Enhancing Employee Experience in the Era of Hybrid Work: The Case of Microsoft Viva

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Tools in a Hybrid, Post-COVID World

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***Abstract*—*The paper presents insights on using employee experience management (EXM) platforms to foster employee engagement within the hybrid work model, which has gained increasing popularity since the pandemic. The study specifically examines the use of Microsoft Viva in a multinational software organization with an established hybrid work model. Based on the qualitative analysis of 26 semi-structured interviews and relevant documentation, we find that Viva contributes to improving employee experience in several ways: developing connections and identification with the team and organization, providing opportunities for self-reflection and self-management, and promoting well-being and work–life balance.*** ***We have also identified various issues based on the downsides experienced by employees. The paper concludes with actionable insights for managers and organizational leaders.***

As the world begins to gradually return to some form of normality following the unprecedented disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforced remote work, there is a global appetite to retain the flexibility of hybrid work.1 While some employees return to in-person work, others continue to work from home (WFH), resulting in a hybrid work model. ‘Hybrid work’ is a form of workplace transformation characterized by having employees who combine WFH and in-person work. Numerous reports show that employees and organizations prefer hybrid work with variations in the hybrid work model. 2 This highlights the fact that hybrid work is here to stay.

While hybrid work has created new opportunities such as flexibility and autonomy, it has also presented challenges for employees, such as increased working hours, blurring of work–life divide, increased digital fatigue, and lack of social interactions. Among others, these challenges have increased the need to explore new ways of work to enhance the employee experience in a hybrid world to help employees manage their productivity, engagement, and overall well-being.3 Some organizations have tried to overcome these challenges using employee experience management (EXM) platforms. EXM platforms use people analytics by applying predictive modeling on people data to understand employees’ sentiments. Such platforms are also promoted as facilitating personal and professional development and improve employer–employee relationships.4 The question then is how such platforms contribute to these promised outcomes in a hybrid work model.

Previous studies have focused on employee experience platforms as performance-monitoring platforms for managers, rather than as platforms that empower employees with the flexibility of hybrid work. Hence, we seek to understand their role concerning employee engagement and employee well-being in the hybrid workplace. This paper analyzes how employee EXM platforms can effectively improve employee engagement and well-being in hybrid work. We particularly focus on how employees and team leaders can reimagine work in hybrid work. We explore a specific EXM platform, Microsoft Viva, whereby we investigate the impact of this platform on employee engagement in a multinational organization.

# Employee Engagement

Employee engagement can be defined as *“the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles”.*5 This definition indicates that engagement reflects a strong connection and identification with work and the organization.6 Further, employee engagement is perceived to be a motivational construct and represents an employee’s physical, emotional, and cognitive investment in their work.7 As such, it manifests in the level of productivity and performance, and is largely influenced by the working environment.8

Employee engagement in hybrid work is characterized by reliance on technology for communication, collaboration, and interactions irrespective of work location. Hybrid work challenges the conventional understanding of employee engagement.9 In a hybrid work model, job resources and demands are expected to differ due to the nature of work,10 such as a) the need to self-manage one’s work engagement, team collaboration, socializing with the team, and interactions with new connections; b) the need to make decisions as required in the volatile work environment and effective management of hybrid teams; and c) the need to focus on productive time, professional development, and knowledge-sharing while maintaining a work–life balance. Managing these engagement challenges in hybrid work calls for exploring new approaches that draw upon the use of technological platforms and artificial intelligence (AI). Algorithmic management, based on AI and work analytics, is an innovative way to deal with the challenges experienced in hybrid work as it generates information which can be used for managing productivity, developing engagement and collaboration while also improving employee wellbeing. 12

# Algorithmic management

Algorithmic management is a new trend in transforming the classical forms of management and the future of work. Algorithmic management is defined as collecting and using data on a platform with learning algorithms to coordinate, control, and recommend various operations.11 With the availability of big data and AI technologies, context-aware and personalized learning algorithms on real-time behavioral and geospatial data provide an interactive environment that results in productive algorithmic management.12 As employees are challenged by frequent and enforced changes in their work environment, algorithmic management enables capturing work analytics related to employees’ work, regardless of the location or device used.13

As such, algorithmic management plays a significant role in hybrid work for people management. Algorithmic management is evolving as the new trend, in not only improving productivity, but also enhancing engagement and well-being. However, as listed by Benlian et al.,11 one of the main challenges in algorithmic management is the process involved in learning from employees personalized data and nudging employees into desirable behavior.14 Further, there are concerns that algorithmic management reduces employees’ autonomy and data privacy. Hence, there is a real need to explore whether work analytics, algorithmic management, and nudging, benefit employees in hybrid work or whether they present threats. Therefore, we explore Viva as an EXM platform that uses algorithmic management and investigate how it is used to enhance employee experience by improving work productivity and reducing digital fatigue in hybrid work.

