Paradigm shift: students' perceptions of work models and well-being

Purpose: This study aims to explore the benefits and drawbacks of different work models, including hybrid and remote models, as perceived by millennial and Gen Z students in Spain. Additionally, it seeks to identify ways to promote work engagement in the context of this paradigm shift.

Design/methodology/approach: The study involved forty-four undergraduate and graduate students who participated in two classroom discussions on the impact of hybrid and remote work models on well-being. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Findings: The results indicate that students' expectations have significantly shifted, and HR managers need to implement hybrid and remote work models to ensure a balance between long-term employee and organisational interests. Younger generations seek flexibility in work and education to achieve a better quality of life, rather than a 100% remote system.

Originality/value: The growing demand for hybrid and flexible working has the potential to create a paradigm shift in the way we work. This study contributes to the organisational behaviour literature by investigating the factors that organisations and policymakers should consider when implementing work models in response to the pandemic to promote well-being. The practical implications of this study can be useful for organisations and educators seeking to adapt to this changing work landscape.

Keywords: work models; remote work; hybrid work; work engagement; well-being

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has transformed work dynamics and time management. Organisations must re-examine their work processes as well as the role of human resources (HR) in supporting a sustainable future. The pandemic has also led to many digital advances, and organisations have adopted new collaborative tools that have enabled unconventional ways of working in Spain, such as hybrid work or teleworking.

Telecommuting has created new work opportunities, such as more family time, but it has also posed challenges for workers and companies that affect work engagement levels. For instance, isolation and productivity concerns arise for remote workers due to the inability to track the exact number of hours worked (Li *et al.*, 2021).

The pandemic has completely changed work dynamics, raising well-being and mental health concerns (Milasi *et al.*, 2020). However, we have adapted, and one thing that is certain is that flexible working is here to stay. There is currently a mismatch between supply and demand in the labour market, with many vacancies that cannot be filled due to a shortage of specific profiles. Younger generations are also demanding more flexible working conditions, posing talent management challenges for organisations (Deloitte, 2022).

Therefore, it is crucial to place people at the centre of HR practises and policies, enabling a more humane and inclusive understanding of how employees can deliver organisational and societal value in the face of enormous and unprecedented change (Biron *et al.*, 2021).

Digital technologies reshape work and lives, breaking spatial and temporal constraints. Even post-COVID, office-based employees will continue to work, at least in part, from home, with a combination of physical and virtual presence expected. Hybrid work is the future in both personal and professional spheres (Wontorczyk and Rożnowski, 2022).

In Spain, digitalization has led to an increase in the number of people providing their services remotely. While Spain ranked 31st in the world ranking of digital competitiveness prepared by the International Institute for Management Development in 2021 (IMD, 2021), it still has room for improvement in digitalization compared to other countries such as Sweden, Denmark, or Switzerland.

In the field of teaching, technological advances have allowed the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to deliver lectures, seminars, or tutorials when it was not possible to remain in the classroom. Through the pandemic experience, students and lecturers learned to function in a technology-mediated learning environment together. In this sense, the digital gap of some teachers was revealed, but it also promoted students' personal responsibility, who had to make personal decisions about their training away from the physical classroom (Tolks *et al.*, 2020).

Maintaining employee engagement has always been a challenge for organisations, and the advent of remote working has added another layer of complexity. The classic challenges that teams face have now become even more prominent: how can we ensure that employees have an equal voice when some are physically present in the office while others join remotely? How do we prevent favouritism and the formation of isolated groups among those who interact in person every day? These hurdles can gradually erode team dynamics and pose a significant challenge for managers to overcome.

Prior quantitative studies have revealed that remote work and teleworking can have both positive and negative impacts on employees and organisations (Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2022; Pass and Ridgway, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). However, the perspectives of young generations on these work models remain unexplored from a qualitative point of view. This study aims to fill this research gap by elucidating the motivational factors that influence millennials and Gen Z students in Spain and suggesting what policymakers and educators could do to promote their well-being. Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the students' responses.

This study is structured into the following sections: First, the work models of face-to-face, remote, and hybrid work are described. Next, the legal framework in

Europe and the particular case of Spain are explained. Then, the concept of work engagement is introduced and related to the previously described work models. The methodology and results of this research are presented in the following sections. Finally, the discussion, theoretical contributions, and practical implications are presented.

