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Hybrid realities: the role of EDIB leadership in shaping ESG-aligned behaviour in digitally mediated teams

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB) leadership practices in hybrid teams shape ESG-aligned behaviours and perceived outcomes, with a focus on sustainable and inclusive organisational performance. Using a qualitative case study approach, it draws on twelve semi-structured interviews with leaders across six industries to achieve three objectives: explore current EDIB practices in hybrid leadership, assess how these practices enable or hinder ESG implementation, and identify the most effective strategies for advancing ESG-related goals. Findings show that inclusive communication, flexible work arrangements, and empathetic leadership strongly support the Social pillar of ESG, while Governance and Environmental dimensions remain underdeveloped. Leaders promoting psychological safety and alignment with ESG values appear to generate stronger social impact, although formal structural integration remains limited. This study offers practice-oriented insights and proposes a leadership framework to guide inclusive, values-driven hybrid work environments towards more consistent and context-sensitive ESG alignment, particularly within the Social dimension.

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EDIB (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging); ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance); hybrid team leadership; digital leadership; remote work; sustainable leadership

1. Introduction

Businesses and corporations today face intensifying societal and regulatory pressure to transparently report on their Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices (Richards 2023). The European Union's 2023 Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), mandating large companies to disclose ESG metrics aligned with European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG) standards, represents a pivotal shift (Schwartzkopf 2023). While ESG has been discussed for over two decades, it gained critical importance following the 2008–2009 financial crisis and has since become a cornerstone of corporate strategy, especially as organisations contend with escalating environmental and social demands (Byrne 2020).

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed a global transformation in work practices. The widespread adoption of remote and hybrid work disrupted traditional organisational structures and reshaped leadership challenges (Hilberath et al. 2020), highlighting the urgency of adaptive and inclusive management

approaches (McKinsey & Company 2023). The hybrid model's popularity is reflected in more than 170 articles published by Harvard Business Review between 2020 and 2023, affirming its continued relevance and evolving complexity (Harvard Business Review 2020–2023).

Despite growing academic and practical interest in both ESG and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB), there remains a significant research gap concerning how inclusive leadership in hybrid environments specifically influences ESG implementation. The intersection of EDIB leadership and ESG is particularly underexplored, yet critically important, as organisations increasingly strive to balance social impact with operational efficiency and environmental stewardship (DiTomaso 2021; Henisz, Koller, and Nuttall 2019).

This study is motivated by the growing yet under-examined intersection between equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging (EDIB) agendas and hybrid forms of leadership. While prior research has extensively examined EDIB as a normative organisational

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objective, far less is known about how EDIB is enacted, negotiated and contested through hybrid leadership arrangements that combine social and commercial logics. As organisations increasingly adopt hybrid governance structures, understanding how leaders reconcile EDIB commitments with competing performance demands becomes both theoretically and practically salient.

This study directly addresses this gap by examining how EDIB leadership practices within hybrid teams shape ESG outcomes. It aims to offer actionable insights that bridge inclusive leadership and sustainability performance in the context of digital and hybrid work. The research is designed to make a valuable contribution to both academic discourse and practitioner guidance, providing a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which EDIB-conscious leadership can drive ESG-aligned behaviour and outcomes.

Guided by this overarching aim, the study pursues three objectives: (1) to explore the current status of EDIB practices in hybrid team leadership; (2) to discover how these practices enable or hinder ESG implementation; and (3) to identify which EDIB practices most effectively support ESG objectives. By investigating these intersections, the study seeks to inform future leadership strategies that are both ethically grounded and operationally sustainable, reinforcing the call for more integrated, values-driven organisational practices in the evolving world of work.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: How do hybrid team leaders make sense of and enact EDIB practices in digitally mediated teams? RQ2: How do these EDIB leadership practices enable or constrain ESG-aligned behaviour and outcomes across Environmental, Social, and Governance dimensions? RQ3: Which EDIB leadership practices are perceived as most effective in supporting ESG objectives in hybrid teams, and under what conditions?

2. 2. Literature review

2.1. Equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) in hybrid teams

Recent developments in Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB) have gained traction in response to global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of hybrid and remote work structures has created both opportunities and barriers to EDIB implementation. Agovino (2022) argues that reduced visibility in remote work settings disproportionately affects women and people of colour, thereby

undermining diversity efforts. Complementing this, Burleson, Eggler, and Major (2022) highlight how remote environments hinder organisational socialisation, especially the transmission of culture and fostering of belonging, central to the effectiveness of EDIB strategies and directly relevant to Objective 1 of this study: exploring the status of EDIB in hybrid leadership.

