



Workplace Flexibility, Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Belonging in Post-Pandemic Organisations

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ABSTRACT

Post-pandemic work arrangements have reshaped employee experiences by expanding remote, hybrid, flexible-hour, and on-site working models. This study examined the relationships among workplace flexibility, emotional exhaustion, and employee belonging across contemporary organisations. A quantitative, cross-sectional, and explanatory design was employed using questionnaire responses from 384 employees working in information technology, education, healthcare, finance, manufacturing, and professional services. Data were analysed using SPSS through descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, exploratory factor analysis, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. Results indicated a moderately high level of workplace flexibility, a moderate level of emotional exhaustion, and a positive but not consistently strong level of employee belonging. Workplace flexibility was negatively associated with emotional exhaustion and positively associated with employee belonging. Emotional exhaustion showed a significant negative relationship with employee belonging and emerged as the stronger predictor in the regression model. Together, workplace flexibility and emotional exhaustion explained 36.9% of the variance in employee belonging. Findings suggest that flexible work arrangements can strengthen organisational connection when supported by manageable workloads, clear availability expectations, supportive leadership, and opportunities for social interaction. However, flexibility alone may not prevent emotional strain or workplace disconnection. Organisations should therefore integrate flexibility policies with workload monitoring, psychological support, inclusive communication, recognition, and team-building practices. The study contributes to understanding how post-pandemic work design influences employee well-being and organisational belonging.

Keywords:

Workplace flexibility; Emotional exhaustion; Employee belonging; Hybrid work; Post-pandemic organizations

INTRODUCTION

Post-pandemic organisations have experienced a shift in the design, coordination, and evaluation of work (Hou & Sing, 2025). Remote work, hybrid schedules, flexible working hours and employee control over how tasks are completed are now established organisational practices, moving from temporary crisis responses (Martins Bruno et al., 2026). These arrangements help employees balance work and family obligations, reduce commuting pressures, and have more control over when and where they work (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). However, it has also created challenges such as continuous digital connection, the blur of work and life, less informal contact and vague availability expectations (Franken et al., 2021). Therefore, workplace flexibility should be considered not only as an operational policy but also as a psychological and social condition that can affect employees' well-being and their relationship with the organisation (Fox et al., 2022).

Exhaustion on an emotional level is significant. It is characterised by emotional exhaustion, lower energy levels, fatigue, and difficulties in recovering from prolonged work demands (Bennett et al., 2018; Simbula et al., 2019). Although flexible work can alleviate some of the pressure, it can also amplify others, especially when employees experience heavy workloads, frequent virtual meetings, constant communication, or little separation between work and personal life (Wang et al., 2021). Employee belonging is as important, as dispersed teams may have fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction (Lal et al., 2023). Belonging is defined as employees' perceptions of acceptance, inclusion, recognition, interpersonal support and organisational connection. Strong belonging can facilitate engagement, commitment, collaboration, and retention. Weak belonging can foster isolation, withdrawal, and turnover intentions (Imboden, 2024).

Existing literature largely conceptualises workplace flexibility as a job resource. Schedule control, choice of location, and autonomy in task and workload adjustment can improve work-life balance and help employees to manage their responsibilities well (Dizaho et al., 2017). Increased autonomy may also convey organisational support and trust, enhancing job

satisfaction and sense of belonging (Heyns & Rothmann, 2018). But benefits of flexibility depend on implementation. Employees may find flexible arrangements stressful if they are expected to be continually available, to manage increased workload on their own or to communicate outside of normal work hours (Franken et al., 2021). Thus, flexibility might buffer emotional exhaustion in supportive conditions but exacerbate it when boundaries and expectations are not clear.

Emotional exhaustion correlates with heavy workloads, ambiguous roles, lack of recovery, low managerial support, and relentless pressure (Shinde, 2025). Employees who are emotionally exhausted have fewer psychological resources to motivate and socially participate (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2016). This is significant for belonging because belonging is constructed through recognition, inclusion, supportive relationships and participation in organisational life. Exhausted employees are less likely to communicate, avoid working collaboratively, and distance themselves from colleagues and organisational efforts (Ter Hoeven et al., 2016). Emotional exhaustion can thus erode belonging even with flexible policies in place (Olaus et al., 2025).

