director described:

For us to take part in the leadership journey was important, not only did we become more familiar with the issue of trust but also of empowerment, helping us to get rid of micromanagement, starting to trust our collaborators and then making them feel that the leader is there and can give you a safe environment. We progressively gave them responsibilities and areas of autonomy, organizing periodical checks with them to see if the results are coming in or if it could have been done with better, more powerful results.

By reframing leadership as a trust-based, outcome-oriented practice, LARI equipped its management to lead effectively in a hybrid work model, ensuring alignment with broader organizational values and enhancing team engagement.

Recognizing the pivotal role of middle managers in operationalizing hybrid work, LARI launched a series of targeted initiatives aimed at supporting their evolution from supervisory roles to more strategic, facilitative, and adaptive leadership positions. As key enablers of team dynamics, middle managers were positioned to bridge strategic direction and day-to-day implementation, particularly in a hybrid setting where coordination, autonomy, and communication must be carefully balanced.

In response, the HR department introduced a dedicated *middle management mentoring program* in 2024, tailored to the specific challenges and developmental needs of this managerial tier. The program addressed core competencies such as self-management, decision-making, relational leadership, and adaptability, while also promoting a broader cultural shift toward innovation and creative problem-solving. This initiative built on earlier interventions implemented in 2023, including collaborative workshops and team-building activities delivered in select functional areas. These activities were designed to strengthen internal communication, encourage peer learning, and create safe spaces for experiential exchange.

As one senior accountant observed:

Time management and meeting planning have undergone significant improvements, thanks also to the

support of our HR director, who introduced team-building practices and coaching to adapt to changes in the way we work together, both in person and remotely. This has led to greater efficiency and reduced downtime, demonstrating that it is possible to maintain productivity and team cohesion even in a hybrid work environment.

Beyond skill-building, these initiatives served a broader strategic function: they helped embed the new leadership philosophy introduced at the top of the organization into middle management practice. Mentoring became a crucial mechanism through which new values, centered on trust, empowerment, collaboration, and outcome orientation, were reinforced and consistently applied across units.

By establishing informal channels of support, including peer coaching and experiential mentoring, LARI not only facilitated individual growth but also cultivated a more cohesive and aligned managerial culture. This alignment was crucial to sustaining the organizational shift toward human-centered, results-driven hybrid work, and ensuring that leadership behaviors were coherent at every level of the hierarchy.

To ensure that the leadership transformation translated into daily behaviors, LARI introduced *structured feedback* mechanisms into its leadership training journey. Participants received feedback on how their behaviors aligned with the principles of autonomy, trust, and accountability. In several cases, leaders reported greater awareness of their shift away from control-based management and toward more empowering styles, demonstrating tangible behavioral change. For instance, feedback sessions facilitated reflection on how leadership behaviors were perceived by team members and helped reinforce positive change. Leaders who embraced these new approaches began to receive both informal and formal recognition from their teams for fostering autonomy and shared responsibility.

Through these combined efforts, LARI's management approach evolved from one rooted in oversight to a model that champions trust, clarity of purpose, and adaptive support, core principles for leading in a hybrid world. This evolution not only supported employee engagement and performance but also reflected and amplified the organization's broader strategic values, reinforcing the overall coherence of LARI's hybrid transformation journey.

4.2.4 | Leveraging Technological Tools

The shift in management approach at LARI, from a model of direct supervision to one based on trust, empowerment, and distributed leadership, required robust technological infrastructure to support new behaviors and distributed work practices. As leaders began to embrace hybrid-friendly mindsets and mentor their teams toward autonomy, it became increasingly evident that such a transformation could only be sustained through the strategic adoption of digital tools and platforms.

Technology was thus positioned as a foundational enabler of the hybrid model, reinforcing the changes in managerial logic and

allowing employees and leaders to collaborate effectively across locations and time zones.

As part of its broader transformation toward hybrid work, LARI prioritized the digitalization of core work processes and invested heavily in creating a technology infrastructure capable of sustaining new modes of collaboration. The objective was clear: to build a technical environment that would enable seamless interaction among geographically dispersed employees, support both synchronous and asynchronous workflows, and foster effective communication and coordination across teams.

Beginning in early 2022, the organization embarked on a comprehensive upgrade of its digital infrastructure, with a particular focus on *equipping employees with enabling technologies*. This effort included the migration to cloud computing and the full integration of the Microsoft 365 ecosystem, which provided a centralized and secure platform for communication, document co-authoring, project management, and mobile work. Tools such as Microsoft Teams, shared cloud repositories, and real-time dashboards became core components of everyday operations.

