

Does Flexibility Substitute for Pay? Hybrid Work as A Moderator of the Compensation–Job Satisfaction Relationship: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Two well-developed bodies of literature address how employees feel about their jobs, yet they rarely speak to each other. One shows that compensation relates to job satisfaction, though less strongly than folk wisdom assumes. The other shows that hybrid and flexible work arrangements relate to satisfaction, with results that swing by context. The question that joins them is seldom asked: does hybrid work change how much pay matters for satisfaction? If flexibility is itself a prized, non-monetary reward, employees may accept and remain satisfied with lower pay when they hold it, the classic logic of compensating differentials. Under that logic, hybrid work should moderate the compensation–satisfaction link. This review examines whether the field has tested that proposition. Following PRISMA 2020, 46 studies (2020–2026) were synthesised from Scopus and Lens.org, coded for whether they treat the compensation–hybrid–satisfaction relationship as an interaction, a substitution, an additive main-effects bundle, or a single edge of the triangle. The verdict is stark. Only two of the 46 studies formally test a compensation × hybrid interaction on satisfaction, and only seven engage the substitution question at all; the remainder study the edges in isolation or stack the variables additively. The field, in short, has assembled every ingredient of the moderation hypothesis and has rarely cooked it. An integrative compensating-differentials / total-rewards framework is advanced, and a research agenda is set out around the untested interaction and the boundary conditions income level, sector, national context most likely to govern it.

KEYWORDS: compensation; pay satisfaction; hybrid work; flexible work arrangements; job satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Managers usually credit pay for employee satisfaction, but labour economists are more guarded: the meta-analytic correlation between pay level and pay satisfaction is modest, and smaller still for satisfaction with the job as a whole (Judge et al., 2010). Salary matters, but it accounts for a relatively small share of the total value employees assign to job factors. Since 2020, as most companies moved to flexible work, that valuation has become an important area of study. Flexibility carries costs, such as blurred work-life boundaries and isolation, yet for many employees its value is large. Software engineers, for example, were willing to sacrifice a large share of their compensation to avoid bad scheduling or to work from home (Mas & Pallais, 2017). Quasi-experimental evidence also shows that work-from-home options raise job satisfaction and reduce turnover, even with little effect on measured productivity (Bloom et al., 2015). The monetary value of work arrangements is therefore part of the overall "reward bundle" rather than an addition to it.

Under the theory of compensating differentials (Rosen, 1986), workers trade undesirable job characteristics against desirable ones through wage premiums or discounts, and flexibility, as an attractive non-wage characteristic, commands a discount. The marginal satisfaction from an extra dollar of pay thus depends on the flexibility one already enjoys: in flexible environments, pay affects satisfaction less, because the two can be substituted. Hybrid work therefore changes the pay-satisfaction relationship rather than being just another factor. A total-rewards perspective reaches the same conclusion by treating rewards as one package, with flexibility as a work-life reward and an integral part of compensation. The two perspectives differ, however. If pay and flexibility combine additively, employers have several independent levers for

satisfaction; if flexibility substitutes for pay, the two are only partly interchangeable. A low-wage employer could then keep employees satisfied through hybrid arrangements, but this has distributional implications, since those least able to trade pay for flexibility are often those who can least afford to (Bloom et al., 2015). A review that does not distinguish the additive from the substitutive model is therefore less useful to organisations.

Existing reviews cover hybrid work and compensation separately, and none takes the compensation × flexibility interaction as its object or codes, study by study, whether the primary literature tests it. That is this review's contribution. It is organised around four questions:

1. RQ1: How does the literature conceptualise the relationships among compensation, hybrid work, and job satisfaction?
2. RQ2: Does hybrid work moderate the compensation-satisfaction relationship, and through what mechanism: substitution, complementarity, or total-rewards recalibration?
3. RQ3: Which compensation components are most and least associated with satisfaction under hybrid arrangements?
4. RQ4: What boundary conditions and gaps emerge, and what research agenda follows?

The contribution is threefold: to read this fragmented evidence through an explicit moderation lens, to show through study-level coding that the interaction is asserted far more often than tested, and to specify the framework and studies that would close the gap.