Flexibility and belonging have a similarly complicated relationship. Flexibility in work can enhance a sense of belonging when employees perceive it as a sign that the organisation values their individual needs and trusts them to manage their work (Miller, 2023). By contrast, remote and hybrid arrangements may constrain opportunities for spontaneous interaction, visibility in the workplace and access to informal networks. As a result, employees can feel less acknowledged or engaged in organisational decisions (Adebisi & Balogun, 2026). The presence of these opposite effects suggests that the interaction of workplace flexibility and emotional exhaustion should be considered in explaining employee belonging in post-pandemic organisations.

The focus on flexible work, employee wellbeing and organisational connectedness is growing, but gaps remain. Research on workplace flexibility has often been concerned with its effects on productivity, job satisfaction, or work-life

balance. There are fewer studies integrating flexibility, emotional exhaustion, and employee belonging in one empirical framework. Studies also frequently assume that flexible work is uniformly good or bad, without thinking about the emotional experiences of employees. Engagement and commitment have been widely studied, while belonging has received less attention - especially in remote, hybrid, flexible-hour, and on-site arrangements. Also, there is limited evidence across multiple organisational sectors.

The study aimed to assess workplace flexibility, emotional exhaustion, and employee belonging in post-pandemic organisations. It specifically sought to determine the relationship between workplace flexibility and emotional exhaustion; examine the association between workplace flexibility and employee belonging; and evaluate the relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee belonging. It also aimed to compare the reported levels of these variables across remote, hybrid, flexible-hour, and on-site work arrangements and provide practical guidance for employee-centred workplace policies and management practices.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Study Population

A quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory design was employed to examine the associations between workplace flexibility, emotional exhaustion, and employee belonging in post-pandemic organisations. Data were collected at one point in time from full-time and part-time employees in remote, hybrid, flexible-hour, and on-site arrangements. Participants were from public and private organisations in information technology, education, health care, finance, manufacturing and professional services. Eligible respondents had at least six months of experience in the organisation. We didn't count interns, temps or short-term hires. The individual employee was the unit of analysis, enabling personal experiences and perceptions in the workplace to be measured and tested statistically.

2.2 Sampling and Research Instrument

Employees who were on-site, remote, hybrid, or had flexible hours were represented using a stratified purposive sampling technique. Organisational contacts, professional networks, e-

mail invitations and digital workplace groups were used to recruit participants. Some 420–450 questionnaires were distributed, and 384 replies were received. Data were collected by means of a structured self-administered questionnaire comprising four parts: demographic and employment information, workplace flexibility (schedule control, choice of location, task autonomy, and workload adjustment), emotional exhaustion (depletion, fatigue, reduced energy, and recovery difficulties), and employee belonging (acceptance, inclusion, recognition, support, and organisational connection). Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

2.3 Pilot Testing, Data Collection, and Ethics

The questionnaire was pre-tested on 30-40 employees similar to the target respondents, but they were excluded from the final study. The pilot test evaluated item clarity, relevance, wording, time to complete, and consistency. Cronbach's alpha was calculated and values above 0.70 were considered acceptable. Items that were unclear, repetitive or of poor quality were revised or removed. Questionnaires were distributed electronically through email, professional platforms and organisational channels, with printed copies available where necessary. The study was explained to the participants and they gave their informed consent. Participation was voluntary and responses anonymous. The data collected were stored securely for academic purposes.

2.4 Data Preparation and Statistical Analysis

Using SPSS, questionnaire responses were coded, cleaned, and examined. Data screening included detection of incomplete questionnaires, duplicate responses, missing values, outliers, and violations of normality and multicollinearity assumptions. We rejected responses with large amounts of missing data. Frequencies and percentages summarised demographic and employment characteristics; means and standard deviations described workplace flexibility, emotional exhaustion, and employee belonging. Cronbach's alpha was used for scale reliability, and an exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the appropriateness of questionnaire items. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to examine the relationships among the variables. Statistical significance was

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set at the 5 % level.

3. Results

3.1 Response Rate and Respondent Characteristics

A total of 432 questionnaires were administered to the selected organisations. 397 were returned, with 13 responses being excluded because of significant missing data, repeating patterns in responses or not meeting the eligibility criteria. Hence, in the final analysis, the valid questionnaire responses were 384, which was a usable response rate of 88.9%. The respondents were drawn from different age groups,

employment sectors and workplace arrangements, which provided enough variation in post-pandemic work experiences.

