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Impact on Performance Assessment in post pandemic Flexible work Arrangement, analysis through Mediation Model

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Abstract: In last 2 years organizations have witnessed straining their cultural cohesiveness and social connections among team members. Fragmentation among teams in remote work is visible and has resulted in drop of cross functional collaboration. Therefore, re-building bonds, increase collaborative approaches of working and knitting affiliation among team members is critical in the new model of working. Keeping the workforce engaged in Hybrid/Flexible work is challenging but with regular feedback in this transitional phase, where flexible work arrangements are being adopted by companies, it is critical to keep the workforce aligned to set objectives. The purpose of this paper was to study the mediating impact of feedback on the performance assessment process in the Hybrid work arrangement. A structured survey questionnaire instrument was deployed for collation of data and Process Macro was used for the mediation analysis. The research has projected the value derived from the regularity of objective feedback delivered in the Hybrid work Model in the post pandemic world. Consistent and objective feedback's mediation impact on the performance assessment in this transitional work environment critically highlights the significance of the role that Managers in the Hybrid work Arrangement

Index Terms - Hybrid, Performance, Feedback, Leadership, Mediation, Flexible

I. INTRODUCTION

Last twenty four months have been really challenging for the businesses across sectors as the pandemic hit hard the set paradigm of business's operations continuity, managing human resources – nurturing talent, reviving culture in the new world order and maintaining attrition levels. The world is evolving around us and is unsettling the deep rooted set structures of leadership that has been in existence for decades. Leadership styles, conducts are being tested at each level to lead an organisation in the new normal and evolution in the leadership skills is critical to lead a re-defined workforce. A workforce which is in the midst of the "Great Resignation" stage are now looking away from the grind of limited opportunities, low salary, not being valued by the leadership/manager, being forced to return to work with limited opportunities to now eyeing towards jobs that offer flexible working practices, better employee salary, benefits, meaningful work and career growth (Comaford, C, 2022).

In last 2 years organisations have witnessed straining their cultural cohesiveness and social connections among team members. Fragmentation among teams in remote work is visible and has resulted in drop of cross functional collaboration. Anxiety for some has increased and patience, tolerance for others have reduced. Hence, re-building bonds, increase collaborative approaches of working and knitting affiliation among team members is critical in the new model of working. This is where Flexible work arrangement will play a pivotal role in this post pandemic new world order. Keeping the workforce engaged in Hybrid/Flexible work is challenging but with regular feedback in this transitional phase, where flexible work arrangements are being adopted by companies, it is critical to keep the workforce aligned to set objectives. Managers are also trying to assess if feedbacks virtually would have more impact than the physical meet ups or will 'Walking Meetings' and 'Virtual Lunches or Coffees' would be the right environment to share light feedback and coaching (Rosenkrantz, 2021)

Through this paper researcher has tried to gauge the mediation impact of Feedback in Performance Assessment process during the Flexible/Hybrid work arrangement in service sector primarily in IT/ITES (Consulting) businesses. Governments in India did provide relaxations to facilitate work from home for Other service providers like IT/ITes companies during the pandemic period (Business Standard, 2020). However, now with Return to Office traction is increasing, employees still prefer organisations that would ensure a longer Work From Home or gradual movement to office through Hybrid work options (Kumar, 2021). A structured survey questionnaire instrument was deployed for collation of data and Process Macro was used for the mediation analysis and the result proved that, the mediation effects of Feedback on Performance Assessment in Hybrid work model environment. It signifies mediation occurrence in the study mediation model. The study echoes the need for consistent and objective feedback delivery in the Hybrid work model for an effective performance assessment in the advent of the new business model.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Remote working which essentially gathered much attention due to operational challenges posed by Covid has now become an arrangement that the organisations would be required to cope with for a long time. Hybrid work option is emerging as a preferred work arrangement for employees (Smet, Dowling, Mysore & Reich, 2021) and hence it is essential to have a right mix of workspace flexibility and worktime flexibility. Workspace flexibility ensures a benchmarking needed for time spent at office and time spent through remote working. With worktime flexibility the amount of active time spent on office tasks needs to be determined (Grzegorzczuk et al, 2021). The benchmarking needs to be reviewed and established by every organisation basis their requirements and processes.