Work models and their legal framework

This section describes three work models: in-person or face-to-face; telecommuting; and hybrid. According to the Telecommuting Law 10/2021 of July 9, 2021, face-to-face work refers to the type of work carried out physically at the workplace or at a designated location specified by the company.

Telecommuting was first developed in the 1970s and refers to working remotely using computers and information technology (Nilles *et al.*, 1976). It involves providing services outside of the company's physical space and transmitting results and outcomes via information and data transmission technologies. Remote workers often face challenges such as poor ergonomics and limited access to company resources (e.g., documentation, databases, or colleagues' support) (Wontorczyk and Rożnowski, 2022).

Hybrid work combines face-to-face and remote work, posing the risk of potential conflicts between remote and face-to-face workers (Green *et al.*, 2020). There is a growing expectation among employees that they can work remotely, especially among younger generations, but many companies still prefer the days of face-to-face work in the office, particularly as an asset to productive relationships (Gifford, 2022).

Prior studies show that younger generations prefer greater flexibility and work-life balance, with 75% preferring a hybrid or remote working model (Deloitte, 2022). In the European Union (EU), 5.4% of employees usually worked from home in 2019, while 12% were likely to be working from home in 2020 due to the COVID-19

pandemic (Eurofound, 2020; Eurostat, 2020, 2021). In Spain, telecommuting is not a widespread practise, with less than 5% of workers aged 15-64 working from home on a regular basis in 2019 and 10.9% in 2020 (Eurostat, 2020, 2021), slightly below the European average. This may be due to the fact that face-to-face work has always been the norm in Spain and is something that is deeply rooted in the Spanish business culture, which is not used to telecommuting. This is why telecommuting is still not a widespread practise.

The European Framework Agreement on Telework was the main legal framework for telework and defined telework as work performed using information technology away from the employer's premises. Most EU countries have legal provisions, social dialogue, and collective bargaining for telework. The Workers' Statute and collective bargaining agreements governed telecommuting in Spain. The Royal Decree-Law 28/2020 addressed telecommuting during the pandemic and was later replaced by Law 10/2021, which expanded the definition of telecommuting and outlined responsibilities for both employers and employees, including resource provision and expense compensation.

Work models and engagement

Interest in work engagement and well-being has grown rapidly in the last three decades due to their significant impact on company productivity, employee performance, and absenteeism (Demerouti and Cropanzano, 2010; Gruman and Saks, 2011; Monje-Amor *et al.*, 2021). During times of change, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to analyse the factors that foster work engagement in an organisation. Work engagement was first defined by Kahn in 1990, and Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) later described it as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption". Engaged workers are more likely to support their peers, be creative,

and be productive (Agarwal, 2014; Gawke *et al.*, 2017; Zhang and Bartol, 2010). However, factors like furloughs, telecommuting, and poor healthcare management have affected employee well-being. While some studies found that telecommuting improved performance before the pandemic (Allen *et al.*, 2015), others found it increased job strain and reduced social and professional isolation (Crandall and Gao, 2005; Felstead and Henseke, 2017).

With the pandemic, employees and employers had to adapt to alternative ways of working, and opinions on the benefits of telecommuting remain mixed (Pass and Ridgway, 2022). For example, Wang *et al.* (2021) identified several challenges related to telecommuting during the early months of the pandemic, such as work-home interference, inefficient communication, procrastination, and loneliness. Giauque *et al.* (2022) found that the mandatory period of telework had a positive impact on employees' work autonomy and work-life balance, but it had a negative effect on collaboration and perceived job strain among public employees. In the same vein, Camacho and Barrios (2022) discovered that teleworkers experienced higher levels of strain during lockdown as a result of two specific techno-stressors: work-home conflict and work overload. This strain, in turn, had a negative impact on both their satisfaction with telework and their perceived job performance. Other studies showed that there are several characteristics of remote work that may positively influence the experience of these challenges, such as social support, work autonomy, supervision, and workload (Brunelle and Fortin, 2021; Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2022). However, Gallup (2022) noted improved employee engagement when employees were given the option to work some days from home and others in the office.