The demographic and employment characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. Most of the participants were in the age group of 31-40 years, with men and women almost equally represented. The most prevalent arrangement was hybrid work, followed by remote work, flexible-hour work and on-site work. Participants were also spread across information technology, education, health care, finance, manufacturing, and professional services.

Table 1. Demographic and employment characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	196	51.0
	Female	180	46.9
	Other/preferred not to disclose	8	2.1
Age	21–30 years	118	30.7
	31–40 years	146	38.0
	41–50 years	82	21.4
	Above 50 years	38	9.9
Work arrangement	Remote	92	24.0
	Hybrid	160	41.7
	Flexible-hour	70	18.2
	On-site	62	16.1
Employment sector	Information technology	82	21.4
	Education	66	17.2
	Healthcare	55	14.3
	Finance	51	13.3
	Manufacturing	70	18.2
	Professional services	60	15.6

3.2 Descriptive Statistics and Scale Reliability

The mean score of the descriptive results indicated that the flexibility level in the workplace was moderate, at 3.55. It was also found that, although the mean score for employee belonging was above the scale midpoint, it was not at a consistently high level. Emotional exhaustion had a mean score of 3.04, which indicates a moderate level of emotional exhaustion due to work.

Table 2 also reports the reliability and correlation results. The level of internal consistency was satisfactory with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.88 to 0.90, which is higher than the minimum of 0.70. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value was found to be 0.89, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, indicating that the items of the questionnaire were appropriate for factor analysis. Three factors were kept, which together accounted for 68.4% of the total variance.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	1	2	3
1. Workplace	3.55	0.54	0.88	1.000		

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flexibility						
2. Emotional exhaustion	3.04	0.64	0.90	-0.381***	1.000	
3. Employee belonging	3.42	0.69	0.89	0.487***	-0.521***	1.000

*Note: N = 384; **p < 0.001.

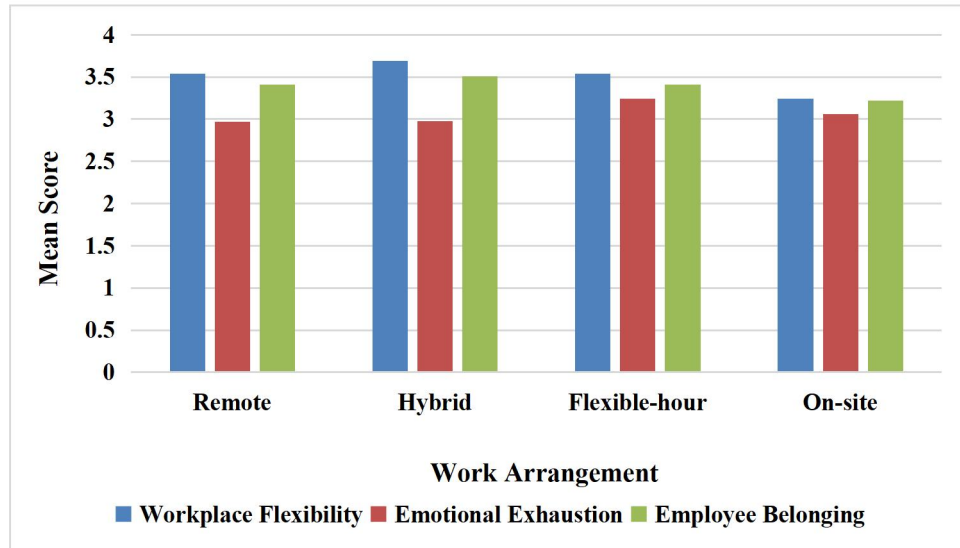


Figure 1. Mean Scores of Workplace Flexibility, Emotional Exhaustion, and Employee Belonging Across Work Arrangements

Figure 1 shows that hybrid employees reported the highest workplace flexibility and employee belonging. Flexible-hour employees experienced comparatively higher emotional exhaustion, while on-site employees recorded the lowest flexibility and belonging. Overall, hybrid work appeared to provide the most favourable balance among the three variables.

3.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that relationships between all three variables were significant. Emotional exhaustion was significantly and negatively associated with workplace flexibility ($r = -0.381$, $p < 0.001$). This result showed that the most favourable demographic factors (schedule control, location, task autonomy, and workload flexibility) were associated with lower emotional exhaustion among employees.

