

Middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving practices in a hybrid work context

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Middle managers play a crucial role in interpreting and communicating organisational strategy, particularly in hybrid work environments where strategic objectives must be continuously adapted to operational realities. While existing research recognises their strategic influence, few studies explore middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving practices within hybrid contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring how middle managers navigate the complexities of a hybrid work environment to facilitate strategy transmission.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative case study was conducted within a large South African FMCG company. Data was collected through 12 semi-structured online interviews with middle managers from various business units. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) How do middle managers make and give sense within hybrid work contexts? (2) What practices are utilised by middle managers to interpret and transmit the strategy message?

Findings: Middle managers in the hybrid work context demonstrated how they transmitted strategic directives and recalibrated their actions. Sensemaking practices included re-establishing work boundaries, managing productivity perceptions, and leveraging informal communication networks. Key sensegiving practices included rephrasing strategic messages, personalising engagement, and fostering accountability. While digital tools support communication, in-person interactions remain essential for relational depth and strategic clarity. These findings offer insight into the situated micro-practices that bridge strategic intent and everyday work in a disrupted and evolving work environment.

Practical implications: The findings demonstrate the centrality of middle managers as meaning-makers and extend our understanding of how strategy work is performed under conditions of fluidity. To enhance strategic alignment, organisations should support middle managers by formalising hybrid work policies that balance digital and in-person collaboration. Management can use these practices to strengthen engagement, job crafting, work-life balance, and trust, thereby ensuring clarity in strategy execution.

Keywords: Case study; hybrid work; middle managers, practices; sensegiving; sensemaking

JEL Classification: B

1. INTRODUCTION

Whilst the concept of remote working was an emerging trend before COVID-19, the pandemic accelerated its adoption across the world. Companies that survived the effects of COVID-19 did so by rapidly transforming the way they did business, which included allowing employees to work remotely for some or all of the time, depending on the nature of their work and the restrictions set out by the World Health Organization (Nyamunda, 2022; Iwu *et al.*, 2023). As economies reopened and restrictions relaxed, there was a dramatic shift from remote working to hybrid working, which refers to a combination of working from the office and working remotely (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). The hybrid work environment includes a combination of in-office hours and hours in which employees work from home. With the rapid adoption of the hybrid work model, employees experienced new lived realities and challenges (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024; Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024).

Challenges identified at the start of the hybrid work movement included the rapid uptake and need for training in technologically enabled systems and infrastructure, institutional management support for digitalisation, and attention to work-family balances (Bolisani *et al.*, 2020; Deutrom *et al.*, 2021). Employees struggled to enforce working-hour boundaries and found themselves trapped in endless virtual meetings (Marx *et al.*, 2025). When working at home, employees experienced frequent interruptions in concentration, especially in households with children (Botha *et al.*, 2023; Iwu *et al.*, 2023). The sudden uptake of hybrid work affected the creation of meaningful social relationships and placed management in the difficult position of having to manage from a distance (Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2023). The sudden adoption of hybrid work for many traditional office-based employees in 2020 created a state of inertia and disorientation, as many felt unprepared for the change.

This disruption and associated challenges directly affected employee sensemaking, wellbeing, engagement, resource requirements, and organisational culture — all of which have implications for the achievement of strategy. The event caused employees to scramble as they sought to make sense of the ongoing messy flow of life and maintain an agentic sense of self (Wolfe *et al.*, 2025). As such, there is a growing body of management research exploring the challenges associated with hybrid working on strategy and business operations in the post-COVID era, with Nyamunda (2022) exploring the influence of hybrid working on personal work and perspectives, and Cassim *et al.* (2023) exploring employee sentiments about hybrid-work

arrangements. Broadening the exploration of hybrid work arrangements, Yozi and Mbokota (2024) examined adaptive leadership competencies within hybrid work teams. Also, in the South African context, Marx *et al.* (2025) explored employee experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on job crafting during uncertainty. Taken together, these studies emphasise the importance of knowing more about the lived experiences of practitioners operating in the hybrid work context. Scrutiny of available research reveals that research on hybrid work is not currently aligned with the pace and scale at which businesses are adopting hybrid work practices (Barmeyer *et al.*, 2019; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Botha *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, previous findings on remote or hybrid work emerged from planned and voluntary contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic caused mandatory and unplanned working arrangements, thus offering a unique and critical perspective to explore the lived experiences of practitioners in the hybrid work context (Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2023).

Whilst employees at all levels are affected by remote and hybrid working, this study focuses on middle managers who experienced the disruption. Middle managers play a fundamental role in strategy implementation, the transmission of culture, and in transmitting the strategy message to others at all levels of the organisation (Barmeyer *et al.*, 2019; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Kohtamäki *et al.*, 2021; Van Niekerk & Jansen van Rensburg, 2022). This group of managers often experience significant top-down and bottom-up pressure, especially during change and uncertainty, where there are increased demands for information and resources.

Even though the middle manager role in management literature is well established, empirical research exploring how these actors engage in sensemaking and sensegiving within post-COVID-19 hybrid work contexts is limited (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024; Kusmaryanto & Santoso, 2025). This study directly responds to ongoing calls for further investigation into hybrid work adaptations (Cassim *et al.*, 2023; Iwu *et al.*, 2023; Nyamunda, 2022; Yozi & Mbokota, 2024; Yang *et al.*, 2022; Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2023). By focusing on the interpretive and relational practices of middle managers, the study contributes to a better understanding of how strategic coherence is enacted in contexts of disruption and ambiguity (Van Dam, 2021; Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024).