Fox et al. (2023) have developed practical guidance on leading hybrid teams, who present recommendations grounded in digital work practices. Their findings stress the importance of leaders' awareness and commitment to EDIB in leveraging technology effectively, a theme echoed by Kuzior, Kettler, and Rąb (2022), who describe how digitalisation can enhance operational sustainability. However, these studies often stop short of linking such practices to measurable ESG outcomes, signalling a gap aligned with Objective 2, which explores how EDIB practices enable or disable ESG.

The operational dynamics of hybrid teams also raise concerns about communication equity and technostress. Metin and Bogavac (2022) and Wang et al. (2024) detail how ICT-induced interruptions affect work-life boundaries and psychological well-being. These findings are complemented by Savarese, Huybrechts, and Hudon (2021) and Malhotra, Wright, and Jarvis (2025), who underscore tensions within hybrid organisations, necessitating ethical complexity and governance flexibility. The ability of leaders to balance these tensions is crucial to their impact on both team culture and broader ESG alignment, addressing Objective 3.

Broader reflections on hybrid governance come from Vakkuri and Johanson (2020), who investigate stakeholder engagement, technological facilitation, and value co-creation across public-private boundaries. These themes recur in Wiatr and Skowron-Mielnik's (2022) and Syed (2020) work, which identifies adaptability, empathy, and technological fluency as essential leadership qualities; these are extending the findings by Tsatsou (2020), which highlights the importance of intra-disability diversity and the role of individual agency in digital inclusion, urging researchers to move beyond fixed disability categories and consider nuanced, individual digital experiences as fundamental to fostering true inclusion. Similarly, Alves et al. (2023) and de Pedro (2024) demonstrate how trust and ethical communication buffer team conflict and facilitate effective collaboration, critical components for sustainable EDIB practice.

Will (2021) and Johnson (2023) further emphasise that effective hybrid leadership must include designing policies for equal engagement, fostering belonging, and promoting retention. Their work, supported by Gratton (2021) and Gould et al. (2020), aligns with the growing recognition that belonging takes time to

materialise but is essential for long-term impact. These ideas find resonance in Agarwal and Bhal's (2020) multidimensional approach to responsible leadership, reinforcing that strategic and ethical alignment supports both EDIB and sustainability.

However, during crises, gaps often emerge. Piwowar-Sulej et al. (2024) found that while organisations maintained ethical messaging during COVID-19, investment in well-being and environmental awareness was lacking. DiTomaso (2021) and Farndale et al. (2015) further illuminate how institutionalised diversity strategies may vary in impact globally, underlining the need for contextual EDIB application.

This literature provides strong foundations for examining current practices yet notably lacks empirical evidence on their direct connection to ESG implementation. Recent work by Khorakian et al. (2024) underscores the importance of remote work satisfaction and digital literacy as critical moderating factors influencing employee performance and well-being, emphasising that digital competencies mitigate stressors and enhance overall outcomes in hybrid and remote contexts. Still, despite these contributions, existing studies tend to examine EDIB either as an isolated human resource practice or within relatively stable organisational forms, offering limited insight into how EDIB is shaped by hybrid leadership contexts characterised by multiple, and sometimes conflicting, institutional logics. Building on Sweeney and Bothwick (2016), who offered impactful diversity guides, and Thompson (2022) introduces flexibility strategies in digital work, but neither addresses how such EDIB practices influence ESG.

Meske and Junglas (2021) reinforce this research gap by showing that employee support for digital workplace transformations is strongly tied to perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness with core psychological needs that overlap with EDIB principles but have rarely been explicitly connected to ESG outcomes. Building on recent developments in digital tools to enhance psychological safety and team well-being, Boian et al. (2024) illustrate how conversational agents can foster empathetic interactions and improve individual engagement in hybrid contexts, offering promising parallels for EDIB applications in leadership. Wilson-Menzfeld et al. (2025) further complicates the landscape, revealing that digital exclusion, driven by age, disability, education level, and socioeconomic status, can exacerbate social inequalities and limit the effectiveness of inclusive leadership strategies in hybrid environments.

Taken together, the literature reveals a fragmented understanding of EDIB in hybrid organisations. While

studies acknowledge tensions between social missions and commercial imperatives, they rarely foreground leadership as the site where these tensions are actively interpreted, prioritised and enacted. This gap points to the need for empirical research that examines EDIB not merely as a policy outcome, but as a leadership practice embedded within hybrid organisational settings.

2.2. Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations

The increasing prominence of ESG in corporate strategy highlights the need for holistic governance. Sajjad, Hosoda, and Toyosaki (2021) emphasise that CSR alone is insufficient and advocate for innovative leadership to drive ESG impact. Meng and Zhu (2023) confirm that gender-diverse leadership correlates with stronger ESG performance, reinforcing the relevance of inclusive leadership to sustainable business practices, a linkage that supports Objective 2 of this research.

