

Communication Issues Related to Hybrid Working in UK SMEs

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Hybrid work has become an established employment model since the Covid-19 pandemic, with UK adoption stabilising at around 26% of the workforce by mid-2025 (Siddiqui, 2026). The hybrid model refers to employees who regularly split their working time between central and remote locations making communication more complicated. This paper explores how synchronous communication, i.e. real-time interaction using tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, impacts productivity, decision-making and employee wellbeing within hybrid working environments.

Our research adopted an interpretivist philosophy, inductive approach and exploratory qualitative design. Participants were recruited from small and medium-sized businesses with fewer than 250 employees working in the UK IT sector because this sector is characterised by distributed teams and cross-functional collaboration, and so it is particularly reliant on effective communication practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants with IT-related roles to explore their experiences of synchronous communication, challenges encountered and perceived impacts on teamwork, productivity and decision-making. Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical approval for this research project was obtained from Bournemouth University (ID: 66950; Approval date: 30th October 2025).

Although based on a small sample, the findings detailed below provide valuable insights into communication practices within UK IT SMEs. Analysis identified six overarching themes that demonstrate both the benefits and challenges of synchronous communication in hybrid work environments. To optimise effectiveness, this research recommends that SMEs should focus on formal communication protocols, continuous digital skills training, standardised collaboration platforms and leadership practices that balance real-time interaction with employee wellbeing.

Theme 1: Communication Barriers in Hybrid Teams. Participants reported technical and infrastructural issues as being major barriers. Examples included unstable internet connections, audio lag, VPN failures and screen-sharing glitches that disrupted meetings and reduced communication richness. Scheduling challenges were also prominent, especially for teams spanning multiple time zones, with early-morning and late-evening calls contributing to fatigue and blurred boundaries. Participants also described the loss of non-verbal cues when cameras were off, making it harder to interpret tone, engagement or hesitation. Hybrid meetings in which some participants were physically co-located, and others remote, created inequities with remote attendees often missing important informal side-conversations.

Theme 2: Strengthening Team Cohesion. Despite challenges, synchronous communication was viewed as being essential for maintaining team cohesion. Daily standups, weekly retrospectives and informal virtual catch-ups helped to create a sense of shared identity and interpersonal connection. These interactions supported onboarding, trust-building and alignment across distributed teams. Participants emphasised that synchronous communication enabled clearer collaboration, especially when resolving complex technical issues. Real-time discussions reduced misunderstandings, accelerated problem-solving and supported cross-functional coordination.

Theme 3: Balancing Collaboration and Focus. Synchronous communication improved productivity when used purposefully. Participants described faster feedback, immediate clarification of requirements and more efficient problem solving through screen-sharing. Real-time collaboration reduced delays, particularly for tasks requiring shared understanding. However, productivity declined when synchronous communication became excessive. Back-to-back meetings were found to fragment time, increase cognitive load and reduce capacity for work that related to deep thinking. Participants stressed the importance of balancing synchronous and asynchronous tools, using synchronous communication for complex and ambiguous tasks, and asynchronous channels for documentation, updates and reflective work.

Theme 4: Supporting Faster Decisions. Synchronous communication significantly accelerated decision-making, especially in high-pressure situations such as system incidents or regulatory changes. 'War-room' style video calls enabled rapid alignment across teams. Participants noted that synchronous meetings improved participation in formal decision-making forums, especially when senior leaders could join remotely. Real-time interaction also prevented misalignment caused by delayed email responses or fragmented asynchronous communication. However, some participants, particularly junior staff, felt anxious when speaking in large synchronous meetings, which highlights the need for inclusive facilitation.

Theme 5: Protecting Wellbeing in Hybrid Work. Hybrid work improved work-life balance by reducing commuting time and enabling flexible scheduling. However, synchronous communication also contributed to boundary erosion. Participants described extended working hours due to time-zone demands and expectations of constant availability. Continuous video presence created emotional and physical strain, and camera-on norms increased self-consciousness. Fatigue from consecutive meetings was common. Leadership behaviour therefore plays a critical role in shaping communication culture and supporting employee wellbeing.

Theme 6: Creating a Supportive Communication Culture. There was evidence that leadership decisions strongly influenced communication effectiveness. Implementing structured meeting protocols with clear agendas, defined participants and time-boxed discussions was reported to significantly improve productivity, thereby reducing meeting overload. Inclusive communication norms, such as requiring all participants to join meetings from individual devices, can help to ensure equal participation between remote and in-office staff.

References

Siddiqui, S. (2026), *Connected and Coordinated: Enhancing Synchronous Communication for UK IT Hybrid Work Environments*. MRes Thesis, Bournemouth University.