The study was guided by the following questions: (1) How do middle managers make and give sense within hybrid work contexts? (2) What practices are utilised by middle managers to interpret and transmit the strategy message? In answering these two questions, the study offers a critical perspective on how middle managers adjust their cognitive, relational, and discursive practices to navigate and restore equilibrium in a hybrid work setting. The empirically identified findings of middle managers' practices are artefacts of their lived experiences. The use of sensemaking theory and the middle manager perspective offers a

theoretical contribution, and the practical nature of the findings offers support to managers seeking to create effective hybrid work strategies. The findings could be used to support employee well-being and maintain strategic coherence and resilience in a rapidly evolving work environment.

2. THEORETICAL POSITIONING

Although the concept of remote working is not novel, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many organisations incorporating remote work practices into post-pandemic operations, thereby creating increased attention on the hybrid work model (Best, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2022).

Hybrid work has been described as the “future of work” (Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024) and has its own growing body of literature. Hybrid work refers to members of an organisation allocating a portion of their normal work hours to work away from a central place (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Gratton, 2021; Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). There are four hybrid work types, including the traditional 9-5, in-office anytime, anywhere 9-5, and anywhere anytime. The hybrid work context typically refers to situations where not all members of the organisation are present in the same place at the same time. A hybrid work arrangement offers advantages for both employees and organisations, as it combines the benefits of remote and on-site work (Botha *et al.*, 2023). Hybrid working practices have been found to be preferred by employees who tend to prefer flexibility and control over how, when, and where they work. These choices have been associated with a sense of empowerment and better work–life balance (Botha *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, managers have reported difficulties assessing productivity and performance (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020; Mabaso & Manuel, 2024).

In this journal, both the advantages and challenges of hybrid work have been discussed. Cassim *et al.* (2023) found that employees expressed positive sentiments regarding receiving appropriate management and organisational support. Additionally, Nyamunda (2022) found that the sudden move to hybrid work changed employees' priorities, perspectives, and how they valued personal and professional relationships. Similarly, Iwu *et al.* (2023) found that employees who did not have the necessary management systems in place struggled with facilitating communication, as well as with feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, and a loss of collegiality. Despite the contributions of these studies, the challenges of hybrid work and their implications for practice necessitate further research. There is a need for research that includes the voices and lived experiences of those operating in a hybrid working arrangement (Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2023). This study responds by offering a timely and unique perspective of middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving practices in the hybrid work context (Dell'Aversana & Miglioretti, 2024). The following sections discuss sensemaking and

sensegiving, as well as the middle manager perspective, which together provide the framework and theoretical lens for the study.

2.1 Sensemaking and sensegiving in hybrid work

Sensemaking was developed as an alternate approach for understanding the process of organisation through labelling and categorising memories into plausible explanations. It is defined as the process of assigning meaning to the environment by applying values, beliefs, and stored knowledge to new situations (Giuliani, 2016; Xaba *et al.*, 2023). Sensemaking theory encourages the collection of lived experiences (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) and offers a lens to explore organising, paradoxes, and socially constructed, socially accomplished processes. It encourages the asking of questions such as 'what has occurred' and 'what is to be done next' (Weick *et al.*, 2005) to organise meaning and stories, particularly in chaotic environments where there is a multiplicity of interpretations.

The interruption of the pandemic provoked emergent organising practices. Practitioners had to reassemble the pieces of their shattered worldview whilst coping with unfamiliar conditions. The pandemic was a catalyst for sensemaking and presented an urgent need for employees to reinterpret and reconstruct their reality to serve as a working foundation for operating. As such, sensemaking is considered a useful theoretical lens for exploring the stories and experiences of practitioners adjusting to hybrid work during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic (Wolfe *et al.*, 2025). Through viewing sensemaking as a constructive, ongoing, cyclical process, attention is paid to the micro-level activities associated with what practitioners do to enact strategy (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). It encourages exploration of individual-level responses to shifts in environment and experiences (Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Jogie *et al.*, 2024).

Closely integrated with the sensemaking perspective is sensegiving theory, which refers to the process of influencing the meaning and understanding constructed by others (Giuliani, 2016). Sensegiving includes symbolic and discursive tactics that give meaning to unfolding events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Govender & Smit, 2022; Xaba *et al.*, 2023). When employees were sent home during the pandemic, they were not given work-from-home policies or guidance, thus creating a situation that was open to interpretation. In the absence of adequate information, practitioners struggled to make sense of the situation and associated health risks. Sensegiving diffuses rationalisations and justifications created through sensemaking across an organisation (Giuliani, 2016; Surju *et al.*, 2020). Without the process of sensegiving, sensemaking is rendered ineffective, as there is no transmission of the understanding gained to a larger audience within the organisation. Consequent studies relating to strategy transmission and translation confirm the importance of adopting a

sensemaking and sensegiving lens to identify how meaningful messages are created to enable the strategy (Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Peyrefitte *et al.*, 2022; Wolfe *et al.*, 2025).

Available literature reveals the day-to-day sensemaking and sensegiving activities undertaken by middle managers when creating and transmitting sense (Rouleau & Balogun, 2007; Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Surju *et al.*, 2020). These include translating stimuli, creating words and actions about the strategy, rationalising the need for change, debating and discussing understanding of the strategy, creating frameworks to guide understanding of the strategy, and reflecting on the message received (Kiernan *et al.*, 2020:496; Surju *et al.*, 2020; Xaba *et al.*, 2023). The sensemaking and sensegiving practices of middle managers stimulate a cognitive shift and revised daily actions, among other outcomes. They attempt to restore equilibrium during disruptions to their lived organisational reality (Kraft *et al.*, 2018; Samson *et al.*, 2022). This is elaborated on in the next section, which focuses on middle managers.