At the same time, meeting room technology was modernized to enhance hybrid collaboration, ensuring that both in-person and remote participants could engage equally in discussions and decision-making processes. To facilitate remote work, all employees were provided with company-issued laptops, and additional equipment such as headsets and webcams was made available upon request. Access to Microsoft 365 Business Premium accounts further extended the organization's digital reach, allowing staff to work efficiently from virtually any location using a comprehensive suite of productivity applications.

These initiatives were particularly impactful for employees who had previously faced limitations due to fragmented or outdated systems. As described by the Sustainability and CSR Manager:

The Teams platform has been essential for enabling remote work, replacing the use of multiple apps and decentralized document management. Previously, departments like sales relied on individual solutions. Now, with Teams and Office 365, communication and document management are centralized, and all office staff have standardized mobile phones and PCs, improving internal communication.

In addition to enhancing operational efficiency, these technological upgrades addressed concerns expressed by the ownership and senior managers regarding accessibility, responsiveness, and visibility, key factors for sustaining productivity and oversight in a hybrid environment. By embedding collaborative tools into daily workflows, LARI effectively created a digital backbone that supports not only strategic execution but also relational connectivity, ensuring that employees remain aligned and engaged regardless of physical location.

To maximize the potential of these digital tools, LARI complemented its infrastructure investments with *technical tools training programs* aimed at developing technical fluency across

the workforce. These initiatives were integrated into the broader effort to build digital collaboration skills and align with the company's strategic values and leadership development objectives.

Training focused not only on basic tool usage but also on advanced functionalities that directly support remote teamwork, such as co-authoring, screen sharing, virtual whiteboarding, and digital project tracking. These sessions reinforced a shared understanding of best practices in hybrid collaboration and helped reduce barriers for employees who were initially less comfortable with technology. By improving both confidence and competence, the training enhanced organizational agility and strengthened the overall adoption of hybrid work. Each department was also asked to designate a key user, who received advanced training (*Training of key users*) and served as an internal facilitator, supporting colleagues and addressing everyday challenges related to technology adoption. As described by the Marketing Manager:

For each area there were facilitators who were available to colleagues to help them with all the questions to solve the problems of the day by day that they had encountered, ...so they had been trained in more depth and those were then the contacts for each area, helping especially those who were a bit more reluctant to approach to the new tool.

The implementation of digital collaboration tools was supported by *feedback loops on remote/hybrid meetings*, which played a key role in embedding continuous improvement into hybrid routines. Employees were invited to share reflections on their experience with virtual collaboration, including the effectiveness of hybrid meetings, communication norms, and coordination practices. For example, the HRM manager, engaged in remote project coordination, participated in regular online meetings where collective feedback was used to refine virtual facilitation techniques. These discussions helped the organization develop shared standards for hybrid interaction, clarifying expectations, improving time management, and elevating the quality of engagement. As a result, digital tools were no longer perceived as passive utilities but as active drivers of behavioral alignment and team cohesion.

This feedback-oriented approach echoed the leadership development philosophy described previously, reinforcing a culture of trust, adaptability, and learning-by-doing. Employees and managers alike were encouraged to treat hybrid collaboration as an evolving practice, one that could be continually optimized through reflection and shared ownership.

4.2.5 | Acquiring and Developing Hybrid Workforce

The successful adoption of digital technologies at LARI, alongside leadership development, performance management reforms, and digital collaboration practices, brought to light a further organizational challenge: the need to realign workforce characteristics to meet the demands of hybrid work. While infrastructure and tools were in place, and leadership was

evolving to foster trust and autonomy, gaps in workforce readiness, particularly in terms of age distribution and digital fluency, emerged as critical areas for strategic action.

LARI's workforce was composed in large part of experienced employees, many of whom had limited exposure to digital tools or hybrid working methods. To ensure that hybrid work could be effectively institutionalized across all organizational levels, the company adopted a dual strategy: *developing internal capabilities* while simultaneously *attracting new hybrid-ready talent*.

To ensure a smooth transition to hybrid work, LARI recognized that technological infrastructure alone was insufficient without the parallel development of digital competencies across the workforce. As such, the company undertook a comprehensive and inclusive training strategy aimed at addressing disparities in digital fluency, particularly among segments of the workforce less accustomed to remote collaboration tools.