Workplace flexibility was also positively related to employee belonging ($r = 0.487$, $p < 0.001$). Those who felt more flexible were more likely to report feelings of acceptance, inclusion, recognition and connection with the organisation. Table 3 shows that emotional exhaustion was negatively correlated with employee belonging ($r = -0.521$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a clear link between emotional exhaustion and a decrease in employee belonging.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Results Among the Study Variables

Variable Relationship	Pearson's r	p-value	Direction	Interpretation
Workplace Flexibility and Emotional Exhaustion	-0.381	<0.001	Negative	Moderate negative relationship
Workplace Flexibility and Employee Belonging	0.487	<0.001	Positive	Moderate positive relationship

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Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Belonging	-0.521	<0.001	Negative	Strong negative relationship
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Note: N = 384. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

3.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to assess the direct effects of workplace flexibility and emotional exhaustion on the belonging of the employees. The regression model was statistically significant with an R^2 of 36.9% of the variance in employee belonging being explained. This suggested that together the two predictors explained a meaningful aspect of employees' sense of being accepted, included, and connected to the organisation.

As presented in Table 4, workplace flexibility had a significant positive correlation with employee belonging ($B = 0.428$, $\beta = 0.337$, $p < 0.001$). So, after the researchers accounted for emotional exhaustion, higher levels of flexibility were linked to greater belonging. Emotional exhaustion had a significant negative effect on employee belonging ($B = -0.420$, $\beta = -0.393$, $p < 0.001$). The standardised coefficient was greater for emotional exhaustion. The findings were thus consistent with the hypothesised mediated relationships between workplace flexibility, emotional exhaustion and employee belonging.

Table 4. Multiple regression results predicting employee belonging

Predictor	B	Standard error	Standardized β	t-value	p-value
Constant	3.174	0.287	—	11.044	<0.001
Workplace flexibility	0.428	0.056	0.337	7.646	<0.001
Emotional exhaustion	-0.420	0.047	-0.393	-8.921	<0.001

Note: $R^2 = 0.369$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.365$; dependent variable: employee belonging.

4. Discussion

The results showed that workplace flexibility, employee exhaustion, and employee belonging are mutually significantly related in organisations after the pandemic. The mean score for workplace flexibility was moderately high, with employees having some degree of flexibility regarding their schedules, places of work, tasks, and workload patterns. Emotional exhaustion, however, was not completely removed, as it still remained moderate, indicating that it was not flexible working arrangements that caused psychological strain. The employee belonging measure was also higher than the median of the scale, but it showed that there were mixed levels of feelings of being accepted, included, recognised, and connected to the organisation among all employees.

Emotional exhaustion was significantly negatively related to workplace flexibility. If the findings are correct, it means that workers who had higher scores on the control over work question were less likely to experience emotional exhaustion. Flexibility could cut commuting requirements, give employees greater flexibility over the way

they do their work, and provide recovery opportunities. However, the moderate strength of the relationship suggests that it is not a purely rigid connection; some flexibility does not necessarily lead to exhaustion. Emotional resources could still be exhausted by workload, manager expectations, digital connectivity, role ambiguity and a lack of work-life balance.

Increased workplace flexibility was positively correlated with employee belonging, meaning that employees' feelings of belonging and value were higher when they had higher levels of workplace autonomy and a responsiveness to their organisation. Flexible policies can be used to send messages of trust and organisational support, which can help to build organisational identification among employees. By contrast, the strength of the correlation of emotional exhaustion with employee belonging was the highest. When employees are emotionally depleted, they may isolate themselves from communication, relationships with co-workers, joint activities, and involvement in the organisation. These patterns were confirmed through regression analysis: Flexibility was

positively associated with Belonging, and Exhaustion was negatively associated with Belonging. The variables accounted for 36.9% of the variance in employee belonging, with emotional exhaustion being the more powerful predictor.

This negative association between flexibility and emotional exhaustion aligns with other research findings that flexible hybrid work and workplace control can contribute to mental health by giving employees autonomy and the flexibility to manage their working hours and workloads according to their own needs and circumstances (Höcker et al., 2024). A large cross-sectional study revealed that having flexible hybrid working and workplace control were related to lower mental distress compared to fixed working, whereas other factors did not. A study of pandemic-related telework also found that flexibility was a possible organisational resource that could benefit work-life balance and decrease sustained workplace stimulation (Peters et al., 2022).