2.2 Middle management perspective

Although clearly defined in the literature as an individual positioned between top management and first-level supervisors, Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* (2014) recognise that the term is not traditionally found in an individual's job title. Rather, middle managers are defined by their position within the organisation in relation to their operational functions (Jogie *et al.*, 2024). Acting as a conduit between top management and operations, the central role middle management plays in achieving key organisational outcomes is referred to as the middle-management perspective (Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Xaba *et al.*, 2023; Samson *et al.*, 2022). Through the application of this middle manager perspective, middle managers are approached as the channels or mediators through which sensemaking occurs (Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024). Studies utilising a middle management perspective have recognised the strategic role middle management has in the interpretation and transmission of strategy. It has highlighted the importance of the role these individuals play in organisational performance (Surju *et al.*, 2020; Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Xaba *et al.*, 2023; Jogie *et al.*, 2024).

Middle managers engage in upward and downward influencing, interpreting and communicating information, facilitating adoption, and implementing the strategy (Van Niekerk & Jansen van Rensburg, 2022; Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2023). The upward and downward influencing role describes the unique position of middle managers as a 'linking pin' between upper- and lower-levels of strategy formulation and implementation. This role can be expanded into championing and synthesising (upward influencing) and facilitating and implementing (downward influencing). These roles describe the middle manager as an influencer and sense-giver of the strategy message (Jogie *et al.*, 2024; Samson *et al.*, 2022). From a practical perspective, when acting as an influencer of the strategy message, middle

managers employ micro-level social and discursive practices to influence the strategic direction (Kiernan *et al.*, 2020). Further practices employed to create a shared message include using informal interactions, plenary meetings, and one-on-one meetings (Rouleau, 2005; Xaba *et al.*, 2023).

Within their role as strategy implementers, middle managers are viewed as the filters through which the strategy message is received and translated into actions and objectives (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.*, 2014; Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Surju *et al.*, 2020). Middle managers take information from top management and translate its meaning for subordinates, while maintaining control over the translated message (Surju *et al.*, 2020; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). While top and lower-level management may also adopt sensemaking practices, middle management is the channel through which broader sensemaking occurs (Kiernan *et al.*, 2020; Jogie *et al.*, 2024). This places incredible pressure on middle managers, who often feel the need to ensure everything is running smoothly. Middle managers utilise their position to attempt to restore equilibrium through the reorientation of work practices (Samson *et al.*, 2022). As such, middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving of their daily experiences present a valuable perspective to explore management studies.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a social constructivist qualitative research approach to explore the phenomenon. A single case organisation was used to gather information-rich data about participants' beliefs, opinions, and experiences in an unconstrained manner over a period of three months in 2023 (Yin, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research on hybrid work has predominantly employed quantitative methodologies and focused on the banking and education sectors (Cassim *et al.*, 2023; Iwu *et al.*, 2023; Nyamunda, 2022). Consequently, further research is needed to explore the phenomenon qualitatively and in other contexts (Botha *et al.*, 2023; Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024; Mabaso & Manuel, 2024). The case organisation selected for this study offers findings emerging from a leading American-owned retailer operating in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. The selected organisation operates across South Africa and underwent a sudden shift from office-based work environments to hybrid work environments during the pandemic of 2020.

Before data gathering began, ethical clearance was received for the study. The process to obtain ethical clearance involved a review of the proposed methodology, the intended participants, and a review of a pre-test interview that met the required criteria. Ethical clearance ensured that participation was voluntary, data privacy requirements were in place, and the interview guide used to conduct interviews had been approved prior to data collection.

Data was gathered cross-sectionally from a case company, and rigorous record-keeping and data management practices were followed. The study's participants were purposively selected in alignment with the inclusion criteria of holding a middle management position and being employed at the case organisation for three or more years (Appendix A). Data, insights, and narratives from the real-life experiences of 12 middle managers were gathered using online semi-structured interviews that averaged 33 minutes each (Jogie *et al.*, 2024; Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024). To better understand individual meaning constructions in the organisation's social reality, the following questions were asked: "What was your experience of work prior to hybrid work, and how did your daily activities change?" "How do you communicate as a middle manager?" "How did you and your staff respond to the new work practices?" "What activities or tools did you implement to transfer new practices and work methods?" "How do you create a shared understanding of organisational objectives and the overarching strategy in this context?" The participants were comfortable sharing their lived experiences, and interviews continued until saturation was reached. The middle managers represented various business functions and units, as demonstrated in Table 1, thereby allowing for a holistic view of the case organisation.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study utilised components relating to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Amin *et al.*, 2020). Prior to the interview, the participating middle managers received an informed consent form to indicate their voluntary participation and to confirm confidentiality as a component of credibility. Once the interview had been completed, interview responses were immediately assigned a number to uphold this commitment, before being transcribed using Microsoft Office services. The procedures ensured the dependability and accuracy of data gathered, while upholding ethical processes. The authors checked the transcripts for accuracy, and the participant's demographic information was captured as a source to ensure transferability should the study be replicated within the same or a different industry.

Data analysis was conducted through a thematic inductive approach. Raw data were loaded into a qualitative analysis system (ATLAS.ti) and interpreted in an iterative process to identify emerging commonalities and trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Early themes were labelled as "communication channels", "in-office communication", "online communication", "relationship building", "developing team goals/objectives", and "standardised in-office working days". However, after multiple rounds of analysis, the themes were then further refined to illuminate the sensemaking and sensegiving practices employed by middle managers to restore equilibrium in a hybrid context. Through these multiple iterations, six sub-themes emerged, including "processing information through meetings", "informal communication", "forming social connections", "rephrasing the strategy message", and "ensuring face-to-face

communication.” The authors then returned to the literature to further guide and refine their analysis. This was followed by consensus discussions among the authors to enhance confirmability and transparency in the analysis process. The findings are discussed in the next section.