A cornerstone of this effort was the launch of the training program "*Communication and Collaboration in a Modern Workplace*" (*Training on communication and collaboration skills*) which aimed to equip employees with both the technical and interpersonal skills needed to operate effectively in hybrid environments. Importantly, the HR department positioned these sessions not as technical tutorials, but as strategic learning opportunities, highlighting how digital technologies could enhance teamwork, coordination, and project execution. Despite these challenges, the combined efforts of technology roll-out, structured training, peer support, and targeted recruitment ultimately enabled LARI to cultivate a digitally capable workforce. This transition, while occasionally marked by resistance and adjustment struggles, underscored the company's broader commitment to inclusion, adaptability, and organizational learning, even in the face of discomfort and disruption.

To ensure that workforce development efforts remained aligned with strategic goals, LARI began exploring the use of *key talent indicators*. These were designed to assess employees' hybrid readiness, adaptability, and collaborative competencies, behaviors increasingly seen as vital for success in a distributed environment. While this initiative was in its early stages, the logic was consistent with LARI's broader shift toward performance systems based on outcomes, behavior, and value alignment rather than presence or hierarchy. By embedding these indicators into existing HR processes such as performance reviews and development planning, the organization aimed to reward learning agility and cultural fit, particularly in the context of hybrid collaboration. This metric-driven approach further supported motivation, offering employees a clear roadmap for growth in a transformed work context.

One of the most profound cultural shifts associated with LARI's workforce transformation was *redefining career opportunities* by decoupling career progression from physical presence. Traditionally, visibility in the office, manifested through extended hours or constant physical availability, was often conflated with commitment and leadership potential. This practice inadvertently favored those without caregiving responsibilities or personal constraints, creating unintentional barriers to internal mobility and advancement.

With the introduction of the hybrid work model, LARI took deliberate steps to challenge and dismantle this outdated assumption. The organization restructured its career development pathways to recognize and reward contributions based on outcomes and value creation, irrespective of where the work was performed. As the HR Director explained:

With hybrid work, we've redefined what leadership potential looks like. It's no longer about who stays latest at the office, but about the value you bring—wherever you are. This shift has opened up real opportunities for people who were previously held back by physical constraints, and it's helped us promote a culture where performance, not presence, drives career growth.

By redefining success around performance rather than physical proximity, LARI significantly broadened access to leadership roles and professional advancement, particularly for employees whose life circumstances had previously limited their visibility in the workplace. This dynamic is exemplified by the career trajectory of the current Head of Marketing: she was able to take on an expanded strategic leadership role, in LARI, while working within a hybrid arrangement that did not require continuous on-site presence. This was particularly important given that she was joining LARI residing in another Italian region, a circumstance that would have made such a role more difficult to sustain under a traditional office-based model. In her case, the new HR practices made it possible to sustain a high-responsibility, client-facing position in ways that would have been far more difficult under the earlier, office-centric model.

4.2.6 | Mutual Reinforcement of the HR Practices to Implement the Hybrid Work HR Strategy

The longitudinal analysis of the redesign of the HR systems that LARI implemented to introduce the hybrid work environment allowed us to classify the HR practices according to the three bundles of the AMO framework (ability-motivation-and opportunity-enhancing HR practices) (Table 4).

If we consider the three dimensions across the overall hybrid work HR strategy, it emerges that, each bundle contributed to face the different challenges posed by hybrid work in terms of changes in labor market conditions and stakeholders' expectations, as well as the re-conceptualization of the spatial, temporal, and technological dimensions of work.

Concerning the *ability-enhancing practices*, LARI has acquired, through training, role modeling and the support of key users, the behaviors and skills necessary to increase the familiarity with the digital tools, to activate collaboration through digital technologies, to enhance the value of relationships in a partial remote setting, and to nurture managerial skills based on trust and delegation rather than control.

Concerning the *motivation-enhancing practices*, LARI reinforced commitment to hybrid work by forming a strategic coalition of early adopters and using early results to reassure skeptical top

managers about productivity. It also strengthened buy-in by aligning customer expectations and leveraging the sustainability, well-being, and employer-branding benefits of the model. Motivation was further supported through OKRs that aligned behaviors to shared goals, structured feedback loops to foster accountability and trust-based leadership (especially in remote/hybrid meetings), and key talent indicators to recognize and sustain hybrid-relevant behaviors over time.