# microsoft viva

Viva was introduced in November 2021 and can be considered part of the class of EXM platforms; one of its key principles is bringing employee experiences into their flow of work. It is a collection of platforms that, among other benefits, make online team collaboration and employee work experiences more efficient and productive while ensuring data privacy and security through aggregation and de-identification mechanisms. Viva is powered by Microsoft 365 and is integrated into Microsoft Teams to foster employee experience in the hybrid work model. Viva platform consists of four modules, including 1) Viva Learning, 2) Viva Topics, 3) Viva Connections, and 4) Viva Insights. Viva Learning facilitates a culture of learning across the organization and enhances social learning. Viva Topics connects related content and targets harnessing knowledge and expertise. Viva Connections amplifies communications within an organization by facilitating a connections page dedicated to any related information. Viva Insights helps employees maintain effective collaboration, follow up on their commitments, and help employees keep track of their well-being at work. A summary of Viva Insights and how it helps improve engagement and well-being is provided in Table 1. We use Viva Insights as an example to demonstrate how this platform contributes to an enhancing employee experience by facilitating engagement and well-being.

# methodology

The case of Viva is used to understand how an EXM platform can be utilized to enhance employee engagement and well-being in hybrid work. A qualitative study was undertaken in a multinational software development organization. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted from December 2021 to August 2022. The interviews focused on understanding work arrangements before, during and after the pandemic and identifying any patterns of changes in relation to work arrangements, engagement, and emerging challenges. Participants were also prompted to comment about their experience in using Viva with particular focus on how the tool enhances their employee experience in the flow of work. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. Participant roles ranged from a data scientist, cloud solution architect, engineer, technology strategist, cyber security consultant, communications executive, networking specialists, marketing manager, chief operating officer, general manager, and digital sales leader. Particularly, they shared their views about using Viva and what value can be attained, focusing on aspects linked to employee engagement and well-being in hybrid work.

TABLE 1. Viva modules.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Viva Insights – Enhance effective engagement and keep track of well-being at work | |
| Functions | **Description** | **Example** |
| Sentiment Analysis | Employees can record their daily reflections and reflect on their own well-being | **Shape  Description automatically generated** |
| Recognition | Employees can send praise and greeting to their coworkers or manager | **Graphical user interface, text  Description automatically generated** |
| Task Management | Viva Insights can filter questions that were asked or commitments that were made over email and prompt a to-do list | **Graphical user interface, text, application  Description automatically generated** |
| Time Management | Employees can block time on their schedule to focus on work without interruptions | **Graphical user interface, text, application, chat or text message, Teams  Description automatically generated** |
| Digital Well-being | Mindfulness exercises give employees a choice of meditation exercises to take a break from work life and be back with more stability and productivity | Graphical user interface  Description automatically generated |

We analyzed data using a ‘thematic analysis’ approach. Thematic analysis aims to identify common patterns across instances from an individual or across individuals.15 We used NVivo for coding. Our analysis focused on identifying the challenges faced by employees during the lockdown and how Viva created visibility on their work patterns and helped improve their work routine in the hybrid work model. We first presented the challenges employees face in the hybrid work model concerning engagement, well-being, and managing a work–life balance. We then focused on how algorithmic nudging facilitated by Viva helped to manage the challenges experienced by employees. Following the analysis, study findings identified several ways Viva assisted employee engagement and well-being as presented in the following sections.

# Staying Connected

The transition to hybrid work created new challenges for employees and teams regarding highly intellectual work that requires team collaboration and coordination, socializing with team members, and communicating with managers. Participants explained how personal interactions helped facilitate teamwork, collaboration, and client engagement in the pre-pandemic work setting. A participant explained that “*you arrange coffee catchup just to kind of, you know, pick their brains about something or whatever it may be;..* [*during remote work*]*; I missed those incidental connections*” (P5, Director). To overcome these challenges in the hybrid work, Viva was found to facilitate collaboration by flagging subject matter experts who can be contacted and by nudging employees to make new connections.