4. FINDINGS

This section details the distinct practices used by middle managers to make and give sense in a new environment. Sensemaking practices included the re-establishment of work boundaries, navigating perceptions of productivity, and leveraging informal communication. In contrast, sensegiving practices included clarifying strategic goals for operational success, personalising engagement to strengthen strategic alignment, and fostering accountability and autonomy.

These findings highlight the ways in which middle managers, when faced with an unfolding and ambiguous organisational reality, improvised and enacted situated micro-practices that bridged strategic intent and everyday work. Rather than treating hybrid work as a logistical challenge or mere relocation of work, middle managers demonstrated their pivotal roles by renegotiating meaning and establishing coherence. Their practices illustrate how strategy is enacted from the middle, reflecting the interplay of cognitive recalibration and discursive influence.

To appreciate the embeddedness of these practices, it is necessary to contextualise them within the situated disruptions of the hybrid work environment. A rich description of the hybrid working context, as described by the middle managers, is presented. Most middle managers expressed a preference for in-office work conditions and practices, describing better work-life boundaries, increased productivity, availability of resources, and improved social relationships among colleagues and subordinates. However, opposing narratives offer empirical evidence that a multiplicity of meanings and experiences emerged from the new mode of work.

The perceived disadvantages associated with hybrid work environments were explained by Middle Manager 5, who shared that meetings often lasted longer than necessary, thereby leading to a perceived decrease in productivity:

“...you’re sitting in these meetings day in and day out, and then you have a shorter time to do your actual work, so meetings have taken up more time of people during those hybrid processes” (Middle Manager 5)

Middle managers shared the difficulties they experienced in managing subordinates remotely, explaining that when managers struggled to get hold of employees, they sometimes became distrustful. Middle Manager 2 explained his perspective.

"I became slightly distrustful of what my peers and people that reported to me were doing, because why can't you be available when I call you?" (Middle Manager 2)

Middle managers experienced frustration when they could not get hold of employees and had no reliable way of knowing whether they were engaged in business tasks and functions. Middle Manager 3 echoed the sentiment of Middle Manager 2, explaining that often:

"When you work apart and everybody's in different locations, it just becomes very frustrating because half of the time you contact the person on the other side, or maybe they're busy on the phone call...and then you can't get a hold of them..." (Middle Manager 3)

The absence of adequate resources was reported as another reason for unavailable employees in the hybrid work context. This was explained by Middle Manager 1:

"It's hard to manage people when they're all working from home. Sometimes they say, 'I don't have a good Wi-Fi connection', or 'my power's out'.... It makes communication really challenging." (Middle Manager 1).

Due to these challenges, some middle managers shared their personal preferences for face-to-face meetings and in-office presence when making critical decisions. Face-to-face meetings on office days were preferred from a timesaving and resource-efficiency perspective. They were also considered more effective for enhancing understanding of the strategy messages. Middle Managers 6, 7, and 2 explained:

"...if I want to speak to someone from talent acquisition and I know it's their office day, I literally just walk to them and say hey, this is what I need, can you help me...you get to close things there and then..." (Middle Manager 6)

"With the office base, you've got more access to a lot more stuff than you've got at home, like the printer... There are disadvantages, advantages across the board and vice versa." (Middle Manager 7)

"As a manager or a leader, you need to be conscious of people's body language and facial expressions, etcetera, because then you can actually see what you're doing...are you explaining things properly..." (Middle Manager 2)

There was little support for a fully remote working environment, as middle managers reiterated the need for face-to-face interaction. However, middle managers also appreciated the advantages of working from home on certain days as part of the hybrid working arrangement. Hybrid working was seen as conducive to focused work and considered productive. Middle Manager 2 explained:

"...because you don't have all those other things that you might have to have done in the office or to get to the office, you've got a lot more time to do more." (Middle Manager 2)

The focus and productivity advantages were supported by Middle Manager 7, who also cautioned that these benefits hinged on the working conditions and potential distractions within the home environment.

"At times, you might get more work done now working from home, it all depends on the environment in your home, so you could have an environment where you got a family living and it's difficult to work, or you could have an environment where you're just living alone, and you find it easier to work." (Middle Manager 7)

Given the mixed views and different contexts of individual middle managers, the hybrid environment accommodated a mixed presence (online and face-to-face) in meetings. Middle Manager 11 explained:

"So a lot of my meetings or workshops are face to face. I will tell you this is a room I booked. It can accommodate everybody who has been invited. But you have the choice to join us via Zoom." (Middle Manager 11)

The hybrid context presented the realities of middle managers and the new modes and means of work, where limited guidance was provided. In this context, middle managers had to realign sensemaking and sensegiving practices to suit the new norm, thereby bridging communication between senior leaders and operational teams. Middle managers made sense of the context cognitively, emotionally, and practically to ensure the strategic message was interpreted and transmitted effectively. The details of the sensemaking and sensegiving practices utilised by middle managers have been arranged into two overarching themes, namely: "Sensemaking Practices in a Fluid Hybrid Environment" and "Sensegiving Practices in a Fluid Hybrid Environment", which are introduced next.

4.1 Sensemaking practices in a fluid hybrid environment

The hybrid work environment introduced both new opportunities and challenges to work patterns and expectations. Consequently, middle managers had to adapt their sensemaking practices to address shifting ideas and behaviours. These adaptations illustrate how sensemaking, as a situated and recursive process, is embedded in the evolving demands of hybrid work. Middle managers responded both to operational needs and to the ambiguity that hybrid work introduced. These practices included re-establishing and defining boundaries for in-person and virtual interactions, navigating perceptions of productivity, and leveraging real-time instant messaging.