Finally, *opportunity-enhancing practices* provided employees with the necessary support to express themselves and perform in a hybrid work environment. The findings show that this bundle of practices aimed to offer formal guidelines for implementing hybrid work and decoupling career progression from physical presence. The practices also aimed to create physical and digital collaborative spaces, fully operationalizing the new way of working. This balanced employees' expectations for autonomy and flexibility while maintaining a cohesive organizational culture. Furthermore, the technological infrastructure was considered not merely an operational enabler, but also a means to cultivate an organizational mindset that views digital communication as social infrastructure, a driver of culture, inclusion and innovation for the hybrid workforce. Furthermore, the empowerment of middle managers as key enablers of hybrid work was aimed to promote an effective balance of coordination, autonomy, and communication.

From the analysis, synergistic effects among the three AMO dimensions emerged to support the five HR strategic goals pursued by LARI. For instance, considering the first strategic intent of *aligning stakeholder interests on hybrid work*, LARI invested contextually on the recruitment of hybrid-ready workers (*ability*) and the formation of a strategic coalition (*motivation*). The contribution of the newly hired not only strengthened human capital skills, but also helped mitigate resistance to change by persuading initially skeptical managers and consolidating support for the hybrid work initiative. This led to the formalization of the hybrid work policy (*opportunity*) that further improved the company attraction of new hybrid-ready workers. Similarly, in order to pursue the strategic intent of *leveraging technological tools*, the development of the digital infrastructure (*opportunity*) could not be fully exploited in the absence of dedicated training that fostered not only the digital skills of employees but also the awareness of how these tools might improve collaboration and communication (*ability*). Moreover, the continuous feedback on the use of the new technologies provided by the HR director and among employees (*motivation*) reinforced the initial training on these technological tools.

These findings support the view that AMO bundles operate as an interdependent system rather than as discrete bricks because the three dimensions are designed in a way that they mutually influence each other to implement a specific element of the LARI's hybrid work HR strategy. In the context of implementing hybrid working, the results highlight the specific nature of bundles of HR practices, which require all three AMO dimensions to effectively pursue strategic goals, shaped considering the salient contingency factors emerged by this new way of working.

4.3 | Outcomes

Strategic HRM research has long explored the link between bundles of HR practices and organizational outcomes, typically distinguishing among HR outcomes (such as employee skills and motivation), operational outcomes (e.g., productivity, quality, service, safety, innovation), and financial results (Jiang et al. 2012). Both the Harvard and AMO frameworks suggest that HR practices primarily influence HR outcomes, which then serve as mediators in driving broader organizational performance.

At LARI, over the 4-year implementation of the hybrid work model, the above discussed HR strategy that the analysis has traced back to the AMO-enhancing practices, contributed to the achievement of positive outcomes. In line with Beer et al. (1985), we differentiate these into immediate HR outcomes and longer-term organizational consequences.

As regards the HR outcomes, the systems of the three bundles of HR practices improved: employees' competence and commitment to organizational goals, as well as leadership behaviors that promoted the growth and the autonomy of collaborators.

The new way of working enhanced employees' competence through the attraction and retention of competent staff. Indeed, by adopting HR hybrid working practices, and specifically revising the Key Talent Indicators and favoring candidates with prior experience of hybrid work, the company widened its talent pool, allowing it to attract and retain employees who live further away, as illustrated by this quote:

Our headquarters are located in a town, which is not easily accessible for all employees. In the past, most of the employees lived nearby the company, but now the situation has changed, and about half of the staff, if not more, live at considerable distances, up to 100–120 km per day. Therefore, hybrid work helps to make the company more attractive

(Senior accountant)

The increased company attraction is confirmed by the increased number of people recruited outside the company's local geographical area (from 33% in 2021 to 38% in 2024 on the total number of new hires). The company also has monitored its retention capacity after the introduction of the hybrid work policy, with the intent also to understand its ability to retain distant recruits. In a survey administered in 2025, employees were asked to express their intention to stay and new hires with a seniority of less than 4 years declared at 100% the intention to stay in the company. Employees' competence was also enhanced through the continuous training activity that favored the acquisition of those digital and self-management skills competencies necessary in a hybrid workplace.

Moreover, HR practices improved the level of employees' commitment to organizational goals through the Objective and Key Results approach that involved people in defining the desired end state of the organization as well as the incremental milestones that, at the team, people use to measure progress

toward the ambitious objectives. The company also administered in 2024 a survey to gather information about the perceived clarity of the strategic goals by employees and their level of commitment to pursue them. The data collected revealed a high score (8.5 out of 10) on both indicators across different functional units.