For connectedness, Viva Manager Insights also helps managers monitor and engage with their teams effectively. Manager Insights ensured that aggregated data is presented to managers to ensure they understand the dynamics of the team and rather than a specific individual. Managers can now lead with data and not dogma by understanding the work habits of employees as a team and taking suitable actions. Clarity in work and visibility in work habits will helps managers to be adaptive leaders. In effect, such features contribute toward employees staying connected and enhance employee visibility to their managers and others. Figure 1 demonstrates how Viva Insights nudges employees with recommendations to enhance their connections, improve engagement, and avoid clashes. Staying connected and feeling a sense of belonging is evidenced by the employees (see Table 2).

Therefore, as EXM nudges employees about their connections and provides recommendations for prioritizing connections, this platform helps employees to stay connected with their team, clients, and managers in the hybrid workplace.

**Graphical user interface, text, application, email

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FIGURE 1. Viva Insights to stay connected

# protect employees’ time

In hybrid work, work schedules likely become embedded into private and family time. As noted by one participant, “your day started from when we were getting calls or pings much earlier than you would have done if you were in an office environment” (P5, Director). Viva Insights facilitates self-reflection about how many hours an individual has been working. It helps to reflect on how to effectively manage time leading to efficient time management (see Table 2). Scheduling focus time is another effective way Viva helps employees to be productive in hybrid work (see Figure 2). For example, setting focus time helps developers to “just block up time to be able to, like, sit and code” (P14, Global Specialist).

Viva Insights also contributes to recreating aspects of physical work such as ‘virtual commute’, an activity analogous to the thinking and planning activities one engages in while commuting to/from work. Viva’s virtual commute feature facilitates self-management, giving one transit time to transition from work to home life.

Graphical user interface, text, application

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FIGURE 2. Viva Insights to protect employees’ time

TABLE 2. Evidence of key findings.

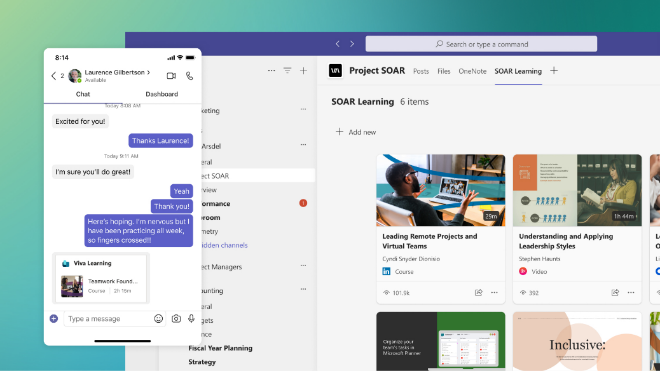
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| **Viva Features** | **Case-specific evidence** |
| **Connections and Identification** | |
| Viva Connections | “*A way in which employees can feel like they’re engaged, and they’re supported and the training requirements, personalization around content and Corporate messaging to those particular users*”– (P16, Technology strategist) |
| Viva Insights | “*There’s a daily email for Viva and it is a machine learning and AI-driven like a bot that Combines your teams’ conversations and emails and … curates commitments you’ve made… Viva can tell you who you’re spending time with. Who are your top collaborators*” *–* (P25, Group leader) |
| “*There’s some interesting insight that it shares with us to say how well we’re working with colleagues or with customers or what that connection point is; that sort of telemetry is useful and sort of highlight some gaps that you maybe want to consider changing work habits.*”– (P16, Technology strategist) |
| **Self-Reflection** | |
| Viva Insights | “*I need to take a break or I need to block out time to do some focus … you probably know that you should do those things*... *when it’s backed with data and it’s showing you, you’ve worked X amount of hours or you've multitasked in meetings when you maybe should be focusing*” – (P16, Technology strategist) |
| **Self-Management** | |
| Viva Insights | “*It finds and curates commitments you’ve made, Meetings. You need to prepare for. It’s been life-changing for me because it gives me a daily. Summary of reminders and what I call nudges*” – (P15, Market manager) |
| “*Before Viva, you had to maintain A to-do list … whereas now with Viva, it pulls that information out of your chats and emails from your manager and reminds you to do that sort of almost fills in part of that water cooler conversation*”– (P6, Product manager) |
| **Self-Development** | |
| Viva Topics | “*So Viva Topics is for an engineering team … If there is a topic card and this is a great learning and for new people and for engineering teams. If you hover over, it’s like a little hyperlink and a topic card. Viva topic card comes up so it’s learning in the flow of work so you don’t have to go out. I don’t have to go to the intranet*”– (P15, Market manager) |
| Viva Learning | “*I mean we use, we use Viva for our learning... So you know it schedules learning time out of your normal being. So make sure that you’re doing your learning that you need to do within your office hours*”– (P17, Defence lead) |
| *“We used to have just a lot of different portals for training and now everything is in Viva, so that’s been good, good to see everything sort of together*”– (P18, Senior cybersecurity consultant) |
| **Well-Being** | |
| Viva Manager Insights | “*Manager Insights can tell early indications that your team might be burning out by working late. So if people are logging on and sending emails at midnight or sort of outside their typical working hours, that insight would be surfaced to your manager*”– (P6, Product manager) |
| “*The Manager Insights is very powerful. It’s not personal like you can’t. But you know we there are ways we can see the trends. If people are disengaging, not individuals. But teams. It’ll say to me you if I hadn’t like, you haven’t had a one-on-one with this direct report for two weeks*”– (P15, Market manager) |
| Viva Personal Insights | “*Viva was good at really calling it out though, particularly at the end of the month where you go, I didn’t even realize, that I’d had no days this month where I hadn’t physically logged on and touched something to do with work and you just go well, that’s not right*”– (P23, Solutions specialist) |