METHOD

Design

The review followed PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). Research questions, search strategy, eligibility criteria, a screening

codebook, and the extraction scheme, including the moderation-coding rubric, were fixed before screening.

Information sources and search

Two curated databases were searched, Scopus and Lens.org, using a three-pillar Boolean design (Table 1): a compensation block, a hybrid/flexible-work block, and a job-satisfaction block, joined by AND with synonyms joined by OR. The window was 2020–2026,

Table 1. Three-pillar search strategy (synonyms abbreviated).

Concept block	Representative terms
Compensation	compensation, pay, salary, wage, remuneration, reward, total rewards, financial incentive, pay satisfaction, benefits, bonus
Hybrid / flexible work	hybrid work, flexible work arrangement, flexible working, remote work, telework, telecommuting, work from home, workplace flexibility
Job satisfaction	job satisfaction, employee satisfaction, work satisfaction, job attitude

Eligibility and screening

A study was eligible if it substantively engaged at least two of the three constructs compensation, hybrid/flexible work, job satisfaction with the pay–satisfaction relationship in view, and was a peer-reviewed article or conference paper in English, 2020–2026. Because the word “benefits” often denotes advantages as well as

chosen deliberately to capture the era in which hybrid work became a distinct, mass arrangement following the COVID-19 pandemic rather than an arbitrary cut-off. One transparency notes bears recording: The Lens CSV export is capped at 1,000 records, so although the search returned roughly 2,025 hits, the top 1,000 were retrieved; given how sharply the intersection filter reduced the pool, the marginal records were overwhelmingly off-topic.

compensation, we restricted the compensation pillar to genuine monetary and reward terms, removing a large tranche of records in which “benefits” meant the perceived advantages of remote work. We screened records by title and abstract against a pre-specified codebook and recorded exclusions by reason (Table 2).

Table 2. Screening exclusions by reason

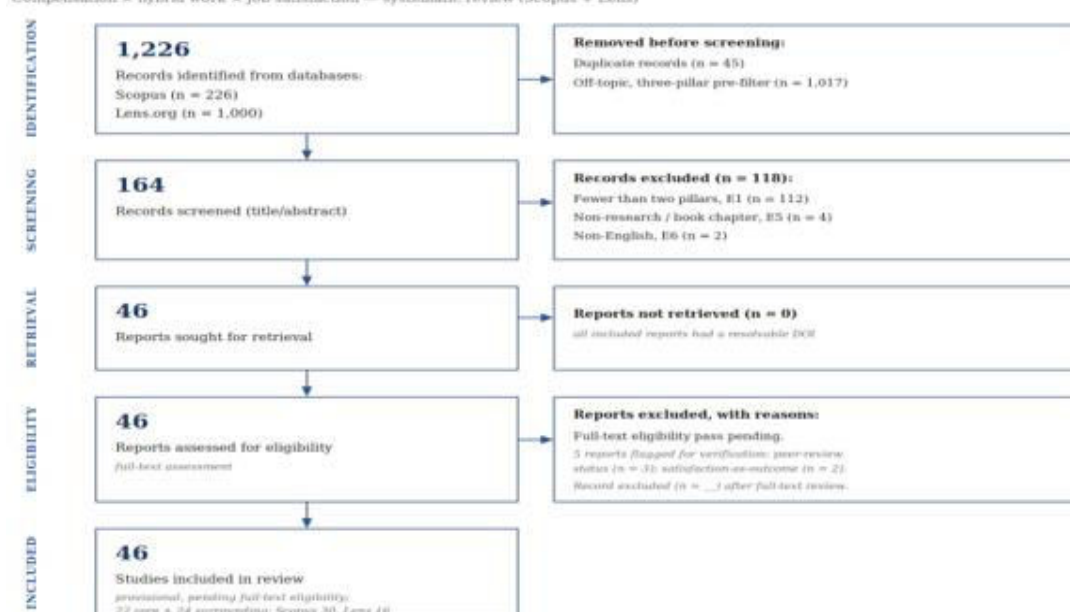
Code	Reason	n
E1	Fewer than two pillars substantively engaged	112
E5	Book chapter / non-research / no abstract	4
E6	Non-English publication	2