This study draws on the job demands-resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) and the integrated model of engagement-disengagement proposed by Monje-

Amor and Calvo (2022). The former model categorises working conditions into job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to those aspects of the job that require physical or emotional effort (e.g., workload, hazards, and job insecurity), while job resources refer to factors that facilitate work goals, reduce job demands, and encourage growth and development (e.g., social support, autonomy, and coaching) (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). The latter model classifies several intangible factors that influence work engagement at three levels: individual, job, and organisational. Individual characteristics of participants include their personality traits, attitudes, feelings, and expectations (dispositional attributes). At the job level, factors such as having a challenging, varied, and purposeful job can foster work engagement. Finally, organisational factors include aspects such as recognition, peer and managerial support, growth opportunities, open communication, and available workplace resources that may promote engagement.

Methods

This study follows a qualitative approach to data collection. Firstly, a literature review was conducted (Snyder, 2019), covering topics related to work models, work engagement, and the legal framework of telework in Europe and Spain. Next, in April 2022, two class discussions were conducted on hybrid and remote work models, involving 24 undergraduate and 20 graduate students from a Spanish university's Business Administration and MBA programmes, respectively. The discussions aimed to identify the benefits and drawbacks of these work models and suggest interventions for managers and policymakers. A qualitative perspective was chosen because it can provide a more in-depth understanding of individual experiences and perceptions regarding work models and well-being. The purposive sample included 44 students, comprising 55% female and 45% male participants, aged between 18 and 34. The

majority of students were from Spain, but the sample also included international students from Italy, Portugal, and South America who were living in Europe during the pandemic.

Participant selection involved asking for volunteers to participate. The lecturers explained the purpose of the activity and guaranteed anonymity while making participation voluntary. Anonymity can create a safe and inclusive environment for all students, particularly those hesitant to speak up in front of peers. To encourage participation, the lecturers provided prompts or questions to guide the discussion and help students feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts. When a group of students from several countries participate in a class discussion, it can offer a diverse range of perspectives and ideas, leading to a more nuanced and comprehensive conversation. However, it is important to recognise that diversity extends beyond national origin and encompasses factors like gender, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural background.

Participants were asked to share their experiences and perspectives on work models through the use of Jamboard, a digital whiteboard. They were prompted to report any incidents they encountered and to specify the advantages and disadvantages of the work model. The study focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students' experiences with both remote work and teaching, including their participation in internships conducted remotely as well as their experiences working for a company through either teleworking or a hybrid model. Although some undergraduate students were only able to report incidents related to remote education, all participants had some level of experience with remote work and teaching.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the participants' responses using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide, which is one of the most commonly used qualitative methods in psychology and management today. Thematic analysis is a

method that allows the identification, organisation, and classification of data according to the participants' response patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The six steps involved in this method involve becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Initially, the data from the class discussions were reviewed to identify initial ideas and patterns, which were then used to generate codes that captured the meaning of the data. These codes were then grouped together to identify potential themes, which were reviewed for accuracy. Finally, the themes were defined, named, and presented in the results section, along with examples of data to illustrate their implications for the research question.

Results

The findings from the two class-led discussions with undergraduate and postgraduate students were divided into two broad themes: the benefits and drawbacks of hybrid and remote work. We grouped the responses based on thematic similarity and identified eleven categories. Table I summarises the themes and categories identified.

Table I. Summary of themes and categories.

Themes	Categories
1. Benefits of hybrid and remote work	Flexibility Cost savings Work-life balance Environmental sustainability Positive outcomes: increased productivity, work engagement, efficiency, and enhanced well-being

2. Drawbacks of hybrid and remote work	Communication issues
	Isolation and lack of social interaction
	Increased supply costs
	Digital disconnection
	Lack of structure and organisation
	Negative outcomes: work-home conflict, stress, decreased productivity, and focus

Source: own elaboration based on study results.

Among the advantages of remote or hybrid work, participants highlighted five categories. All participants mentioned flexibility as an advantage in the form of greater flexibility in time management, working hours, organisation of tasks, breaks, and choice of workplace. The second category is cost savings in reduced office costs (supplies, equipment, and energy) and savings in commuting (public transport, gas, tolls, parking, etc.) and time. Improved work-life balance is another advantage of remote and hybrid work because employees and students could spend more time with family and friends. Participants also identified environmental sustainability as an important benefit due to reduced carbon footprints from commuting and energy consumption, which may have a positive impact on corporate social responsibility initiatives. Finally, participants believed that these work models could have positive outcomes for well-being, such as improved productivity or work engagement derived from having greater autonomy, good communication with teams and managers, and access to resources.

