

How Work Location Influences Task Selection and Well-Being: A Qualitative Study of Hybrid Workers

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid work allows employees to choose among offices, homes, and third places, yet practical guidance on matching tasks to locations and understanding well-being mechanisms remains limited. This qualitative study examines how hybrid workers select locations for tasks and how environmental characteristics shape well-being. Nineteen information workers in Japan completed semi-structured interviews of thirty minutes during December 2023 and January 2024. Inductive coding identified five task categories, mapped task–location correspondence, organized environmental factors, and classified well-being effects; mention tallies complemented interpretation. Location choice varied by task: meetings and synchronous collaboration were widely distributed; creative and conceptual work concentrated in third places; administrative and routine tasks were most often performed at home; and deep-concentration work showed pronounced individual differences. Private rooms or booths and reliable connectivity were pivotal enablers, while their insufficiency was the most frequent constraint. Third places were linked to refreshment and enhanced creativity; homes supported concentration and time efficiency; negative well-being effects were limited. Against mixed evidence on working from home, the findings support autonomy-supportive hybrid systems that treat location as a strategic resource and invest in quiet enclosed spaces and robust networks across sites.

Keywords: Hybrid work, Work location, Task–location fit, Well-being, Third places, Workation

INTRODUCTION

Work style reform and digitalization have diversified feasible locations for knowledge work beyond fixed offices to homes and third places such as coworking spaces and cafés. Following COVID-19, remote and hybrid arrangements expanded rapidly among office-based employees. The empirical record on working from home remains mixed, with concerns about social isolation (Bouziri et al., 2020) contrasted with improvements in work–life satisfaction (Kazekami, 2020) and systematic-review evidence of enhanced well-being (Ferrara et al., 2022). These inconsistencies likely reflect interactions among task characteristics, individual preferences, and environmental affordances. Hybrid work foregrounds autonomy in selecting when and where work is performed, enabling workers to leverage distinct

features of offices, homes, and third places. Yet organizations lack consolidated guidance on which tasks are best supported in which locations and on how environmental factors shape well-being. This study explores location choices for common knowledge-work tasks and examines perceived environmental mechanisms of well-being among hybrid workers.

METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative design was adopted to capture practices and meanings that quantitative approaches may overlook. Semi-structured interviews elicited narratives about location use, task–location fit, enabling and constraining environmental features, and perceived well-being effects.

Participants

Nineteen office workers based primarily in the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan areas participated, including twelve men and seven women, largely in sales and marketing roles. Inclusion criteria were experience across office, home, and third-place settings; current engagement in hybrid work using multiple locations each week; and personal-computer-based desk work. Snowball sampling was used. Office attendance frequencies varied: six participants attended four or more days per week, seven attended two to three days, and six attended fewer than two days.

Data Collection

Data were collected between December 2023 and January 2024 through online interviews of approximately thirty minutes with two researchers present. With consent, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Topics included frequency and purposes of location use, task content by location, reasons for selecting locations and perceived fit, physical features such as chair and desk, lighting, private rooms or booths, quietness, and network connectivity, psychological aspects including concentration, relaxation, stress, and isolation, and perceived impacts on well-being.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were read closely and coded inductively. Task descriptions were grouped into administrative and routine processing, deep-concentration work, creative and conceptual work, meetings and synchronous collaboration, and light work during travel or breaks. Task–location correspondence was mapped for office, home, and third places, and positive and negative evaluations and challenges were catalogued for each task and location. Environmental factors were organized into physical and psychological classes. Well-being effects were coded as positive, including concentration, creativity, stress reduction, and refreshment, or negative, including decreased concentration and isolation. Tallies of mentions by location and theme supplemented interpretive claims.

RESULTS

Office Attendance Frequency

Attendance frequency was broadly balanced, with six high-frequency, seven medium-frequency, and six low-frequency office attendees.

Task–Location Correspondence

Counts in Table 1 show clear task-contingent patterns. Meetings and synchronous collaboration were the most frequently mentioned tasks with thirty-four mentions, occurring across locations with home slightly more common than office and third places. Creative and conceptual work had sixteen mentions, half of which occurred in third places, exceeding office and home with four mentions each. Deep-concentration work had thirteen mentions distributed across office with five, home with four, and third places with four, indicating substantial individual differences in environmental needs. Administrative and routine processing had ten mentions and was most often carried out at home with five, followed by office with four and third places with one. Light work during travel or breaks had eleven mentions, with four each at office and home and three at third places.

Table 1: Task–location mentions by category.