The PRISMA flow appears in Figure 1. Of 1,226 records identified (Scopus 226; Lens 1,000), 45 duplicates and 1,017 records failing the three-pillar intersection pre-filter were removed, leaving 164 for title/abstract screening; 118 were excluded. The 46 remaining reports were sought for retrieval and all obtained, each having a resolvable DOI (reports not retrieved = 0), and were then

assessed for full-text eligibility. This yielded 46 included studies: 22 that engage all three constructs (the three-way core) and 24 that engage two (the surrounding literature); five reports were flagged at the eligibility stage for verification of peer-review status or of satisfaction as a genuine outcome.

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Compensation × hybrid work × job satisfaction — systematic review (Scopus + Lens)



Two database curated design (Scopus + Lens). Lens CSV export capped at 1,000 of ~2,025 retrieved; marginal records predominantly off-topic.
Source: Page MJ et al., PRISMA 2020, BMJ 2021;372:n71.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram with retrieval and eligibility stages.

Extraction and the moderation code

Each study was coded for context, method, compensation component, hybrid measure, theory, and the analytical core: a moderation code capturing how it treats the compensation–hybrid–satisfaction relationship: interaction formally tested (an explicit compensation $\times$ hybrid term on satisfaction); substitution/trade-off (evidence or argument that flexibility offsets pay, in the compensating-differentials tradition); main-effects (all three variables present, modelled additively); or one of three surrounding edges (compensation–satisfaction, hybrid–satisfaction, or compensation–hybrid) for studies engaging only two constructs. Synthesis combined thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) with a bibliometric keyword co-occurrence map and the moderation-coding matrix.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Descriptive profile

The corpus is a creature of the pandemic era: publications rise across the window, and cluster in 2024–2026 (Figure 2), consistent with a literature that formed as hybrid work became

normal. Methodologically, it leans on cross-sectional surveys, many analysed with structural equation modelling, alongside fewer econometric panel studies and reviews (Figure 5). Longitudinal and experimental designs, the best suited to identifying an interaction, are scarce. Geographically the corpus is dispersed, spanning European panel data (Arntz et al., 2022; Laß et al., 2025), North American surveys (Angrisani et al., 2026; Makridis & Schloetzer, 2026), Gulf and Middle Eastern samples (Alotaibi, 2023; Hussain & Ahmed, 2025; Serhan et al., 2026), and a substantial South and Southeast Asian contingent (Gayathri & Ayswarya, 2026; Othman et al., 2024; Saifullah & Arijanto, 2024). This is a mixed blessing: it gives the corpus external reach, but no single context is covered densely enough to support strong claims about how substitution operates within it. Studies from high-flexibility labour markets and from lower-income settings where remote work is a scarce privilege describe different points on the same underlying function, yet the corpus rarely treats them that way. Information-technology and professional-services sectors are also prominent, while frontline and manufacturing settings, where flexibility is constrained and the pay–satisfaction relationship may look different, are thin.

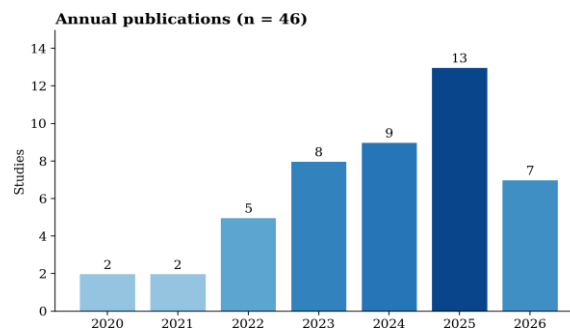


Figure 2. Annual publications across the corpus (n = 46).