Building on foundational work by Hellsten and Malin (2006), as well as Fang, Kwok, and Schroeder (2014), whose early research contributions highlight that virtual and hybrid team environments create unique knowledge challenges, particularly in integrating distributed expertise and facilitating effective knowledge creation, transfer, and application, which are essential for sustaining inclusive leadership and advancing ESG objectives, recent studies by Lioui and Tarelli (2022) validate that ESG-aligned investments can offer superior financial returns. However, ESG's potential lies not only in financial outcomes but also in organisational culture (Khan et al. 2021). Sijan Niu, Park, and Jung (2022) argue that digital leadership is essential for integrating ESG into daily operations. This is echoed by Henisz, Koller, and Nuttall (2019), who outline ESG's fivefold value, spanning risk mitigation to employee engagement, highlighting its organisational significance beyond compliance.

Yet, the execution of ESG remains inconsistent. Kopanakis (2023) links ESG to employee happiness, while Davies and Doherty (2019) stress that hybrid organisations must balance economic, social, and environmental objectives. These tensions demonstrate the importance of aligning EDIB and ESG in leadership models, addressing this study's central aim and all three objectives.

Several studies also explore technological integration in ESG. Katsamakos, Miliareisis, and Pavlov (2022), Duque-Grisales and Aguilera-Caracuel (2021), and more recent work on digital transformation and sustainability (Benitez et al. 2022; Chen, Wang, and Nevo 2023) show that digital platforms and capabilities can

promote ESG by enabling collaboration, data transparency, and innovation. Torres et al. (2023) provide further evidence that responsible business practices lead to safer, more sustainable work environments, affirming the relevance of EDIB to ESG implementation in hybrid models.

However, challenges in ESG metrics persist. Drempe-
tic, Klein, and Zwergel (2019) highlight biases in ESG ratings, and Giese et al. (2019) criticise the unfair advantage larger firms have in sustainability rankings. These disparities raise concerns about the transparency and credibility of ESG performance measurement, a theme that intersects with EDIB, particularly in promoting equitable evaluation frameworks.

Puriwat and Tripopsakul (2022) introduce the concept of Digital ESG (DESG), arguing for ESG frameworks adapted to digital engagement. Their findings that DESG enhances brand equity and sustainable growth directly relate to this study's focus on hybrid team dynamics in a digital era.

Pagitsas (2022) adds qualitative depth through interviews with Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs), noting their evolving roles and the complexities of managing ESG within political, operational, and budgetary constraints. The parallels between CSOs and hybrid team leaders, who also navigate ambiguity and resource limitations, highlight the broader relevance of leadership alignment with ESG.

2.3. Prior studies on EDIB-ESG linkages

Across the ESG literature, EDIB-related constructs are most frequently linked to ESG through three overlapping pathways. First, studies connect inclusive leadership and workforce inclusion to ESG primarily via the Social pillar, for instance through employee happiness, engagement, and wellbeing (Henisz, Koller, and Nuttall 2019; Kopanakis 2023). Second, EDIB is linked to ESG through leadership composition and governance channels, where inclusive representation (e.g. gender-diverse leadership) is associated with stronger ESG performance (Meng and Zhu 2023). Third, digital and hybrid contexts introduce an implementation pathway, where leadership practices and digital infrastructures shape how ESG is embedded into everyday work (Duque-Grisales and Aguilera-Caracuel 2021; Katsamakas, Miliarexis, and Pavlov 2022; Niu, Park, and Jung 2022; Puriwat and Tripopsakul 2022).

What is reasonably well-established is that ESG is not solely a compliance exercise, but is increasingly positioned as a value-creating organisational agenda that can influence culture and employee engagement (Henisz, Koller, and Nuttall 2019), and that leadership

is repeatedly identified as central to enabling ESG impact (Benitez et al. 2022; Memon and Ooi 2023; Pagitsas 2022; Sajjad, Hosoda, and Toyosaki 2021). Recent work further suggests that leadership influence on ESG is often indirect, operating through digital transformation, information flows, and organisational capabilities that support sustainability outcomes (Benitez et al. 2022; Chen, Wang, and Nevo 2023; Memon and Ooi 2023; Wang, Kung, and Byrd 2022).

This perspective highlights that ESG outcomes are shaped through mediated organisational processes rather than direct managerial intent. The emerging 'digital ESG' perspective further suggests that ESG frameworks may need adaptation to digitally mediated engagement and hybrid organising (Puriwat and Tripopsakul 2022). Research on digital leadership suggests that leadership influence is often exercised indirectly, through the orchestration of technological capabilities, information flows, and organisational processes that enable ESG performance to emerge (Benitez et al. 2022; Memon and Ooi 2023). This points to a more mediated understanding of leadership impact, where outcomes depend on how practices are enacted and embedded within organisational systems rather than resulting from direct managerial intention alone.