Finally, the HR practices promoted congruence favoring the leadership style and the collaboration required in a hybrid work environment. Indeed, by setting clear shared objectives through the Objective and Key Results approach and improving employees' autonomy through continuous training and enabling technologies, HR practices fostered accountability among team members. This resulted in a more motivated workforce that was capable of achieving individual goals independently while still contributing effectively to the collective objectives of the organization, as illustrated by the following quotes:

The days designated for remote working, compared to those spent in the office, are an important element in ensuring the proper functioning and the trust that is built between the supervisor and the employee, and among the employees themselves. They are tasked with working towards objectives, taking responsibility for their work regardless of where it is carried out. Regarding mutual trust, even though we do not see each other, and I cannot monitor you in person, I know that you are performing your job well. I have always tried to empower the people I work with as much as possible, sometimes even confronting them with their mistakes. I strive to let everyone stand on their own two feet, each with their own skills and competencies

(CSR and sustainability manager)

The hybrid model helps us because either via chat or via a call, we always manage to get on the same wavelength very quickly and make decisions very quickly.....I make them participate since they do not come to the meeting.What I have always told them in the end is that you owe it to me, that is, you must contact me not to show me something if you have uncertainties about what you are going to do. If you are sure it is already the right thing.

(Marketing manager)

The findings also provided preliminary evidence of what the Harvard model defines as "long-term consequences" that we distinguished in accordance with the literature (Beer et al. 1985) among individuals' well-being, organizational effectiveness, and societal impact.

By reducing commute times and allowing for personal activities, such a work model provides employees with more control over their daily schedules, leading to reduced stress and a better integration of work with personal life aimed at improving employee well-being:

Flexible hours and remote work have become essential, enhancing work-life balance. For me, hybrid work improves quality of life, allowing time for personal activities like sports. It has transformed my relationship with work, giving me more personal time and reducing frustration. Sticking to a regular schedule, even when working from home, enriches my routine and greatly reduces commute stress, providing a more relaxed start to the day and benefiting both my professional and personal life

(Accountant Supervisor)

The bundles of HR practices also influenced organizational effectiveness in the organization of work, as exemplified by the following quote:

I prefer to do one or two days of remote work a week, not so much because of the distance (even though I now live about 45–50 minutes from the office), but because I find that, on particularly busy days of meetings, coming to the office is a waste of time. Moreover, at home, I can focus better, especially when I have tasks that require great attention, like preparing the balance sheet. In the office, with chats, breaks, and phone calls, you can easily lose concentration. So, for me, hybrid work is a matter of work efficiency

(Employee)

Moreover, the adoption of one communication platform has been particularly beneficial in streamlining workflows and coordination, fostering a more cohesive organizational environment, as illustrated by the following quotes:

With the introduction of Teams as the main platform, company communications have moved there, abandoning the use of WhatsApp for work-related matters. This change has significantly improved communication efficiency within the company, also facilitating the management of phone contacts without having to go through the switchboard for every call

(Employee)

Since I am a very organized person, my calendar is always super updated. So, I'm not saying I'm obsessed with Teams, but the fact that there's a shared calendar with everyone is important to me. When I have to organize a meeting, I don't call 100 times to bother someone; I open the calendar, see when you're available, and schedule the meeting. Then, if you reject it, it's fine, it means you're not available. I would say it's much simpler to use even for communication, avoiding making 100 phone calls to someone who may not answer

(Marketing director)

The adoption of systems like Teams, which make you feel a bit more connected to everyone and give you visibility on everyone's work presence, has helped make the transition from five days in the office to three and two smoother

(Employee)

Meetings that used to literally take a day, if not two days, now take 1 hour maximum 1 hour and a half now organising them via call. It (the hybrid work model) went to break down the occupation of our people and I can follow them much better.