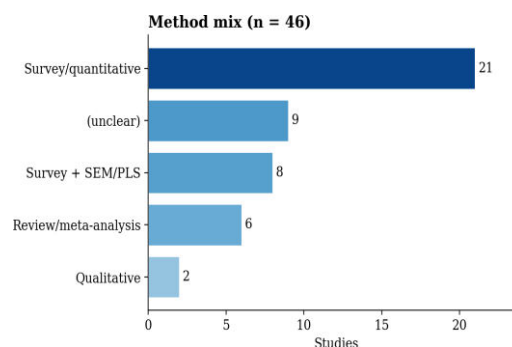


Figure 5. Method mix across the corpus (n = 46).

RQ1: How the relationship is conceptualised

Two patterns define the conceptual terrain. First, the compensation construct is dominated by base pay and benefits, with non-monetary and total-rewards framings a distinct minority (Figure 4). Studies adopting a total-rewards lens tend to come closest to the moderation question, treating flexibility as one reward among several whose value depends on the mix (Serhan et al., 2026). Second, the keyword co-occurrence network resolves into two clusters (Figure 6). One binds job satisfaction to compensation, benefits, remote work, telework, working from home, work-life balance, and COVID-19: the pandemic-era literature on where people work and how satisfied they are. The other binds hybrid work to rewards, incentives, non-monetary rewards, performance,

retention, motivation, and engagement: the human-resource literature on the reward mix and its behavioural outcomes. What is revealing is which terms fall on which side: monetary compensation and benefits sit in the satisfaction cluster, while reward and incentive vocabulary sits apart, so job satisfaction and hybrid work, the very pair whose interaction this review interrogates, occupy different clusters joined only by thin cross-links. The density map (Figure 7) confirms this, showing two dense cores separated by a thin intermediate area, exactly where publications on the compensation $\times$ hybrid interaction would be expected. The map thus depicts two distinct lines of research pursuing the same goal from fundamentally different questions.

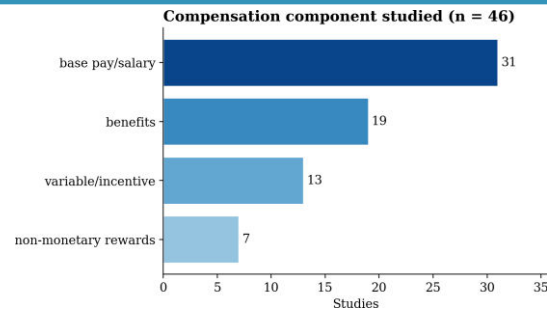


Figure 4. Compensation component studied across the corpus (n = 46).

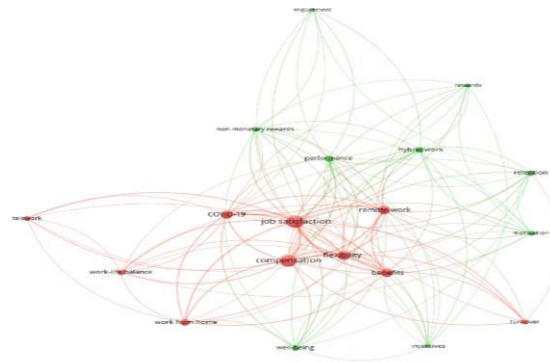


Figure 6. Keyword co-occurrence network (VOSviewer, n = 46). Cluster 1 (compensation, benefits, remote/telework, work-life balance, job satisfaction); Cluster 2 (rewards, incentives, non-monetary rewards, hybrid work, performance, retention, motivation, engagement).

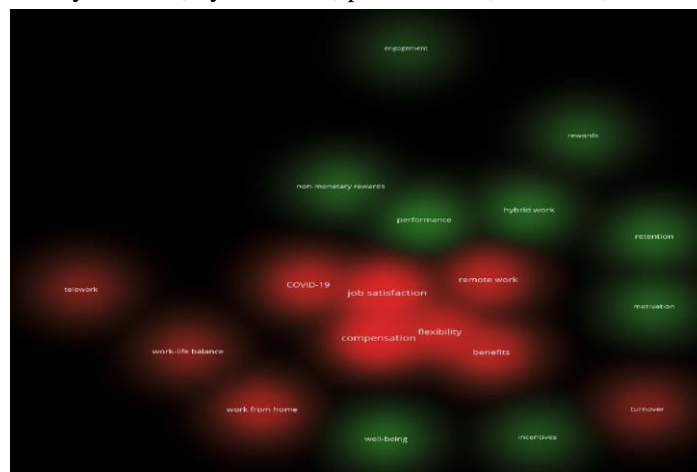


Figure 7. Keyword density visualization (VOSviewer, n = 46). Dense cores mark the two clusters; the sparse middle marks the untested compensation × hybrid × satisfaction intersection.