Task Category	Office	Home	Third place	Total
Administrative/routine processing	4	5	1	10
Deep-concentration work	5	4	4	13
Creative/Conceptual Work	4	4	8	16
Meetings/Collaborative Work	13	14	7	34
Light work during travel/breaks	4	4	3	11

General table note (applies to Tables 1–5). Counts represent unique mentions for each task-location or factor-location combination. If a participant mentioned the same combination multiple times, it was counted once. Zeros indicate that the theme was not mentioned for that location.

Environmental Factors: Positive Aspects

Table 2 indicates that private rooms or booths drew the most positive mentions with fourteen in total, including seven at third places, four at office, and three at home. Quietness and sound insulation received eleven positive mentions across locations. Network connectivity drew eight positive mentions, predominantly for third places. Desk usability and lighting quality each received six positive mentions distributed evenly across sites. Screens or monitors drew five positive mentions, and chair comfort and temperature or air conditioning also drew five each. View or scenery was noted positively in eight instances, while seating density, interior atmosphere, and power supply did not register positive mentions in this dataset.

Environmental Factors: Negative Aspects

As shown in Table 3, insufficient private rooms or booths was the most frequent constraint with eleven mentions across locations. Lack of quietness and sound insulation drew ten mentions and was particularly concentrated

in offices. Network problems drew nine mentions, split across office, home, and third places. Screens or monitors also drew nine negative mentions, with home accounting for the largest share. Desk problems drew eight mentions, inadequate lighting drew six, and chair discomfort drew five, more often at home. Temperature or air-conditioning issues drew four mentions. View or scenery produced four negative mentions and power supply or adapters three, suggesting that otherwise acceptable settings can be undercut by practical obstacles. Seating density and interior atmosphere did not emerge as salient negative factors.

Table 2: Positive physical environmental factors by work location.

Environmental Factor	Office	Home	Third place	Total
Chair comfort	1	1	3	5
Desk usability	2	2	2	6
Lighting quality	2	2	2	6
Private rooms / booths	4	3	7	14
Quietness / sound insulation	4	3	4	11
Wi-Fi / Internet	1	2	5	8
Screens / monitors	2	1	2	5
Temperature / air conditioning	2	1	2	5
View / scenery	3	2	3	8
Seating / crowding	0	0	0	0
Interior / atmosphere	0	0	0	0
Power supply / adapters	0	0	0	0

Table 3: Negative physical environmental factors by work location.

Environmental Factor	Office	Home	Third place	Total
Chair discomfort	1	3	1	5
Desk problems	3	2	3	8
Inadequate lighting	2	2	2	6
Insufficient private rooms / booths	4	3	4	11
Lack of quietness / sound insulation	5	2	3	10
Wi-Fi / Internet problems	4	3	2	9
Screens / monitors: limitations	3	4	2	9
Temperature / air-conditioning issues	1	1	2	4
View / scenery: obstruction/glare	2	1	1	4
Seating / crowding	0	0	0	0
Interior / atmosphere	0	0	0	0
Power supply / adapters: scarcity	1	1	1	3

Well-Being Effects

Table 4 shows that refreshment or switching effects were the most frequently cited positive outcomes with eighteen mentions, including ten at third places. Improved concentration drew ten mentions distributed across locations, with home slightly more prominent. Reduced stress or a sense of security drew eight mentions. Enhanced creativity drew six mentions, four of which were associated with third places. Table 5 indicates that negative well-being effects

were limited: decreased concentration drew eight mentions across locations, and a sense of isolation or loneliness drew two mentions, one at office and one at home, with none reported for third places.

Table 4: Positive well-being effects by work location.

Well-Being Indicator	Office	Home	Third place	Total
Improved concentration	3	4	3	10
Enhanced creativity	1	1	4	6
Reduced stress / security	3	3	2	8
Refreshment / switching	4	4	10	18
Reduced fatigue / burden	0	0	0	0

Table 5: Negative well-being effects by work location.

Well-Being Indicator	Office	Home	Third place	Total
Decreased concentration	2	3	3	8
Isolation / loneliness	1	1	0	2
Increased stress / tension	0	0	0	0
Increased fatigue / burden	0	0	0	0

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Task–Location Fit

The results clarify how workers align tasks with locations against a mixed empirical backdrop on working from home (Bouziri et al., 2020; Kazekami, 2020; Ferrara et al., 2022). Meetings and synchronous collaboration appear effectively location independent given ubiquitous digital tools, although privacy and noise control at home can make participation easier. Creative and conceptual work gravitates toward third places where moderate ambient stimulation and distance from routine settings appear to support ideation. Administrative and routine tasks concentrate at home, consistent with the advantages of reduced commuting and individualized environmental control. Deep-concentration work divides across settings, underscoring sizeable individual differences in sensitivity to quietness, privacy, ergonomics, lighting, and thermal comfort.