In the beginning, while everyone was adjusting to the new reality, there was an assumption that employees working from home were available for longer hours throughout the day. Normal working hours did not appear to apply to those not physically present in the office. In the absence of management tools to monitor productivity, managers explained how they worked excessively long hours, feeling the need to be constantly available. Middle Managers 3 and 2 shared their realities:

"... [Initially], I mean you had to be on standby virtually 18 to 20 hours a day..." (Middle Manager 3)

"So if I see someone has got a green dot on Zoom, then I assume you're available and I'm going to call you, you know, and equate that to you're at your desk at work physically, no one around you, doesn't mean you're available. You could be working on something, but Zoom doesn't tell me that." (Middle Manager 2)

The "always available" expectation and practice even extended to comfort breaks. Middle Manager 11 explained:

"So I lay clear expectations. I don't wait until I can't get hold of you. They knew that you know it's worse than in the office. Now we need to be available. I said if you have to take your phone to the toilet, you're going to do that OK or call the customer back." (Middle Manager 11)

These quotes highlight how the erosion of temporal and spatial boundaries demanded a revised moral consideration of employee availability. Expectations of presence became blurred and redefined outside traditional office settings. Furthermore, these expectations exposed the effects that the absence of a clear policy can have on working hours and conditions. They also affected employee morale and work-life balance, leading to further sensemaking and the re-establishment of work boundaries.

Middle managers made sense of the context and provided a new directive: compulsory office days were introduced to ensure that all team members are in the office on the same day at least once a week. Middle Manager 9 described the utilisation of standardised office days as indicated below:

"...we coordinate which day are you in the office and almost set meetings for days that you can actually be in the office so that you can have your face-to-face meeting." (Middle Manager 9)

Despite their best efforts to coordinate their days, Middle Manager 7 explained that, for various reasons, it still ended up being a combination of in-person and Zoom meetings, with the decision depending on the circumstances.

"That now happens in person, but from time to time, we do have a Zoom. For example, we found that the office it will be a one-on-one. If I'm at home, then if we feel that it's not gonna be a major meeting, then we'll just have a Zoom. Or if it's a major meeting, then we just have to go into the office. If it's our day to work from home that week, but it's not any inconvenience to anybody at the end of the day."

Such adaptations underscore the iterative nature of sensemaking, whereby meaning is negotiated through both formal arrangements and informal workarounds. This finding illuminates how middle managers' own sensemaking helped them to navigate the new normal. Middle managers interpreted the challenges and re-established boundaries by creating a balance between in-person and virtual interactions. The practice not only enhanced communication and practitioner sensemaking but also facilitated engagement and strategy execution. The implementation of compulsory in-office days ensured structured collaboration with reduced fatigue and misunderstandings. Middle managers added structure to the hybrid working context that supported the effective translation of strategy messages in an evolving work environment.

Beyond boundary redefinition, sensemaking practices also extended to the reinterpretation of performance expectations—challenging existing assumptions about visibility, output, and the meaning of productivity itself. Another practice observed was the shifting perceptions surrounding employee productivity within a hybrid work model. While hybrid work introduced autonomy, some managers initially equated productivity with an increase in virtual meetings, leading to exhaustion and a breakdown in sensemaking and sensegiving. Over time, middle managers reassessed these assumptions, reduced the frequency of online meetings, and refined their practices in support of correcting work-life balances and addressing employee dissatisfaction. Middle Managers 1 and 2 explained:

"Initially, the shift seemed to make us more productive because meetings were quicker and constant, but over time, it just became exhausting...too many meetings...too little action."
(Middle Manager 1)

"I think people confused having 50 million meetings on Teams or Zoom as an indicator of productivity... So you're actually taking a physical construct and applying it to an online or hardware construct and expecting the same answer." (Middle Manager 2)

In the absence of performance measures for hybrid work, multiple meanings and interpretations of what productivity meant emerged. Middle managers, known for their role in executing strategy, grappled with performance monitoring in the new context. Middle Manager 8 reflected on these absent performance measures for hybrid work:

"...first of all, we haven't had mechanisms of measuring productivity in relation to the hybrid model. We haven't really figured that out..." (Middle Manager 8)

This ambiguity served as a catalyst for reflection, forcing middle managers into a position of both sensemaking and tentative sensegiving in the absence of formal metrics or institutionalised support. In their attempts to ensure effective translation and transfer of critical strategic and operational messages, managers reverted to utilising in-person meetings to achieve the desired understanding and action. Middle Manager 7 revealed his frustrations and the reasons he valued in-person meetings.

"Not having a face-to-face interaction became a bit frustrating from time to time, especially when you want to receive samples. So you couldn't actually view or physically touch the sample that you want to see." (Middle Manager 7)

Middle managers defaulted back to their pre-pandemic face-to-face communication. They considered it to be more effective and observed improved sensemaking. This reality was shared by Middle Managers 8 and 9, who elaborated:

"...I try to make sure that important communication happens when we are actually in the office rather than in Zoom to be honest...because there is that kind of connectivity and people are able to connect, I suppose the messaging is better when they are together rather than remote." (Middle Manager 8)

"Whereas now [in-person], there's just no opportunity to hide behind misunderstandings or getting it wrong...by saying they didn't understand this, you know, or it wasn't clear on Zoom and things like that." (Middle Manager 9)

The strategic intent of middle managers is evident through their embodied interaction. The material and sensory dimensions of communication were reiterated as a crucial component of sensemaking. Middle managers continuously refined and reassessed their routines, ensuring that strategic messages were effectively processed and transmitted in hybrid work, highlighting their role as key facilitators of strategic alignment.