RQ2: The moderation is asserted, not tested

Our main result is a categorization of the studies of the three-way relationship among pay, flexibility, and satisfaction (Figure 3, Table 3). Fifteen studies included all three variables in their main-effects models but did not examine their interaction. Fourteen investigated only the hybrid-satisfaction relationship, and eight only the compensation-hybrid relationship, with satisfaction not their main focus. Five engage the substitution logic, through willingness-to-pay estimates for remote work (Angrisani et al., 2026), the compensating-differentials framing of commuting and job characteristics (Morris et al., 2025), the explicit "more pay or better work-life balance?" trade-off (Dangaiso et al., 2024), the generational reordering of pay below flexibility (Shah, 2025), or the finding that the remote-work satisfaction advantage shrinks sharply once compensation is controlled (Makridis & Schloetzer, 2026).

Just two studies formally test a compensation × hybrid interaction on satisfaction, and both are instructive because they are exceptional. One embeds extrinsic rewards in a socio-technical model of remote and hybrid work and finds that the reward-satisfaction link is conditioned by the technological and organizational context rather than fixed (Marjerison et al., 2026). The other revisits Herzberg across work locations and shows that hygiene factors such as pay and benefits relate to satisfaction differently for remote and in-person workers, a moderation result in all but name (Wilgus & Travis, 2025; Herzberg, 1966). Neither is framed mainly as a test of compensating differentials, and neither decomposes the interaction by compensation component, but both show the analysis is feasible with ordinary data and methods. The barrier, then, is not technical: the question is rarely posed.



Figure 3. How studies treat the compensation $\times$ hybrid $\times$ satisfaction link (n = 46)

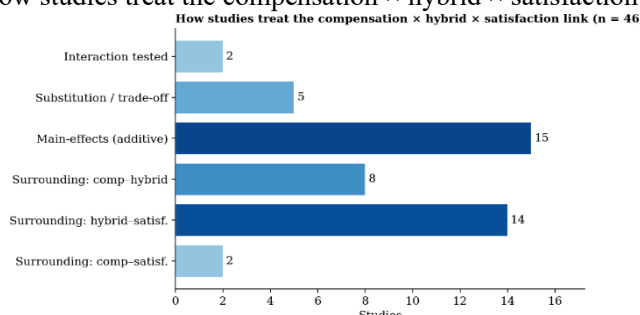


Table 3. Moderation code distribution (n = 46)

Treatment of the relationship	Studies
Main-effects (all three, additive)	15
Surrounding: hybrid-satisfaction edge	14
Surrounding: compensation-hybrid edge	8
Substitution / trade-off (compensating differential)	5
Interaction formally tested	2
Surrounding: compensation-satisfaction edge	2

Only two of forty-six included studies model the contingency that both economic and managerial theory predict, and only about one in seven engages the substitution question in any form. Additive studies are not wrong so much as silent: entering pay and flexibility as parallel predictors assumes their effects are independent, which is the substitution hypothesis assumed away rather than tested. The willingness-to-pay and pay-controlled studies come closest and converge on substitution, suggesting that the satisfaction premium of remote work is partly a compensating differential in disguise (Angrisani et al., 2026; Makridis & Schloetzer, 2026). But convergence among five studies is a promising signal, not a settled finding. An additive regression yields two tidy coefficients, whereas a single product term could reveal that pay matters greatly for office-bound workers and little for flexible ones, or the reverse. With fourteen studies examining hybrid work and satisfaction without any compensation term and fifteen more stacking the variables additively, the field has amassed much evidence consistent with substitution and almost none that distinguishes it from independence.