Hybrid work arrangement means combination of remote work along with work from physical office space, with frequency of visiting office differs basis the requirements. There are pros like real estate cost saving for employers, increased efficiency and productivity for employees and increased protection from Covid infection as it helps in maintaining minimum contact with others with this arrangement. Though certainly the challenges of Hybrid work model includes negatively impacting the team work and coordination when compared with physical office setup, reduced employee visibility and employee engagement too becomes tough in virtual ecosystem (Lenka, 2021). Hence, it becomes critical for the managers to drive the performance of the employees for achieving the larger set objectives of the organisation in the new working model and that can be delivered through continuous effective feedback.

It is manager's responsibility to schedule regular check-ins with their teams, be transparent with work schedules, regularly ask for feedback to support and guide them in their day-to-day activities. A manager should highlight work priorities and accomplishments for better engagement. Manager should always strive to build strong personal connections regardless of their work locations. Employee on the other hand should also collaborate to regularly update on the work and tasks assigned with manager. Be active in their team meetings and be transparent about the work schedules (MIT, 2022).

Feedback in Hybrid workplace is certainly a critical task as in the physical office space managers could meet up with the team members and have that informal conversations and even coaching while on the walk or during the water cooler conversations. The way managers adapted to the quick change of business operations since the pandemic hit the industry and with now return to office initiation, it is critical to not have too many virtual feedback sessions or rather have a frequency of remote and physical connects determined. However, if only the performance review sessions are given in person then it may seem like that the poor management skills are being covered up (Rosenkrantz, 2021). Lately, there is an increase in the employee churn with ease in restrictions, suggesting that a transparent and objective communication is essential to keep employees aligned with the organisation's objective. A limited frequency of feedback can be detrimental to performance management in hybrid setting. This is because of paucity of face to face contact is and therefore an 'out of sight, out of mind' culture is more likely to appear between employees and their managers (Seemann, 2021).

When an employee transitions from only physical office model of work to hybrid/remote model of work, it becomes more important to have right tools for assessment of performance for an employee. Employee trust and engagement alters in the hybrid work model and the annual ritual of assessing the performance needs to be carefully altered too. In hybrid model, the business needs to get away from the approach of measuring performance through the number of hours spent on the system rather a more tailored approach needs to be curated where the output delivered is the factor that should be considered for performance assessment (Westfall, 2021). Performance assessment as a process ensures that managers fairly and equitably review the performance of their employees and ensures that each employee is delivering high quality service to stakeholders, and is treating colleagues with dignity and respect. Process includes evaluation of performance, improvement of performance, encourage staff development and highlight the performance strength and weaknesses (Nor, 2018). It is also important in the Performance assessment/appraisal process to set the standards, communicate the objectives, measure performance, provide feedback and take corrective actions.

With relevance of feedback in Hybrid work environment tied up with organisations goals, it really becomes crucial for managers to provide with fact driven, action oriented and event based objective feedback to their team members. On the other hand a subjective feedback that majorly constitutes opinions, judgement and perceptions about the team or an individual performance may have limited alignments with the aligned objectives. An objective feedback with regular check-ins will certainly drive team member's behaviour and actions that will in tandem positively enhance the team's performance in limited observational remote environment. Hence, it is beneficial to provide team level and individual level feedback because it allows for self-presentation and social comparison both at the same time (Handke et al., 2022).

Organizations are now being forced, in the wake of the pandemic, to determine how best to handle performance evaluation. Re-examining the process is now essential as the goals must be in line with the evolving business requirements. Today, in addition to financial rewards, workplace flexibility is increasingly considered as a way to recognize and reward teams. (Sarin, 2021).
Mediation Model of the Study

In view of the above literature, the study proposed feedback playing a mediating role between the Hybrid/Flexible work option (independent construct) as a working model and the performance assessment process (dependent construct). The relationship between the three constructs namely Hybrid Work Model, Objective feedback and Performance Appraisal/Assessment is presented as below in Figure 1:

- Hypothesis I - There is a causal relationship between working in the Hybrid work option and Performance assessment factors for employees working in the new world order.