(Marketing manager)

The empirical study also unraveled the relationship between the hybrid work practices and their effect on society. One of the key goals of the company, which is reflected in its core values, is to reduce the organization's environmental impact. The introduction of the hybrid work model has minimized energy consumption and supports broader sustainability efforts. Adapting office spaces to the new working mode promotes energy saving and environmental sustainability, reflecting the company's commitment to reducing its carbon footprint, as highlighted by a senior accountant:

We aim to concentrate office presence on specific days, partly for energy-saving reasons

(Accountant supervisor)

Furthermore, the integration of hybrid working has been particularly effective in addressing social needs like maternity, paternity, and caring for family members. By allowing employees to work flexibly from home or remotely, hybrid work supports a more adaptable approach to balancing professional responsibilities with personal circumstances. This flexibility can significantly reduce stress for employees dealing with life's pivotal moments, ensuring they do not have to choose between career and family. Therefore, hybrid work models foster a more

inclusive and supportive workplace environment, benefiting both employee well-being and the community:

Hybrid work aims also to respond to the personal needs of employees, such as maternity, paternity, or the need to care for family members

(HR Director)

5 | Discussion

The debate on hybrid work models has grown rapidly in recent years across both academic and practitioner communities (Lauring and Jonasson 2025). This research offers a contribution applying a SHRM perspective to better understand how organizations can strategically manage the shift to hybrid work. Hybrid arrangements introduce distinct challenges, including changes in the labor market, competing stakeholder expectations, fragmented work patterns, shifting autonomy and control dynamics. These conditions heighten the risk of inconsistency across HR practices and potential disengagement if alignment is not carefully managed. While the importance of vertical and horizontal alignment in HRM is well conceptually established but limited empirically explored (Lengnick-Hall et al. 2009; Kehoe 2021), our findings emphasize that in the context of hybrid work, such alignment becomes more complex and critical.

Our study shows that successful integration of hybrid work in organizations requires not just technical enablement but the coordinated design of a hybrid work HR strategy in which HR practices are internally coherent (horizontal alignment via AMO-enhancing bundles) and externally responsive (vertical alignment to stakeholder needs and contextual factors). Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that illustrates how these dual dimensions of alignment can support positive outcomes at individual, operational, and societal levels.

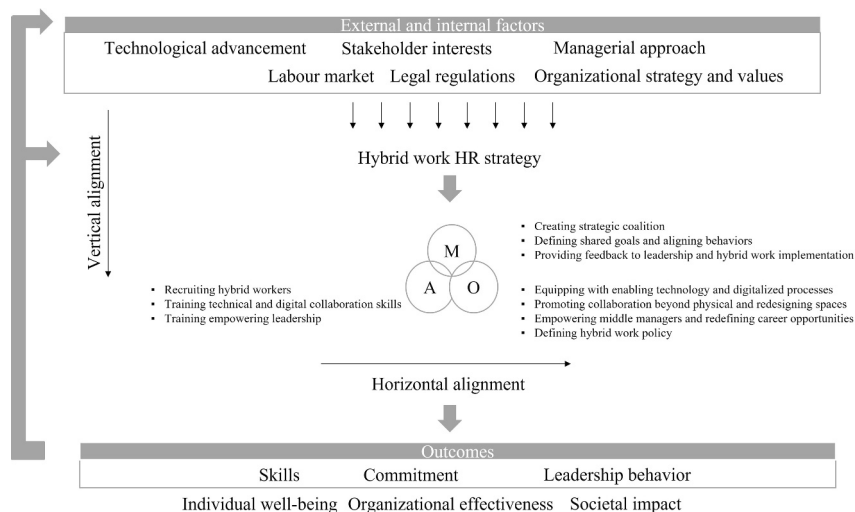


FIGURE 1 | Vertical and horizontal alignment of SHRM practices in a hybrid workplace.

In this section, theoretical and practical implications are presented, pointing out the advancements offered by the research on the current debate on hybrid work models, as well as limitations and recommendations for future research.

5.1 | Theoretical Contributions

Based on the empirical evidence from qualitative data, our study makes several contributions in bridging the SHRM and hybrid work literature.

First, the study has addressed a dimension poorly investigated in the current empirical research on the hybrid work model, which has primarily devoted attention to the individual level of analysis (Lauring and Jonasson 2025), namely the role of organizational support in favoring the implementation of this new way of working. Overall, our findings underline the importance of developing a coherent hybrid work HR strategy that (i) is contextually aligned; (ii) is translated into horizontally aligned HR practices that enhance employees' capabilities to engage with new ways of working (ability), sustain hybrid-consistent behaviors over time (motivation), and provide the organizational support necessary to enact them (opportunity), (iii) address the reconfiguration of the spatial, temporal, and technological dimensions of work.