RQ3: Which compensation components, under flexibility

Where compensation is disaggregated, base pay and salary dominate, followed by benefits, with non-monetary rewards a smaller share (Figure 4). The components are unlikely to interact with flexibility in the same way: base pay, as a hygiene factor, may be most readily traded for flexibility, while non-monetary rewards, closer to Herzberg's motivators, may complement it. A few studies gesture at this heterogeneity by examining cash versus non-cash benefits (Gopidas, 2025; Herzberg, 1966), non-monetary reward mixes in remote settings (Serhan et al., 2026), or fringe benefits alongside flexibility for hybrid workers (Thirasak & Rompho, 2024), but none decomposes the interaction by component. This matters in practice: if flexibility substitutes chiefly for base pay, hybrid arrangements are a lever on labour cost with the same equity questions as wage-setting; if it substitutes for or complements non-monetary rewards, it operates more as culture than cost. Without differentiating compensation, the corpus cannot tell managers what

they are trading, and disaggregating the reward bundle, as a few studies begin to do descriptively (Gopidas, 2025; Serhan et al., 2026), is a precondition for an answer.

RQ4: Gaps

Four gaps follow. The interaction gap: the compensation $\times$ hybrid moderation is essentially untested. The design gap: additive cross-sectional surveys cannot identify moderation, and panel and experimental designs are rare. The component gap: no study asks which elements of the reward bundle flexibility substitutes for. The boundary-condition gap: substitution likely depends on income, sector, and national context, since low-paid workers can least afford to trade wages for flexibility and often cannot access it (Bloom et al., 2015; Quintero-Peña, 2026), yet these contingencies are described rather than modelled.

An integrative framework

The evidence supports treating hybrid work as a moderator of the compensation-satisfaction relationship, nested within a total-rewards conception of the job. Pay raises satisfaction, but with a slope that flattens as flexibility rises. This is the substitution branch, where the willingness-to-pay and pay-controlled evidence points, though the framework leaves room for complementarity (pay and flexibility reinforce each other as signals of a valued relationship) and recalibration (hybrid work resets the referents against which pay is judged). Its value is diagnostic: a single product term whose sign and magnitude would adjudicate between additive and substitutive worlds, located where the corpus is emptiest. The framework is falsifiable, predicting a negative compensation $\times$ flexibility term that is stronger among workers for whom flexibility is accessible and valued. No interaction would vindicate the additive world, and a positive one would indicate complementarity. It also reframes null findings: the weak average pay-satisfaction link may conceal a strong effect among the inflexible and a negligible one among the flexible, so the modest correlation anchoring the field since Judge et al. (2010) may be an artefact of pooling across flexibility regimes, a possibility no included study is designed to rule out.



DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

The field has borrowed the vocabulary of compensating differentials and total rewards without their central claim: both hold that a wage's value depends on the amenities bundled with it, so both predict an interaction, yet the literature estimates additive models. The two-factor tradition sharpens this: because pay and flexibility plausibly operate on different margins, their combination is unlikely to be additive, and the asymmetry is itself testable (Wilgus & Travis, 2025). If flexibility is a motivator and pay a hygiene factor, substituting one for the other is a trade across categories that could leave employees exposed when the hygiene floor is threatened, for instance by a pay freeze eroded by inflation, something no cross-sectional study can capture. The corpus also blurs pay level with pay satisfaction and formal flexibility with experienced autonomy, so separating objective from perceived measures is a precondition for identifying the interaction.

Practical implications

Offering hybrid work instead of pay is tempting, but the evidence does not yet license it. It shows that flexibility is valued and that its satisfaction return appears to overlap with that of pay (Angrisani et al., 2026; Makridis & Schloetzer, 2026), while whether, for whom, and at what fairness cost substitution works is unestablished. Substitution is not neutral: higher-paid knowledge workers can most easily trade wage for flexibility and access it, while lower-paid and frontline workers often can do neither (Bloom et al., 2015; Quintero-Peña, 2026). The return to flexibility may also erode as it becomes an expectation rather than a perk (Shah, 2025), so a snapshot of high satisfaction is no durable licence to hold wages down.