On the other hand, several disadvantages were highlighted. Most participants recalled situations where communication was poor among team members and information was lacking, leading to misunderstandings and internal conflicts. The second category is isolation and a lack of social interaction. Those who had to work or

do internships remotely reported that it was more difficult for them to establish contact with colleagues (lack of social relations) and that onboarding was frequently non-existent, leading to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness. Most participants recognised a separate category highlighting the increased supply costs, including electricity, water, or Internet expenses, which the company did not cover. All participants mentioned digital disconnection as a challenge, as it was difficult to set boundaries between work and their personal lives when working from home. Most claim to have answered messages or emails outside working hours, even during the weekend or vacation period, which entails longer working hours, increased workload, and time availability. Several students mentioned that there was little control by companies over the execution of workers' tasks, reduced accountability, and a lack of supervision, which is the fifth category (lack of structure and organisation). Lastly, participants noted several negative outcomes related to these work models, such as work-home conflict, stress, or ergonomic problems.

In addition, there is a fine line between factors that could be considered advantages and disadvantages, as it depends on the personal situation of each employee. For example, participants with family burdens found it difficult to balance remote work with supervising children or elderly relatives at home, which affected their productivity but also provided them with more time with their loved ones.

As for virtual teaching, most of the students (85%) preferred face-to-face teaching over virtual teaching, but they were happy with the adaptation of the teaching staff during the lockdown. Although universities are becoming more flexible, participants demand more flexibility in the mode of communication with lecturers, the format of classes, and the availability of recorded classes. For example, they would rather communicate with lecturers through Teams, chats, or a virtual forum than by

email. They would like some classes to be recorded so they can watch them again later or follow the class via Teams if they cannot attend class.

Discussion

The world of work is undergoing transformation due to recent challenges and future expectations, which are influencing labour relations and teaching. Since the lockdown in March 2020, ICTs have enabled immediate adaptation to the new scenario. The forms of work that move away from face-to-face work are modifying working conditions, leading to different scenarios where some workers work from home, others in the office, and others use a hybrid model. As a result, the means of work, the distribution of tasks, and performance evaluation are affected, as are the relationships between co-workers and management (Viña, 2021).

Businesses lack experience in this new context, and there is no roadmap to follow for implementing a new work system. Therefore, it is necessary to understand hybrid employee experiences since the success of the hybrid model will depend on various factors in different organisations and work teams.

With face-to-face work, it is easier to promote social relationships, and the authority of the leader is facilitated. However, other forms of work characterised by a lack of physical proximity and interaction between colleagues caused by technology create a need to reorder this relationship. Working relationships will be more flexible in terms of schedules, working hours, and workplaces. On the other hand, a higher level of trust will be required as the company's sphere of control is reduced. The role of the leader is crucial; they will focus on motivating teams, encouraging autonomy, time management, and empowering employees (Alotaibi *et al.*, 2020; Breevaart and Bakker, 2018).

Organisations implementing a new work model will have to learn it gradually. Existing office policies and practises need more than just increasing the number of videoconferences and the occasional visit from managers. While ICT has facilitated this transition, companies need to consider what tools to use to communicate with workers, ensure their development, and keep them motivated in this new environment. These results are aligned with prior studies (Brunelle and Fortin, 2021; Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2022).

Managing any transition to telecommuting or hybrid work requires HR departments to ensure that future organisational strategies protect and enhance opportunities for employee development, motivation, and retention. People development, work-life balance, open communication, and participative leadership are key elements in this transition and in building the future workforce, especially when it comes to transferring tacit knowledge and identifying and developing talented people. These results are consistent with previous studies (Monje-Amor and Calvo, 2022; Pass and Ridgway, 2022).

The student body is demanding the use of telematics for tutoring or attending classes if they are isolated or sick. This context also poses challenges for teachers, who must transfer the subject matter to a virtual environment while using ICT and innovative methodologies to encourage participation and make the class entertaining and dynamic. Students have high expectations for digitalization, both in the educational and organisational fields. Despite ongoing efforts to promote technological innovation, artificial intelligence, the digitalization of public services, and the digital skills of citizens and businesses through policies such as the Digital Agenda for Spain, the Digital Kit Programme, and Spain Digital 2025, Spain still has potential for enhancing its digitalization efforts.