Creative and Conceptual Work in Third Places

The preference for third places in creative and conceptual work aligns with qualitative and theoretical accounts in coworking research that emphasize community formation, serendipity, and exploratory knowledge flows (Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017; Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017), with quantitative evidence linking knowledge-sharing attitudes in coworking to creative performance (Rese, Kopplin, & Nielebock, 2020), and with experimental findings that moderate ambient noise can facilitate creative cognition (Mehta, Zhu, & Cheema, 2012). The setting itself may act as a boundary mechanism that separates work from everyday life, generating psychological space for divergent thinking; workation research similarly

reports improvements in psychological detachment that persist after the event (Iwaasa, Ebara, Mizuno, & Yoshikawa, 2022). Our well-being tallies echo these mechanisms, with third places dominating refreshment and creativity mentions.

Administrative/Routine Work and Working From Home

The predominance of administrative and routine tasks at home reflects a good match between routinized, low-interdependence work and environments that reduce commuting, allow immediate start-up, and permit personal control of temperature, lighting, and noise. Evidence from randomized designs indicates that elective hybrid arrangements reduce turnover without damaging performance and can improve specific outputs in some roles (Bloom, Han, & Liang, 2024; Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015). At the same time, collaboration-intensive work can suffer under fully remote conditions because of higher coordination costs and more fixed communication patterns, which helps explain heterogeneous productivity outcomes across job types (Gibbs, Mengel, & Siemroth, 2023; Yang et al., 2022). The present data also reveal liabilities of home environments, including limited private space, variable connectivity, and suboptimal ergonomics, which suggests the value of targeted support.

Meetings and Synchronous Collaboration

Meetings were the most frequently mentioned activity and were distributed across locations. The slight predominance of home in our counts may reflect easier access to quiet rooms and privacy for calls. In offices, the shortage of enclosed spaces appears to constrain meeting quality, consistent with the negative mentions of insufficient private rooms or booths and poor sound insulation.

Deep-Concentration Work and Individual Differences

The near parity of deep-concentration mentions across office, home, and third places points to strong individual differences in the determinants of focus. Some participants emphasized silence and enclosure; others favored moderate background activity or the motivational presence of others. This dispersion underscores the importance of autonomy in selecting environments for concentration and of offering multiple viable options.

The Role of Physical Environment

Across analyses, the most consequential levers were access to private rooms or booths and reliable, high-quality network connectivity. The persistent gap between the demand for small enclosed spaces and their availability appeared most acute in offices and third places. Field evidence indicates that transitions to open-plan designs can reduce face-to-face interaction and increase electronic communication, altering collaboration in unintended ways (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). Designing for hybrid work therefore requires rebalancing open zones with plentiful small rooms and phone booths, clear acoustic zoning between quiet and conversational areas, and

robust network infrastructure across sites, including support for home connectivity. View or scenery and power availability, while sometimes considered peripheral, emerged as subtle differentiators that can enable or undermine otherwise suitable settings.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings point toward autonomy-supportive systems that allow employees to align location with task while ensuring that core environmental enablers are in place. Third places can be positioned as creativity and refreshment resources, not merely overflow space, while homes can be supported as effective venues for routine and concentration tasks through ergonomic and connectivity stipends. Offices remain important as collaboration hubs but require sufficient enclosed rooms and acoustic management to function well.

Limitations

The sample is modest and concentrated in sales and marketing, which limits generalizability to other roles and industries, particularly those with low feasibility for remote work such as manufacturing and healthcare. Mention tallies complement interpretation but do not represent effect sizes. Measures rely on self-report without objective productivity or physiological indicators. The fieldwork window was short and confined to early winter of 2023 and 2024 during a period of pandemic recovery. Causality cannot be inferred; reverse causality and third-variable explanations, including personality traits, job characteristics, and home contexts, cannot be excluded.

Future Prospects

Large-scale quantitative studies across occupations and industries are needed to test the generality of task–location patterns and well-being mechanisms. Mixed-methods designs that integrate wearable measures, digital work logs, and objective output indicators would refine estimates. Longitudinal and intervention studies could clarify causal pathways, for example by encouraging third-place days as a treatment. Research on moderators such as personality, autonomy, task variety, and home environment would illuminate individual differences. Organizational culture and system supports, including psychological safety and supervisor practices, warrant closer examination. As firms continue to calibrate return-to-office and elective hybrid approaches, comparative evaluations of long-term performance and employee outcomes will be essential, particularly in light of evidence that elective hybrid can reduce turnover without damaging performance (Bloom, Han, & Liang, 2024).

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