Methodological implications

Cross-sectional models that enter pay and flexibility additively cannot reveal moderation; a simple product term would fix this. Cleaner identification calls for panel data that follow the same workers as their flexibility changes (Arntz et al., 2022; Laß et al., 2025), discrete-choice and willingness-to-pay experiments that quantify the trade-off (Angrisani et al., 2026; Mas & Pallais, 2017), and controls for compensation so the differential is measured rather than absorbed (Makridis & Schloetzer, 2026). Selection compounds the problem, since workers with abundant flexibility often also have high pay and strong outside options, so naive comparisons conflate flexibility's effect with who obtains it. Within-person designs avoid this, and the two corpus studies closest to identifying the differential rely on exactly these features (Arntz et al., 2022; Makridis & Schloetzer, 2026).

Structure of the field: two clusters and a missing bridge

The co-occurrence and density maps (Figures 6 and 7) show the fragmentation that the moderation coding quantified. The fault line separates monetary compensation, benefits, and pandemic-era remote-work vocabulary (clustered around job satisfaction) from reward-management vocabulary such as incentives, non-monetary rewards, performance, and retention (clustered around hybrid work as a policy). The pay $\times$ flexibility interaction falls in the valley between them, and the density map shows no ridge connecting the two cores. The two studied edges, compensation-satisfaction and hybrid-satisfaction, have not converged because different research

communities pursue them with different vocabularies and venues, leaving the interaction institutionally homeless.

Reconciling the mixed hybrid-satisfaction evidence

The moderation gap may also explain why studies report positive, null, and negative effects of hybrid work on satisfaction, which reviews have attributed to measurement error, industry differences, and timing. A moderation framework offers a more parsimonious account: if pay moderates the satisfaction from flexibility, studies pooling different pay regimes will find averages that shift with sample composition. Well-paid professionals who can trade wage for flexibility will yield one estimate, and lower-paid workers who cannot will yield another. The inconsistency is then a signal of an omitted interaction, not noise, though no included study is designed to test this.

Contribution and relation to prior reviews

Prior syntheses cover remote and hybrid work outcomes and, separately, compensation and satisfaction, and these bodies of evidence remain as separate as the two clusters in Figure 6. This review instead treats hybrid work as a moderator, codes the primary literature for whether it tests that moderation, and shows with Figure 3 and Figures 6 and 7 that it rarely does. Its value is diagnostic and generative rather than summative: it pinpoints the single missing question whose answer would reorganize what is known.

CONCLUSION

The field has every ingredient of a question it has not asked. It knows that pay relates to satisfaction, weakly and conditionally, and that flexibility relates to satisfaction, with workers willing to pay for it. Theory (compensating differentials, total rewards, two-factor logic) predicts that these two facts should interact, so that the value of pay bends with the flexibility bundled around it. Yet only two of the 46 studies examined this interaction, and only a few hybrid-work studies discussed compensation as a substitute for or complement to flexibility. The two literatures have grown side by side, largely separate empirically while closely interwoven in theory. Viewing them through a moderation lens identifies the single term that needs study, along with the relevant designs and boundary conditions. The most promising future work will therefore analyze multiplicative relationships rather than pile up further main effects. A single interaction estimate can tell employers whether flexibility substitutes for or complements monetary compensation, show policy makers whether hybrid work is shifting the wage-satisfaction equilibrium and who gains or loses, and clarify for researchers whether the small but persistent pay-satisfaction correlation is a real property of how employees perceive pay or an averaging artifact of un-modeled contingencies. These are substantial returns for a trivial methodological change: what is needed is integration.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author states that this research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationship that can be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.



AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

N. Yushinta Puri contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, literature search, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. Abdul Rohman contributed to the conceptualization, interpretation of findings, critical revision of the manuscript, and supervision. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE STATEMENT

The authors state that generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in the preparation of this manuscript. The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI to help improve language clarity and the grammatical structure of manuscripts. The use is carried out in compliance with applicable ethical guidelines regarding the use and disclosure of generative AI in scientific research. Each author has made substantial intellectual contributions to this work. The entire content of the manuscript has been carefully reviewed to ensure its accuracy, and the author is solely responsible for the integrity and final content of the manuscript.

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