Second, the study adds to the few studies in SHRM literature that have underlined the need to consider both the vertical and horizontal alignment in designing HR practices (Kehoe 2021; Werbel and DeMarie 2005), with particular attention given to the role of the context in orienting HR strategy, which has been poorly investigated with few insights at the theoretical level (Farndale and Paauwe 2018). Our study provides evidence of hybrid work not as a one-size-fits-all phenomenon, but rather as a contextually-bounded model, and identifies the relevant external and internal conditions that influence its implementation. Prior studies on the contextual influence on HRM identified location as a major influential factor (Brewster and Mayrhofer 2012). While location certainly plays a role in the hybrid work model development, for instance in the predominant managerial approach and more specifically in our case in the labor market access of LARI, other internal and external conditions emerged as relevant. Labor market general conditions, connected with the expectations and interests of various stakeholders, and technological advancements shape the hybrid work model implemented by companies. For example, many businesses may be less familiar with digital tools than smart organizations (Bondarouk and Brewster 2016). This may influence the extent to which HR practices related to technology adoption contribute to the success of hybrid work. Accordingly, this study foregrounds the role of contextual embeddedness and stakeholder plurality in shaping strategies for hybrid work, highlighting that such strategies must account for the complexity of the organizational environment in which hybrid models operate. The decisions about the implementation of each HR practice depend on the analysis of the stakeholders' interests as well as the internal and external factors. Indeed, to be sustainable over time, the research showed that the creation and implementation of a hybrid work environment requires a continuous dialog with stakeholders, which translates

into a process of co-designing of HR practices, which are progressively adjusted based on the adaptability demonstrated by the different parties.

Third, the study shows that a broader hybrid work HR strategy must be broken down into more specific objectives requiring targeted HR interventions for a successful transition to a hybrid work context. In this regard, our research sheds light on the "black box" of HR practices, classified according to the AMO framework, and describes how each bundle of ability, motivation, and opportunity is necessary for responding to a specific strategic endeavor. In light of the limited research on the HR practices necessary for effectively implementing hybrid work models, this study significantly contributes to the literature on SHRM and hybrid work. Indeed, the empirical evidence emphasizes that organizations are asked to consider the synergistic effects of all three bundles when implementing hybrid work. For instance, the provision of technological infrastructure alone, without promoting a behavioral alignment or the development of essential skills, and a feedback approach for continuous improvement, can lead to the failure of strategic initiatives. Prior research analyzing the effectiveness of organizational and team level actions in supporting employees navigating hybrid work arrangements (Teng-Calleja et al. 2024), show that the lack of one specific type of support (technological, informational and emotional support) limits their work experience and related behaviors. Our findings advance this debate by providing further support for designing HR practices using bundles that aim at different yet complementary objectives, and whose configuration needs to be consistent with specific strategic intent.

Moreover, our study contributes to the identification of the most salient HR practices related to the implementation of hybrid work, providing a detailed description of their implementation. Our findings show LARI implemented a mutually reinforcing system of ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing HR practices that address core challenges inherent in hybrid work, particularly those related to stakeholder interests, collaboration, autonomy and control, and technology. Ability-enhancing practices focused on developing digital, relational, and managerial capabilities to enable effective collaboration across physical and virtual settings while shifting leadership approaches from control toward trust and delegation. Motivation-enhancing practices strengthened commitment to hybrid work by building stakeholder alignment, and reinforcing accountability through goal alignment, feedback mechanisms, and recognition systems that supported trust-based coordination. Opportunity-enhancing practices institutionalized hybrid work by creating formal guidelines, decoupling career progression from physical presence, and designing integrated physical and digital spaces that balanced employee autonomy with organizational cohesion. Together, these practices reframed technology not only as an operational tool but as a social infrastructure supporting collaboration. The HR practices identified are based on the specificity of the context analyzed but offer a preliminary classification of the main areas of interventions that HR professionals should consider in designing the transition toward a hybrid work environment.

Finally, this study represents an attempt to integrate a configurational and contingency approach to SHRM, highlighting the

complementarity of the two approaches and the relevance of pursuing both vertical and horizontal alignment when considering the transition toward alternative work arrangements. Indeed, the two models, traditionally considered separately, helped to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the formulation of the hybrid work HR's strategy emerges from a dynamic analysis of stakeholders' interests as well as the environment and company's contextual factors, and how the strategy directs the HR department toward the definition of a systemic and synergistic HRM architecture. This is in line with studies that conceive alignment as dynamic (Snell and Morris 2021) in order to cope with complex environments, such as a hybrid work context which is characterized by the need to reconcile the varying expectations of different stakeholders and by a transformative work experience in which time, space, and collaboration modalities are constantly reconfigured.