Sensemaking in the hybrid environment also occurred through the introduction of real-time feedback mechanisms to enhance sensemaking and engagement. Middle managers incorporated informal communication platforms (e.g., Slack, WhatsApp) into their operating practices. These instant messaging apps allowed asynchronous and synchronous communication. They emerged as an integral part of middle management's daily sensemaking activities, even though they were not an initial practice before the pandemic. This third practice emerged post-COVID-19 and contrasts with the other two practices, which indicated an

adaptation of pre-existing practices to suit a new social reality. Middle Manager 9 explained how various instant messaging tools were used:

"So we would use multiple. We had soft phones, we had Jabber, we had WhatsApp." (Middle Manager 9)

Now that middle managers were separated from some or all of their team members in the hybrid context, there was a need for more short, frequent messaging to keep processes going and ensure messages were being understood and actioned. Middle Managers 7 and 3 explained how these instant messaging tools played a role as support mechanisms for sensemaking when team members did not physically see each other.

"Communication was a major and very important factor around us, especially not seeing one another, either via e-mail, either via cell phone, WhatsApp, etcetera, was very important." (Middle Manager 7)

"Then obviously we use the phones quite a bit and even WhatsApps, we're sort of using WhatsApps or for work as well, because when you couldn't get hold of anybody by phone, you'd actually WhatsApp them, and we started using that. Before, it was never a thing that you used for work." (Middle Manager 3)

WhatsApp was seen to reiterate and facilitate instant feedback loops as part of the sensemaking and sensegiving process by mimicking in-person interactions. This is described by Middle Manager 4 in the excerpts below:

"I think at the point we were using Slack, we did have more better benefits in terms of instant messaging where you can get feedback, jump on the call, share documents that too, really, really helped in that kind of replicating in office or in person kind of instant response and feedback versus emails..." (Middle Manager 4)

The repurposing of informal instant messaging tools illustrates how sensemaking is technologically mediated. Platforms like Slack and WhatsApp became artefacts through which coherence and belonging were reconstituted. Key points were reiterated by middle managers through these tools and used to keep teams engaged. Informal communication platforms facilitated the creation of social relationships and personal interactions, which were initially missing from the work-from-home environment.

The three practices introduced demonstrated the efforts by middle managers to align multiple meanings and to cope and communicate in the new context. Middle managers reflected on and refined their practices, shared their rationale for decisions, and established feedback loops to ensure both understanding and action. In the next section, the sensegiving practices are presented.

4.2 Sensegiving practices in a fluid hybrid environment

As part of their intentional efforts to influence the meaning construction of others towards a new organisational reality, middle managers focused on clarifying strategic goals for operational success, personalising engagement to strengthen strategic alignment, and paid close attention to how accountability and autonomy were fostered.

High-level strategy was translated into actionable 'bite-sized' tasks related to the overall strategy. This practice illuminates how middle managers created team deliverables and facilitated a feeling of achievability for subordinates. Middle Manager 1 explained:

"I have to take [the strategy] and break it down to a daily goal because we talk on it from a month-to-month basis or a month versus previous year log for last year this time. So I've got to take that same goal and bring it down to their level and say okay cool, as an individual, this is going to be your output, this is what we're going to do as a team, and make sure that we monitor that on a daily basis." (Middle Manager 1)

This reframing of strategic content signals an important micro-level sensegiving mechanism, in which middle managers function as translators. Knowing that there were multiple meanings and unfixed interpretations around the directive during this disruptive time, middle managers focused on reducing and synthesising the message. After breaking down the strategy into daily goals and priorities, these were then included in Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Middle Managers 9 and 8 explained:

"And then I'm going to make sure that my team has those strategic objectives broken down into task-level in their KPIs for their performance management for this year. And then we take those KPIs in our one-on-one catch-ups and we break it down further, okay, what individual tasks do you need to do to meet this KPI?" (Middle Manager 9)

"So that's the one tool that we've actually used to measure whether or not managers are communicating transparently...suppose we will only be able to gauge once we receive the final results... but to kind of help mitigate the results of non-communication, we've sent some of our managers on training." (Middle Manager 8)

The use of formal tools such as KPIs, when embedded in regular dialogue, points to the negotiated and recursive elements of sensegiving over time. This sensegiving practice demonstrates how middle managers ensured clear transmission amidst evolving hybrid work challenges. Their deliberate efforts sought to convey messages and ensure team alignment. The rephrasing of the strategy to create individualised meaning was confirmed to be an iterative, collective process involving discussion.

Building on this practice, another practice of making engagement personal also emerged. Personalised engagement emerged as a response to middle managers noticing the uncertainty among team members that was adversely affecting shared sensemaking. To address this, middle managers attempted to personalise interactions as part of their sensegiving efforts.

The sensegiving practice of personalising engagement was explained by Middle Manager 2:

“One of the things I’ve had to learn is to directly ask people to contribute in meetings. Otherwise, it’s easy for them to just stay quiet on Zoom...I always make sure to address people by name...it encourages them to speak up.” (Middle Manager 2)

By actively involving subordinates in discussions, middle managers could gauge the sensemaking process undertaken by subordinates and shift their perceptions and understanding accordingly to convey the right strategic message. Middle Manager 1 echoed the sentiments of Middle Manager 2:

“Hybrid meetings can be tricky. If you don’t actively get people to talk, some just sit there...so you have to call on them.” (Middle Manager 1)

This intentional naming underscores a tactical form of discursive sensegiving that restores visibility and voice. It emerged as essential to counteract the depersonalisation of digital engagement. The practice of personalisation and calling on names also aimed to combat disorientation and disengagement, whilst simultaneously getting the best out of individuals. Middle Manager 2 shared:

“You know when someone is disengaged. You know it’s frustrating to try and run a project remotely using Teams and all of that, because again I don’t think we trust very well in this thing... So, how do you deal with this changed environment to get the best out of someone? And I think it was just hit and miss all the time. So absolutely, it still happens today in the hybrid situation we’ve all got these expectations.” (Middle Manager 2)

Personalising engagement supported middle managers in clarifying the strategy and sustaining alignment, which was particularly important when there were so many different meanings and interpretations, and multiple instructions all arriving at the same time. By involving team members at a personal level, middle managers ensured strategic messages were understood, reducing disengagement and uncertainty in hybrid settings.