There are, however, other reports in the literature that view flexible work as a two-way arrangement. The home office can also make boundaries between work and family life less distinct, foster longer working hours, and inhibit a shift during working hours (Žiedelis et al., 2023). Research on overwork climates reveals that remote workers might feel more emotionally exhausted if they are not able to remove themselves from work (Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė et al., 2023). Therefore, the results of the present study are not intended to suggest that all flexible arrangements are necessarily good: the impact of workload, autonomy, boundary control, managerial practices, and organisational expectations must be taken into account.

A strong connection between flexibility and belonging is also evident in new research on the post-pandemic workplace. The research on hybrid working indicates that the sense of belonging is not only about being physically present with the team, but also about being able to engage in meaningful relationships, join the team life and feel valued at work, both at the workplace and from a distance (Urrila et al., 2025). The evidence from other countries also shows that there is disparity in the experience of cohesion and belonging in remote, hybrid and

onsite arrangements. The rest of the workers indicated that working in their preferred environment also improves their belonging, job satisfaction and mental health compared to those who do not work in their preferred environment. The results are very important for companies. "Managers need to view workplace flexibility as a resource, not just a way people can work outside the office." Working hours, response times, workload, meeting frequency and availability need to be clear for flexibility to be effective. Organisations should put in place protected 'non-working' periods, encourage regular breaks, monitor excessive workloads and discourage communications outside agreed working hours. These practices may reduce emotional exhaustion and still maintain the benefits of flexibility.

Organizations must also intentionally create belonging in remote and hybrid environments. Regular contact with teams, inclusive decision-making, recognition of employees, mentoring, informal social contact and equitable access to leadership can help prevent flexible employees from becoming invisible in the workplace. Managers should not allow opportunities for promotion, development and participation to be the exclusive domain of employees who are physically present. Mental-health support, workload assessments, supportive supervision and early detection of signs of burnout should be integrated within flexible-work policies rather than stand-alone initiatives, as emotional exhaustion was the stronger predictor.

There are some limitations to note. The cross-sectional design does not allow for strong causal conclusions, and self-reported questionnaire answers are open to social desirability and common method bias. Stratified purposive sampling and coverage of selected sectors might limit generalisability. The analysis also combined different types of flexibility into one construct, although schedule, location, task, and workload flexibility may produce different outcomes.

Future research should utilise longitudinal designs to examine how flexibility, exhaustion, and belonging change over time. Stronger causal evidence could be obtained through experimental or multi-wave research. Researchers should conduct separate comparisons by industry, country, occupational level and remote, hybrid and onsite employees. Future models could also

include leadership support, digital overload, psychological detachment, organisational culture, work-life balance and employee preference as mediating or moderating variables. More in-depth qualitative interviewing would help explain why similar flexible arrangements create a sense of belonging for some employees, but isolation and exhaustion for others.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated the link between workplace flexibility, emotional exhaustion and employee belonging in organisations in the post-pandemic era. Responses from 384 employees in a range of sectors and work arrangements indicated moderate to high experiences of workplace flexibility, moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, and positive but not consistently high levels of employee belonging. These findings suggest that flexibility in and of itself does not automatically lead to a healthier or more connected workplace. Workplace flexibility was negatively and significantly associated with emotional exhaustion, which suggests that more control over scheduling, work location, task performance, and workload may help reduce emotional strain. It was also positively related to employee belonging, indicating that flexible arrangements may increase perceptions of being accepted, recognised, and connected to the organisation. Nevertheless, emotional exhaustion had the strongest negative relationship with belonging and was the stronger predictor in the regression model. The finding emphasises that employees who are emotionally drained are less likely to get involved in workplace relationships or identify with their organisation. The study thus concludes that a combination of flexibility, psychological recovery, and social inclusion is critical for effective work design after the pandemic. Organisations must establish clear expectations for work hours, workload, availability and communication, but also create regular opportunities for team interaction, recognition, mentoring and inclusive participation. Flexible policies should be underpinned by workload monitoring, supportive leadership and early detection of burnout risks. However, the cross-sectional design, self-reported data, purposive sampling and the combined measurement of flexibility limit the

causal inferences and generalizability. This study provides evidence for employee-centred workplace policies. Future research should use longitudinal and mixed-method approaches, compare sectors and work arrangements separately, and investigate leadership support, digital overload, work-life balance and psychological detachment as additional explanatory factors.

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