Self-management in relation to tasks is another challenge experienced by employees in hybrid work (see Table 2). Planning and scheduling tasks may be supported by being physically in the same workplace where people run into each other and recall things promised to be done as they meet another person. However, with hybrid work, it can be difficult to stay on top of commitments due to the lack of personal encounters. Therefore, Viva provides much support to keep people on track and self-manage their time and commitments efficiently.

Thus, time management is achieved through self-reflection about one’s work habits and self-management of tasks. As the EXM platform nudges people about their pending tasks and makes employees aware of their work habits, it empowers employees to improve their productivity in a hybrid work environment.

# learning routine

Organizations need to facilitate a culture of learning to keep up with the pace of change and empower employees to excel in their careers. Developing a learning routine in the work calendar, receiving timely support when required, and supporting coworkers in developing skills are all different approaches that play an important role in the hybrid work model. New employees onboarded in a hybrid work setting require more support in developing their skills and knowledge. Viva Learning and Viva Topics help facilitate knowledge-sharing and skills development in the hybrid workspace at the individual’s own pace. Viva Learning provides not only online training modules and video courses from various content providers in a common interface, but also, facilitates social learning with the team (see Figure 3). Conversely, Viva Topics is a platform for learning and sharing knowledge in the flow of work. Participants in the study mentioned that one Friday a month is a meeting-free day dedicated to learning (see Table 2).

FIGURE 3. Viva Learning recommends relevant courses

Viva enables learning in the flow of work by facilitating access to learning resources and training opportunities and allows employees to engage in knowledge-sharing and social learning practices within the premise of their organization. This kind of learning environment is believed to contribute to productivity and engagement.

# work–life balance

Hybrid work faded the boundaries between work time and family time with the phenomenon of the ‘triple peak’ in work hours featuring in the hybrid work. One participant explained that “*you have a peak time in the morning, you have a peak time in the afternoon, and then you have a peak time at night-time*” (P2, Architect). Digital fatigue was evident through unsustainable work practices that kept employees tethered to a digital world. One participant noted “*I’m feeling like I’m actually working longer hours*” (P2, Architect). Burnout is experienced due to overflowing inboxes and back-to-back meetings. Employees had to juggle between work and life responsibilities *–* “*then 2 o’clock I would log off, and I would log back on around 8:00 PM after the kids are in bed and dinner is done*” (P1, Networking specialist). Leaders were experiencing the same challenges:“*work–life balance got thrown out the window because you sit at your desk and the day became longer*”(P7, Digital sales leader).

While leaders experienced these challenges, they also played an important role in helping their employees manage their work–life balance. Rich and fulfilling work experiences at work and home are key to improving productivity and enjoying the benefits of flexibility and autonomy, empowering employees in hybrid work. Viva Manager Insights provides visibility into teams whose work patterns may lead to burnout and stress (see Figure 4). The insights highlight after-hours work, meeting overload, and other trends that help managers take necessary steps to help their teams replan their work habits and manage their well-being (see Table 2). Viva provides these insights while maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the data so that managers only get access to aggregated metrics, as seen in Figure 4. Managers who used such insights found them very useful to lead with empathy by understanding their teams’ work habits and taking strategies to empower employees to plan their work. Employees use personal insights to self-reflect and alter their work habits, their health and mental well-being.

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FIGURE 4. Manager Insights about Team’s Well-being

# Scepticism reported

Although most participants expressed positive sentiments about how Viva helped them change their work routine, engage with their team members, and improve their well-being, several issues were evident in using Viva.