- Hypothesis II – Objective Feedback mediates the effect of relationship between working in Hybrid work arrangement and its impact on the Performance assessment for the workforce

Figure 1a depicts the total effects between the Hybrid Work Option, i.e., the independent construct, and the Performance Assessment - the outcome construct of the study. The hypothesized relationship coefficient has been depicted as “Path-A”. Figure 1b defined the direct effects between the Hybrid Work Option (independent construct) and the Performance Assessment (dependent construct) through the Objective Feedback (mediating construct) denoted by path-A’, as well as the indirect effects of the hypothesized model denoted as “Path-B” and “Path-C”.

Mathematically, total effects = Direct effects + Indirect effects
i.e., $A = A' + BC$

“Path-A” is the regression coefficient defining the total effects of the independent construct on the outcome or dependent construct in the model (Figure 1a). Path-A’ is the regression coefficient predicting the direct effect of independent construct on the dependent construct through the mediating variable. The indirect effects in the model is the product of the Path-B and Path-C coefficients of determination (BC) as shown in Figure 1b; where, Path-B is the regression coefficient assessing the mediating construct from the independent construct while path-C is the regression coefficient estimating the outcome or dependent construct from the mediating variable of the study’s hypothesized model.

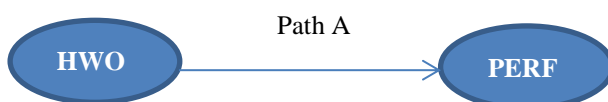


Figure 1a : Total effect of the Model

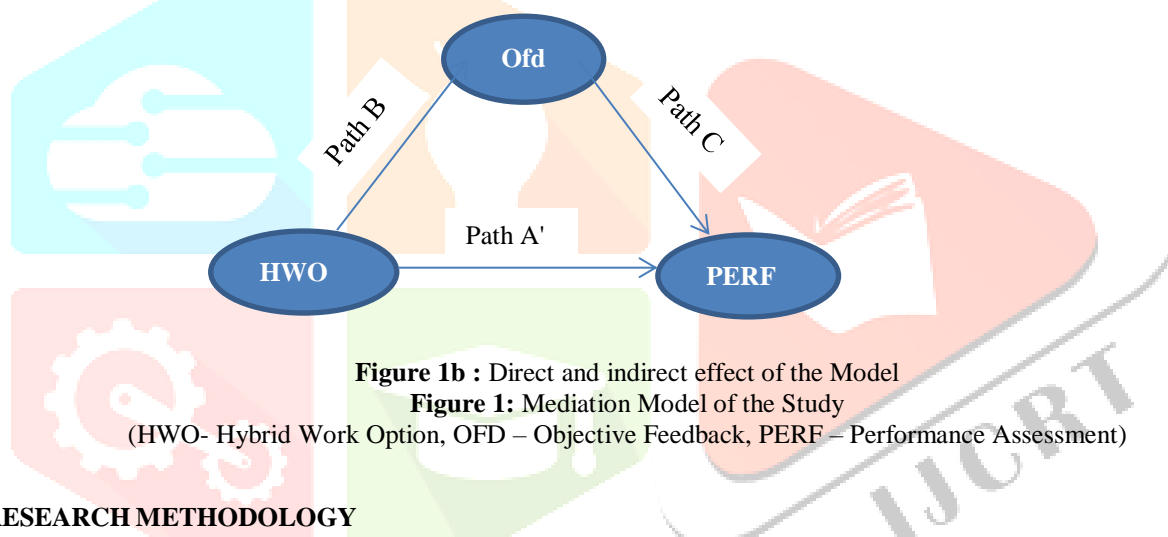


Figure 1b : Direct and indirect effect of the Model

Figure 1: Mediation Model of the Study

(HWO- Hybrid Work Option, OFD – Objective Feedback, PERF – Performance Assessment)

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To effectually analyse the hypothesized mediation model, all the three of the study constructs: Hybrid Work Option (HWO), Objective Feedback (OFDB) and Performance Assessment (PerfA), were measured with a Five-point Likert scale. Dependent, Independent and Mediating constructs were measured using the Five-point Likert scale, starting from Strongly Disagree denoted by 1 to Strongly Agree denoted by 5. Content validity of scales used for the study was conducted by industry and academic experts. The pilot study was also carried out among 35 respondents from IT/ITes companies, who were not included in the sample, to identify the possible errors of a questionnaire so as to improve the reliability of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of questions and statements related to the constructs, which were developed on the basis of literature review.

The stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting the research sample for it assures a certain level of precision. A total of 582 structured survey questionnaires were distributed through emails and social media messaging to employees from IT/ITes/Consulting sector. Recorded the overall response rate of 57% totaling to 331 responses but only 307 were used for the study of mediation analysis.

Reliability and Validity Test of Instrument

The average variance extracted (Convergent Validity) and the Composite reliability coefficients are related to the quality of a measure. AVE is a measure of the amount of variance that is taken by a construct in relation to the amount of variance due to measurement error (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To be specific, AVE is a measure to assess convergent validity. Convergent validity measures the level of correlation of multiple indicators of the same construct that are in agreement. The factor loading of the items, composite reliability and the average variance extracted have to be calculated to determine convergent validity (Hair et al, 2014). The value of AVE and CR ranges from 0 to 1, where a higher value indicates higher reliability level. AVE is more than or equal to 0.5 confirms the convergent validity (Noora,2021).

Table 1- Average Variance Extracted (AVE) & Composite Reliability (CR) of constructs

Constructs	Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	AVE	CR
HWO	.803	0.73	0.93
OFDB	.684	0.66	0.85
PerfA	.691	0.65	0.93

The convergent validity is established when average variance extracted is ≥ 0.5 . The AVE values for the constructs namely, Hybrid Work Option (HWO), Objective Feedback (OFDB) and Performance Assessment (PerfA) are 0.73, 0.66, and 0.65 respectively. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), $AVE \geq 0.5$ confirms the convergent validity and it can be seen that all the AVE values in Table 1 are greater or equal to 0.5. The composite reliability (CR) value for constructs are 0.93, 0.85, and 0.93 respectively. It evidences the internal consistency in scale items.

The reliability of a questionnaire is examined with Cronbach's alpha. It provides a simple way to measure whether or not a score is reliable. It is used under the assumption that there are multiple items measuring the same underlying construct; such as in tourist satisfaction survey, there are few questions all asking different things, but when combined, could be said to measure overall satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency and measure of scale reliability. Cronbach's alpha ranges between 0 and 1. A general accepted rule is that Alpha of 0.6-0.7 indicates an acceptable level of reliability, and 0.8 or greater a very good level. However, values higher than 0.95 are not necessarily good, since they might be an indication of redundancy (Hulin, Netemeyer, and Cudeck, 2001). For the above constructs HWO, OFDB and PerfA the Cronbach's Alpha are .80, .68 and .69 respectively, hence falling within the acceptable limit. This confirms the reliability and validity of the instrument basis the Cronbach Alpha, AVE and CR readings.

Assessing the mediation effect of Objective Feedback on Performance assessment using Process Macros

Mediation as a modern statistic with different approaches allows researchers to explore and understand how and why relationships and or effects exist between study variables (Hayes, 2012). In this study, the mediation effects of Objective Feedback on Performance Assessment in Hybrid work model were achieved using Process Macro (Hayes et al, 2013). Process Macro is a mediation software, capable of assimilating a number of functions of different mediation techniques into a single procedure (Hayes et al, 2014). The mediation methods used were:

- Bias corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs) method (Efron et al, 1993), and
- Sobel test (Sobel, 1986)

Path B: Indirect effect of Hybrid Work Option (IV) on Objective Feedback (Mediator)

The coefficient of the effects of Hybrid Work Option on Objective Feedback as the outcome construct along Path B was .6506, the test of the statistical significance t-value was 7.2946, and the p-value was = 0.0000 ($P < 0.05$), indicating significant effects between the independent construct (HWO) and mediating construct (OFDB). Also, the bias-corrected lower limit Confidence Intervals (C.Is) (LLCI) and the upper limit C.Is (ULCI) obtained along Path B were 0.4751 and 0.8261, respectively. Considering that the p-value ($P < 0.05$) and both LLCI and ULCI did not include zero, the effects between the independent construct (HWO) and the mediating variable (OFDB) was significant as highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2: Relationship between Variables along Path B