The final sensegiving practice emerged as an adaptive response to the challenges experienced. Some middle managers realised that, despite the ongoing hybrid work, official hybrid policies and approved mechanisms for measuring off-site productivity were still absent. They realised that, despite their preferences for in-person meetings, the differing

circumstances of team members resulted in a constant combination of in-person and hybrid presence. Middle managers accepted that they could not purely rely on in-person presence to facilitate the transmission of messages. Middle managers reflected on the 'green dot' expectation, noting that the assumption employees should be 'always available', even in the bathroom, is unsustainable, and may contribute to burnout and other adverse management implications. Middle managers' own retrospective and prospective sensemaking led them to a place of acceptance. It was at this point that a new practice was observed. After middle managers had broken down the deliverables, they intentionally clarified intentions and then reinforced autonomy.

This reinforced autonomy practice was described by Middle Managers 5 and 3:

"I told my team, look, I can't micromanage you in this setting, so it's up to you to take responsibility for getting things done..." (Middle Manager 5)

"But it kind of develops a lot more independent work in you know junior level individuals, kind of minimises my time of having to micromanage you." (Middle Manager 3)

This autonomy-embedded sensegiving practice was perceived as both empowering and effective. Team members knew that they had to focus when middle managers gave instructions, because they would be handling the situation themselves. Middle Manager 3 explained:

"I think the value-add is now it's becoming more empowering, I mean, I get less calls about issues because they can handle it themselves." (Middle Manager 3)

Fostering autonomy reflects a deeper reconfiguration of control and trust within hybrid contexts, and it is an example of shifting managerial practices that facilitative strategic alignment. Middle managers encouraged independent decision-making by empowering employees to take ownership and accountability for their tasks. This sensegiving practice not only enhances efficiency but also strengthens confidence and competence within teams in the hybrid work model.

Taken together, the sensemaking and sensegiving practices articulated a grounded form of strategic enactment in contexts of disruption. Middle managers demonstrated how they interpreted organisational directives and then reframed them in ways that made them actionable within their teams. These improvisation practices illuminate the centrality of middle managers, not only as intermediaries, but as meaning-makers and strategic actors. In doing so, the findings extend our understanding of how strategy work is performed under conditions of fluidity.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored how middle managers engage in sensemaking and sensegiving within hybrid work environments, focusing on revealing the empirically developed practices they use to interpret and convey strategic messages.

The findings confirmed that hybrid work created both opportunities and challenges for middle managers, while offering its own nuanced practices. While there was improved focused work and autonomy, there were productivity and trust issues as well, associated with the absence of official policies and performance mechanisms (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024). Middle managers expressed concerns about work-life balance and declining social relationships. Despite these concerns, middle managers voiced their support for the autonomy and flexibility afforded by the hybrid work model. This internal conflict experienced by middle managers resonates with findings by Nyamunda (2022) and Cassim *et al.* (2023), who reported that even though the off-site environment of hybrid work was conducive and preferred, managers experienced blurred boundaries and held onto their old attitudes towards work. This included a view that productivity and effective communication were negatively impacted in a hybrid work environment.

What emerges from these findings is a view of hybrid work as an evolving organisational terrain in which meaning is continually reconfigured. Middle managers functioned as adaptive agents, cultivating alignment through situated, intentional actions rather than prescriptive routines. This contributes to a more dynamic view of strategy-as-practice — one in which strategy is continually translated, locally interpreted, and stabilised through interaction and consensus (Xaba *et al.*, 2023).

A key contribution of this study was observing how some practices of sensemaking and sensegiving remained consistent across work contexts. For instance, breaking down strategic messages into team deliverables and individual KPIs was a key practice, consistent with findings by Surju *et al.* (2020) in public sector organisations. Similarly, the emphasis on social connections and informal communication networks aligns with Giuliani's (2016) assertion that sensegiving is essential for diffusing strategic rationalisations across an organisation. These practices underscore the adaptability of middle managers in sustaining employee relations and strategic alignment amidst changing work dynamics.

This study also contributes to theory by enriching sensemaking literature with empirical insights into how meaning is actively reconstructed in hybrid contexts. Spatial and temporal boundaries were re-established by middle managers, and their practices align with Van Niekerk and Jansen van Rensburg's (2022) notion of 'adapting' as a multidimensional,

resource-based process. The findings illustrate how middle managers draw on behavioural, emotional, and relational capabilities to recalibrate their practices.

However, the hybrid work model introduces unique operational and relational challenges, including blurred work boundaries, perceived reduction in engagement, and increased reliance on technology. These challenges required cognitive, emotional, and practical adaptations in middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving processes to cope with disruption and changes in the new environment (Jogie *et al.*, 2024). For example, the introduction of digital communication tools such as Slack and WhatsApp for work purposes enabled middle managers to sustain alignment and engagement, thereby addressing certain gaps created by the new working model. This reflects the growing body of research that highlights the critical role of digital platforms in employee relations (Cassim *et al.*, 2023; Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). Yet, as noted by middle managers in the findings and confirmed in the literature, these tools could not replace the relational and strategic clarity afforded by face-to-face interactions (Surju *et al.*, 2020).

The use of instant messaging also extends recent studies showing how digital tools became effective mediators of relational proximity during COVID-19 (Ke *et al.*, 2023). Informal instant messaging tools functioned as both symbolic and functional conduits of engagement—echoing relational job-crafting strategies identified by Marx *et al.* (2025). These findings reinforce the notion that sensemaking is not only a cognitive exercise but also a technologically mediated and emotionally grounded process. Middle managers emerged as key enablers of organisational resilience. Their interpretive and relational capacities were found to be essential for navigating the fluidity of post-pandemic organisational life. This study responded to calls for an in-depth exploration of how middle managers navigate the complexities of hybrid work environments (Marx *et al.*, 2025; Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2023). It also addressed the need for broader research on hybrid work environments by exploring the practices employed by middle managers in such settings and linking these practices to organisational strategy.