5.2 | Practical Implications

This study has addressed the complex nature of HRM implementation of a hybrid workplace, resulting in practical implications for general managers and HR professionals.

First, within the contemporary context of rapid organizational transformation, in line with recent research that calls for a radical reevaluation of traditional HR roles (Cuel et al. 2025), this study highlights the importance of pushing HR professionals to promote more innovative ways of working, and consequently becoming pivotal actors of business decisions. Specifically, the findings emphasize how HR directors and managers may act as change agents in facilitating the transition toward a hybrid work environment. This role encompasses the formulation of a hybrid work HR strategy that is aligned with the business strategy, the stimulation of a new managerial and workforce mindset, and the development of the necessary competencies to operate in a flexible work environment. Furthermore, it involves implementing a change in the employee-organization relationship, favoring the transition from the concept of "work physical presence" to that of "work as achieving results", and the redesign of time, space, and modalities through which collaboration occurs. This shift entails the facilitation of line managers' tasks, with the provision of support and encouragement for the tailoring of the practices to the specific conditions of each unit, while ensuring that the fundamental principles of HR practices remain consistent with the overarching HR strategy.

Moreover, in a hybrid work environment, it becomes even more relevant to consider the various actors involved in the process in order to build a shared understanding of, and commitment toward, the firm's strategic priorities (Elvira and Davila 2005). These insights suggest that HR practitioners should adopt a dynamic approach to the design and implementation of HR systems for hybrid work, tailoring them through a continuous observation of the labor market trends and a constant dialog with internal actors.

Furthermore, with regard to the SHRM system of practices, the case brings interesting implications for managers in terms of the content of the bundles and interactions among practices. When

the top and middle management receive high levels of support from the HR department, in terms of procedures, information and advice, and tools and training, they are able to nurture a trust-based culture that increases their confidence in deploying the HR practices with their team.

5.3 | Limitations and Future Research

While this research yields important insights, it is necessary to be aware of its limitations. The study of a single case over a 4-year period of time offers the advantage of an in-depth description of the phenomenon under investigation, but it might limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts. The boundary conditions identified in this research refer to the specific alternative work arrangement analyzed, namely hybrid work, to the high discretionary and autonomy of the HR department in crafting the strategy and the related HR practices, and to a management mindset initially not inclined toward these flexible work models. Future studies should consider multiple-case research in order to investigate the pursuit of the vertical and horizontal alignment in companies starting from different contextual conditions. We encourage qualitative researchers to extend this research to diverse settings and various national contexts. By doing so, the nuances and potential variations encountered would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the SHRM practices necessary for the implementation of a hybrid work model. Moreover, further advancements are required to investigate the sequence of introduction of the HR practices, their interrelationships over time, and the influence on different categories of outcomes. Specifically, the debate on the outcomes associated with the hybrid work model is at the core of the literature debate. The research offered a classification relying on the distinction between HR outcomes and long-term consequences. However, future studies should advance the definition of the types of outcomes and the related metrics to enable a better understanding of the impact of hybrid work environments in comparison to other work arrangements, which, for instance, contemplate full presence or fully remote work. Finally, the case has offered a preliminary insight into the relationship between HRM practice and performance specifically related to a hybrid work model. Previous quantitative studies have examined the relationship between AMO components and performance, but the findings were contradictory and not specific to flexible work arrangements (Bello-Pintado 2015; Beltrán-Martín and Bou-llusar 2018; Jiang et al. 2012). This requires further advancement in temporal models and methodologies to study the evolution of a hybrid workplace and to address the issue of measuring the impact of HR practices on organizational outcomes at different points in time.

6 | Conclusion

This study examines how hybrid work arrangements can be effectively embedded within organizational practices and systems in the post-COVID-19 context. Specifically, this research illustrates how companies aiming to develop a sustainable hybrid work environment need to integrate the vertical

alignment, addressing the context specificity of the hybrid work HR strategy, with the horizontal alignment, investing on a bundle of HR activities which are mutually reinforcing. It also underscores the transformative role that HR professionals should play in implementing hybrid work environments. We hope this study will open fruitful research avenues that enhance the understanding of the role that SHRM plays in the current evolution of the ways of working.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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