OUTCOME VARIABLE:						
Ofd						
Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.3892	.1515	.3572	53.2107	1.0000	298.0000	.0000
Model						
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2.5231	.2640	9.5576	.0000	2.0036	3.0426
HWO	.6506	.0892	7.2946	.0000	.4751	.8261

Path C: Indirect effect of Objective Feedback (Mediator) on Performance Assessment (DV)

For the indirect effects of Path C, the obtained coefficient was 0.1524, p-value was 0.0000 ($p < 0.05$) and test of the significant t-value was 9.6523; while, the LLCI and ULCI were 0.1213 and 0.1834, respectively. Hence, effect of the mediating construct Objective Feedback (OFDB) on the dependent construct Performance Assessment (PerfA) was significant ($p < 0.05$), and both the lower and the upper CI values did not include zero as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Relationship between Variables along Path C

OUTCOME VARIABLE:							
PERF							
Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	.7166	.5135	.0265	156.7692	2.0000	297.0000	.0000
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	1.1782	.0822	14.3279	.0000	1.0164	1.3401	
HWO	.2617	.0264	9.9171	.0000	.2098	.3136	
Ofd	.1524	.0158	9.6523	.0000	.1213	.1834	
Standardized coefficients							
	coeff						
HWO	.4357						
Ofd	.4241						

Path A: Total effect of Hybrid Work Option (IV) on Performance Assessment (DV)

The coefficient of determination for the total effect of HWO on Performance Assessment (Path-A) was 0.3608, which was significant at $p = 0.0000$ ($p < 0.05$) level of significance, test of statistical significance t-value was 12.9736. The LLCI and ULCI were 0.3061 and 0.4156, respectively. The p-value was significant and also, the C.Is values were significant, having no zero (0) value between the confidence intervals at a 95% level of confidence, highlighted in Table 4.

Table 4: Total effects of Relationship along Path A

***** TOTAL EFFECT MODEL *****							
OUTCOME VARIABLE:							
PERF							
Model Summary							
	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	.6008	.3609	.0347	168.3141	1.0000	298.0000	.0000
Model							
	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
constant	1.5627	.0823	18.9833	.0000	1.4007	1.7247	
HWO	.3608	.0278	12.9736	.0000	.3061	.4156	

Measuring the Overall Mediation Effects Based on the Bias-Corrected Bootstrapping

Summary of the total and the direct and indirect effects from the Process macro mediation analysis on the study model is presented in Table 5. The result provided the bias- corrected bootstrap CIs at 95% lower and upper limits on the paths of the model. In this approach, the Confidence Intervals levels for the indirect effects were checked to ensure zero was not involved within the limit range (Mallinkckrodt et al, 2006 and Hayes et al, 2008), and to ensure the indirect effects (path-B * path-C) or $(A - A') \neq 0$ and were significant in relation to the obtained t-value and p-value (Hayes, 2012, 2013).

The indirect effect can be ascertained either as the product of the path-B, and path-C coefficients (BC) or by calculating the differences between the total effect (path-A) and the direct effect (path- A') coefficients $(A - A')$:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{i.e., Indirect effect} &= (\text{Path-B} * \text{Path-C}) \\ &= (0.6506 \times 0.1524) = 0.0991 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Alternatively, the indirect effect} &= \text{difference between Total effect (Path-A) and Direct effect (Path-A')} \\ \text{i.e.,} & (0.3608 - 0.2617) = 0.0991 \end{aligned}$$

The indirect effects which were obtained based on the two different mediation options were the same as shown above. Thus, the findings were consistent, and the indirect effect was positive and totally different from zero, which proved the occurrence of mediation in the study model (Hayes, 2012, 2013a). Also in Table 5 it is highlighted that the obtained indirect effect of 0.0991 at the 95% bootstrapped CIs which were 0.0622 and 0.1348 obviously did not include zero. This highlights the incidence of mediation effect in the study model.