Firstly, we found that new employees used Viva for learning but were unaware of how to use Viva to effectively manage their work, improve engagement, and connect in their new workplace. Lack of use was evident in new employees, “*I don’t… but I should probably use it*” (P19, Cloud solution architect). Secondly, we found that senior staff members who are well experienced in managing their work and team members were less dependent on Viva and would use it only if required: “*We have so many tools and sites and bells and whistles and that at some point it becomes annoying*”(P20, Senior engineering manager). Thirdly, there are times when algorithmic management might not be as realistic as possible with exceptional scenarios. An example is when a manager returns to the office after a holiday of several days only to be nudged by Viva about missed meetings and unfulfilled commitments during their leave which is unappreciated by employees: “*You haven’t had a one-on-one with this person for a couple of weeks or so … I’ve been on holidays for two weeks. So, it’s like giving me, you know, you haven’t spoken to anyone*”(P27, Director)*.*

While these issues highlight that like any other technological tool, the use of Viva and its utilization to its full potential is evidently affected by not only lack of knowledge about the tool’s full potential, but also, it’s perceived utility and added value. Therefore, if organizations are to rely on EXM platforms like Viva to re-imagine their employee experience in hybrid work, it is critical that managers and leaders take initiatives to create visibility around the tool, its potential and its limitations.

# implications

Many conventional practices for managing employee engagement and well-being in the collocated work setting need to be revisited and reimagined, given the context of hybrid work. Our study shows that EXM platforms such as Viva play an important role in facilitating employee engagement and reimagining employee experience in the hybrid workplace, albeit in ways that may not always be welcome (e.g. nudging to make communication with others). The study suggests that Viva can play an effective role in creating data-driven self-awareness about hybrid working habits and work behaviors, both for managers and employees. The findings demonstrate how Viva can help employees to develop visibility around their work habits in a hybrid work environment, how it helps employees and managers to implement behavioral changes in their work patterns and foster engagement. Thus, using Viva in the hybrid workplace contributes to reimagining employee experience in several ways.

For employees, Viva increases awareness of opportunities to develop connections and closer identification with work teams and the organization at large, thus helping overcome feelings of isolation when working remotely while enabling a stronger sense of belonging and increased commitment to projects. Analytics also provide opportunities for increased awareness of work habits. As such, the analogy of Viva being like telemetry indicates the platform’s role in highlighting current work patterns and collaboration trends and identifying gaps, such as communication and skill development, that employees may not be aware of. These platform-generated insights contribute to self-reflection and empower employees to decide how to best manage their work and collaborations. This way, employees can be more mindful of actions they need to take to maintain work–life balance and take control of their well-being.

For managers, Viva enables data-driven leadership strategies that are adaptive and responsive to employees’ work situations and requirements compared to leadership approaches that are driven by dogmatic principles and how work ‘should’ be done, perhaps based on conventional pre-pandemic ways of working. Our study shows that the platform could potentially support human-centric leadership that demonstrates genuine rather than artificial care by bringing more clarity with data. The insights provide an opportunity for managers to deliver individualized support and consideration in response to these insights and make the workplace more inviting. This level of care and support is believed to be a key driver for employee engagement in a hybrid workplace and is likely to positively impact employee commitment and retention.

Based on our findings, we offer the following actionable insights for managers and their teams:

* EXM platforms can act as a means through which managers gain renewed knowledge and recommendations about their teams and their work patterns. Managers can then use these metrics to take actions centered around supporting their team towards building collaboration, improving wellbeing, and maintaining work–life balance. Employees can use these metrics to enhance their experience by staying connected, managing their time, developing their skills, and enjoying work-life balance.
* EXM platforms go beyond providing metrics and analytics on employees’ work performance. They provide opportunities for managers to pay attention to the learning and development of their employees and improve their overall work experience. Managers should take advantage of these opportunities towards caring, coaching, and mentoring their employees by fostering a relationship-oriented leadership.
* It is important to recognize that EXM platforms are not a panacea. It is only a medium to learn more about the employee experience. Although it can provide solutions for overcoming some hybrid work challenges, managers should maintain an active role in nurturing employee engagement with in-person meetings and networking events.

In conclusion, our study revealed that as an EXM platform, Viva has great potential for improving the employee experience in the hybrid workplace. It is in the hands of each employee to take the insights ideally to better manage their work. It will thus empower employees with the flexibility of hybrid work and enhance their experience in their hybrid workplace. This study thus shows evidence on how EXM platforms can be embedded into employees’ flow of work and empower employees to be energized and enhance their experience in the new era of hybrid work. Future research directions can focus on how analytics may affect employee–manager relations.

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