Organisations must determine what works best for themselves and their employees rather than chase the aspirational commitments of others. The needs and interests of employees must be taken into account, since working as an administrative assistant can be substantially different from working as a consultant, in HR, or in the front office. Therefore, finding the best work model is not a matter of determining the one that is most acceptable to society but rather the one that best suits the needs of the company, its resources, and its employees.

In short, what the new generations are really demanding is flexibility in both work and teaching, rather than a 100% remote system, in pursuit of a better quality of life. However, only a few employers have developed clear policies and guidelines, despite the importance of providing hybrid and flexible work provisions that participants recognise.

Theoretical contributions and practical implications

This qualitative study makes two significant contributions to the organisational behaviour literature. Firstly, it provides insight into the benefits and drawbacks of various work models (e.g., hybrid and remote work) from the perspective of millennials and Gen Z students. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that uses thematic analysis to delve into the experiences and perspectives of students regarding different work models. It fills a gap in the literature that quantitative studies cannot explain. Secondly, this study identifies the motivations that impact these young generations and proposes ways to promote work engagement in the context of a paradigm shift towards more flexible work arrangements. These findings provide valuable insights into how organisations can better support the well-being and productivity of their employees as the future of work changes.

Moving on to practical implications, organisations that wish to transition to remote or hybrid work can do so by intervening in people's training and development. For instance, flexible working practises, combined with a positive workplace culture where everyone is given equal opportunities to connect, learn, grow, and advance, are key to an effective hybrid work strategy. Organisations can adopt various strategies to support employees who prefer to spend less time in the physical office. To achieve this, leaders should receive training on unconscious bias related to proximity, monitor promotion rates to ensure that remote workers are promoted at the same rate as face-to-face workers, and schedule regular meetings with their subordinates regardless of their location.

Moreover, organisations should guide leaders and subordinates through the transition by providing necessary training and information on good time management, workload management, and clear expectations. This will improve employee performance and contribute to achieving the company's strategic objectives. Keeping employees motivated is also crucial. Therefore, giving them a voice and sharing their opinions on business processes and policies can drive change.

Business leaders must drive change to attract and retain talent by promoting opportunities to improve skills through new projects, coaching sessions, or job rotation. Ultimately, organisations must constantly adapt to their own needs and those of their teams by fostering a collaborative environment. HR managers can positively influence employee engagement by training managers to have the necessary skills to lead and motivate their work teams and fostering individual engagement through personal development (Fletcher, 2016).

Younger generations would like to choose where and when they work. Other flexible working arrangements that organisations could implement are the compressed

workweek, flexible work hours (flexitime), or job sharing (Griffin *et al.*, 2019). These arrangements are likely to have a positive impact on employee productivity and retention.

In the teaching field, lecturers must adapt to the new scenario and meet the demands of the student body. They need to receive training on digital tools and teaching innovation methods to apply them in their classes. Additionally, classes can be energised in a virtual environment through gamification or active methodologies such as the flipped classroom, which can promote student participation and involvement.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study examines the perceptions of Gen Z and millennial students regarding work models and well-being during the pandemic, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to individuals from different age groups and beyond the COVID-19 context. Future research could include the perceptions of other generations, such as baby boomers, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, exploring the applicability of these findings in normal circumstances would provide insights into the long-term implications of work models on well-being across various age demographics. Such research endeavours would contribute to a more holistic understanding of work dynamics and help inform effective strategies for promoting well-being in different work environments.

Another limitation is that this study did not measure the impact of work models on well-being. Future studies could use quantitative methods, such as SEM analysis, to determine how work arrangements affect work engagement, job satisfaction, and performance. Researchers could also investigate how current policies and practises on work models affect employee performance and company returns, as well as whether they meet the needs of younger generations who demand greater flexibility.

Conclusion

This qualitative study highlights the rise of a new professional paradigm that combines remote work with greater flexibility to meet the evolving needs and expectations of younger generations. It explores the changing dynamics of work and education, particularly during the pandemic, while recognising the challenges faced by organisations and educational institutions. The findings emphasise individual preferences and specific requirements for different roles. Practical implications include effective training programmes, a positive corporate culture, and support for time and workload management. Organisations should prioritise employee engagement, offer flexible arrangements, and foster continuous learning. In the educational sector, embracing digital tools and innovative teaching methods could enhance student engagement. Overall, this research provides valuable insights for navigating the complexities of work and education in an evolving landscape, guiding organisations and educational institutions to meet the changing expectations of students and employees alike.

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