Table 5: Summary of the Total, Direct & Indirect Effects of the Study Model

*****TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y *****						
Total effect of X (HWO) on Y (PERF)						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c_cs
.3608	.0278	12.9736	.0000	.3061	.4156	.6008
Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c'_cs
.2617	.0264	9.9171	.0000	.2098	.3136	.4357
Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
Ofd	.0991	.0184	.0622	.1348		
Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:						
Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI			
Ofd	.1651	.0301	.1043	.2228		

Sobel Test Mediation Result

Process macro software generates different mediation outputs based on the model type chosen & the mediation method selected before running the analysis. This study used the fourth mediation model (Model 4) as developed by Hayes (Hayes,2013), and the Sobel test was chosen as a validating mediation approach to confirm the results obtained through the bias-corrected bootstrapped C.Is method as recommended by Hayes (Hayes,2013).

Purpose of Sobel Test is to test whether a mediator carries the influence of an Independent Variable (IV) to a Dependent Variable (DV) (Sobel, 1986). The Sobel test is based on the assumption that the products of the indirect effects are normally distributed; with this method, the standard error of the indirect effect coefficients was estimated based on the Normal theory test. Regression analysis was used for fetching the t- test statistic, t_a and t_b are the t-test statistics for the difference between the a and b coefficients (where a = regression coefficient for the association between IV and mediator and b = regression coefficient for the association between the mediator and the DV (when the IV is also a predictor of the DV), (Quantpsy, 2022).

Input:	Test statistic:	p-value:
t_a 7.295	Sobel test: 6.33012947	0
t_b 12.736	Aroian test: 6.31548809	0
	Goodman test: 6.34487317	0
Reset all		Calculate

Figure 2 – Sobel Test Results via Quantpsy.org

Basis the regression analysis the t_a and t_b inputs were determined as 7.295 and 12.736 respectively, with Sobel test Test Statistic computed as 6.33 and p = 0.0000 significance at p < 0.05 level of significance. The reported Test Statistic (rounded to 8 decimal places) are drawn from the unit normal distribution under the assumption of a two-tailed z-test of the hypothesis that the mediated effect equals zero in the population. +/- 1.96 are the critical values of the test ratio which contain the central 95% of the unit normal distribution (Quantpsy, 2022).

These proved the consistencies between the two different mediation findings (The indirect Result via the Sobel test remained the same as for the indirect effect obtained via the bias-corrected C.Is bootstrapping) using two distinct methods, and the outcome ultimately proved the mediation occurrence in the hypothesized study model. Hence, objective feedback as mediator in the model has mediated the effect on performance assessment for employees working in the Hybrid work model.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mediation results after analysing the data showed a causal relationship between the working in the Hybrid model (independent construct) and the Performance assessment for employees (dependent construct). The coefficient of determination for the causal relationship was = 0.3608, p-value = 0.0000 with a significance at p < 0.05 level of significance. The findings highlighted, Hybrid work model has a significant impact on the performance of employees in the post pandemic era. Hence, the 0.3608 value obtained as the coefficient of determination explains the magnitude of the effects on performance assessment for an employee by working in Hybrid model, Thus, the finding supported Hypothesis 1.

In Table 5 it is highlighted that the obtained indirect effect of 0.0991 at the 95% bootstrapped CIs which were 0.0622 and 0.1348 obviously did not include zero. This suggests that the study model contains a mediation effect. These results therefore provided evidence in favour of hypothesis 2, according to which Objective Feedback mediates the impacts of the interaction between the Hybrid Work Option and its impact on Employee Performance Assessment.

Further analysis was conducted using two distinct mediation approaches: the Bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CIs) method and the Sobel test method of mediation. Both approaches confirm the mediation impact of continuous objective feedback on the performance assessment of employees by working in the hybrid work model.

This study presented a mediation based model where Objective feedback did impact the performance assessment for employees in IT/ITes sector working in the hybrid model. However, the effectiveness of performance can only be enhanced with a continuous and sequential delivery of feedback which can be delivered by the managers for their workforce. Impetus for the same will depend on the managers as to remove biasness a consistent approach for improvement is needed and especially in the post pandemic work where Hybrid working will stay for long across industries. Further scope of studies can be assessed on the effectiveness of feedback and it's impact on performance in the Hybrid model in further industries and in academic sector too.

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