Hybrid work served as a valuable context for middle managers to experiment with new ways of doing, sensing, and influencing. In doing so, they advanced strategic coherence not through policy compliance but through socially embedded and relational sensemaking and sensegiving practices.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has direct implications for managers navigating hybrid work environments. The findings underscore the dual nature of hybrid work. Hybrid work offers autonomy and flexibility while simultaneously blurring boundaries, reducing engagement and raising productivity concerns. For organisations to sustain performance, managerial practices need to intentionally balance these dynamics. Middle managers demonstrated their crucial role in influencing perceptions and bridging communication gaps (Surju *et al.*, 2020; Samson *et al.*, 2022; Van Niekerk & Jansen van Rensburg, 2022). This aligned with their pivotal role in strategy transmission. For practitioners, this means that middle managers should be formally recognised and supported as strategic communicators, rather than being left to rely on informal practices. Structured support can enhance their ability to clarify goals and sustain alignment. The sensemaking practices identified, including re-establishing work boundaries, navigating productivity perceptions and leveraging informal communication for real-time interpretation, offer managers concrete techniques to adapt in hybrid contexts. These practices can be adopted as proactive managerial routines to reduce ambiguity and strengthen both trust and accountability in dispersed teams. Similarly, sensegiving practices involving clarifying strategic goals, personalising engagement, and fostering accountability emerged as critical to alignment. Managers should therefore adopt blended approaches to strategy communication, combining synchronous (face-to-face) with asynchronous (digital) interactions to maximise clarity and responsiveness. The findings highlighted that instant messaging tools such as WhatsApp and Slack enabled faster connection and communication, but also blurred the line between availability and personal time. Managers should therefore set clear boundaries around digital availability and model healthy communication norms to prevent employee burnout (Kusmaryanto & Santoso, 2025).

Middle managers prioritised trust and engagement in their hybrid work practices, deliberately fostering autonomy to reduce oversight concerns and strengthen trust. This highlights the need for organisations to invest in relational and emotional competencies (Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024). Training in digital communication, boundary setting, and well-being-centred leadership can help managers sustain trust while avoiding micromanagement. Finally, the study observed how middle managers combined pre-pandemic practices (in-person feedback loops) with new practices (digital communication and boundary setting) to create coherence and alignment. For management, this suggests that hybrid work is not about discarding old routines but about integrating them with digital practices in an intentional, balanced way. Organisational policies should support such blended practices. It is recommended that policies be structured in-office days, improve digital communication protocols, whilst also paying close attention to the hybrid manager's dual relational and strategic role in the hybrid context.

7. CONCLUSION

The study explored how middle managers navigated the complexities of hybrid work to facilitate strategy transmission. Its contribution includes practical insights into organisational adaptation and strategising in hybrid work environments, and demonstrates the centrality of middle managers as meaning-makers. Through a qualitative case study analysis, the empirical research revealed that middle managers combined pre-pandemic micro-practices with newer practices to create coherence and strategic alignment. These sensemaking and sensegiving practices of middle managers offer situated insight that can enhance managerial communication, employee engagement, and strategic decision-making in similar flexible work settings.

The findings highlighted a preference for in-office working, particularly when middle managers needed to make decisions. However, rather than resisting change, middle managers adapted by combining established practices with new modes of engagement.

Having observed how middle managers struggled to carve out their new jobs when adopting hybrid work, it is imperative that preventive coping mechanisms be incorporated into management practice. Through a socially constructed process, managers are encouraged to engage employees on the foreseeable threats to their well-being and take action to minimise the negative consequences of the change. Given the connection between stress and performance, future research could explore how employees navigate these tensions (Hasbi & Van Marrewijk, 2024) and what coping strategies are most effective in sustaining emotional well-being in hybrid contexts.

Despite the study's contributions, its limitation to a single organisation within the FMCG industry restricts generalisability. Due to the context-dependent nature of the single case design, it is not possible to draw a definitive set of practices that are applicable across all hybrid work settings. Future research should seek to explore the transferability of these practices across different industries and organisational cultures. Additional qualitative studies during and after turbulent times—like a pandemic—are needed. Studies focusing on narratives and the artefacts of sensemaking will contribute valuable empirical evidence to further expand on existing studies (Marx *et al.*, 2025; Wolfe *et al.*, 2025). Longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches could also help assess how sensemaking and sensegiving evolve over time and quantify the frequency and efficacy of such practices in other contexts.

As hybrid work continues to shape organisational landscapes, understanding and leveraging the practices identified in this study will be essential for maintaining strategic coherence and cultivating a resilient, engaged workforce.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: A profile of middle managers as participants

Participant	Position	Department	Gender	Length of the interview
1	Business Development Manager	Operations	Male	29
2	Strategy Implementation Manager	Operations	Male	35
3	Senior Buyer	Appliances	Male	22
4	Senior Manager 1: Digital Sales	Sales	Male	38
5	Team Lead: End-User Support	IT	Male	25
6	Culture, Diversity and Inclusion Team Lead	Human Resources	Female	29
7	Level Buyer	Sporting Goods	Male	26
8	Vice President for Culture, Diversity and Inclusion	Human Resources	Female	45
9	Vice President for Financial Services	Financial Operations	Female	50
10	Team Leader: End-User Support	IT	Male	28
11	Enterprise Strategy	Operations	Female	50
12	Value Added Services Senior Manager	Finance	Female	36
			Average	33