A related stream of research emphasises that leadership characteristics, in isolation, are rarely sufficient to generate consistent sustainability outcomes. Their effects tend to depend on organisational conditions such as resource allocation, strategic priorities, and institutional support mechanisms. Even where leadership demonstrates a strong sustainability orientation, its impact is shaped by how resources are directed and how organisational structures support implementation (Al Amosh 2026; Chen, Wang, and Nevo 2023; Wang, Kung, and Byrd 2022). This suggests that leadership-ESG relationships are conditional and may not translate uniformly across different sustainability dimensions. However, the literature also shows notable inconsistencies (Vogel and Erickson 2021). Much of the evidence linking EDIB to ESG is associational (e.g. correlations between leadership diversity and ESG performance) rather than explaining mechanisms (Meng and Zhu 2023). Where implementation is discussed, it is often examined at senior or organisational-policy levels (Pagitsas 2022), leaving limited insight into how ESG and EDIB are enacted within day-to-day leadership practice in hybrid teams. In addition, challenges in ESG measurement and rating systems complicate interpretation, as biases and firm-size effects can obscure substantive performance (Padsiadlowski 2013; Drempe-
tic, Klein, and Zwergel 2019; Giese et al. 2019).

At the same time, ESG itself is increasingly treated as a heterogeneous construct rather than a unified outcome. A growing body of literature shows that environmental, social, and governance dimensions do not evolve in parallel and may respond differently to organisational drivers and leadership practices (Al Amosh and Khatib 2024; Bansal and Song 2017; Crifo, Durand, and Gond 2019). In practice, this means that organisational initiatives may generate strong effects in one pillar while remaining only loosely connected to others. Treating ESG as internally differentiated therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding of how leadership practices are translated into sustainability-related outcomes.

Taken together, prior studies suggest that inclusive leadership matters for ESG, but they provide limited empirical visibility into how EDIB practices are translated into ESG-aligned behaviours across Environmental, Social, and Governance pillars within hybrid team settings. To make this positioning explicit, Table 1 maps key studies, their contexts and approaches, and the specific gap addressed in this research.

2.4. Research gaps and theoretical opportunity

As explained in the previous section, organisations may demonstrate strong performance in one pillar while remaining underdeveloped in others, highlighting the need for more differentiated analysis of ESG alignment (Bansal and Song 2017; Crifo, Durand, and Gond 2019; Fatemi, Glaum, and Kaiser 2018).

While individual contributions in EDIB and ESG are well-documented, their intersection in hybrid work settings remains underexplored, presenting a clear opportunity for scholarly investigation. As Niu, Park, and Jung (2022) and Pedersen et al. (2021) show, digital leadership significantly influences organisational innovation and sustainability when integrated with ESG strategies. Their work supports this study's Objective 3: identifying effective EDIB practices that promote ESG.

Furthermore, the ESG literature often overlooks how inclusive leadership and belonging, particularly in hybrid environments, can act as levers for sustainable impact. This project seeks to fill that void by linking hybrid EDIB leadership to ESG outcomes and informing a roadmap for future best practices. Despite growing interest in hybrid work, few empirical studies systematically examine how EDIB leadership practices influence ESG outcomes in these contexts, leaving a critical gap that this study aims to address.

Drawing on the above synthesis, this study develops a conceptual framework that links (i) **hybrid leadership**

practices (e.g. structuring communication, enabling flexibility, and building trust) to (ii) **EDIB mechanisms** (e.g. equity of voice, psychological safety, and belonging), which in turn shape (iii) **ESG-aligned behaviours** and outcomes across the Environmental, Social, and Governance pillars. The framework also foregrounds recurring tensions in hybrid settings, particularly the gap between value-driven, interpersonal EDIB enactment and limited organisational embedding within governance systems, and the contrast between incidental environmental benefits and intentionally managed environmental strategy.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to investigate how EDIB leadership practices in hybrid teams influence ESG outcomes. Building on approaches used in recent studies on ESG and leadership (e.g. Agarwal and Bhal 2020; Niu, Park, and Jung 2022), semi-structured interviews were selected as the most suitable method to capture rich, contextual insights into leaders' experiences and practices. The interview guide was structured in three blocks aligned to RQ1 to RQ3, moving from leaders' descriptions of day-to-day EDIB practices, to perceived connections with ESG priorities, and finally to reflections on which practices were most (and least) effective in hybrid contexts.

Twelve hybrid team leaders from six industries were interviewed to provide cross-sector perspectives. The final sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, with no substantively new themes emerging in the later interviews, indicating that the data were sufficient to address the research aims. Participants were identified using purposeful sampling through the researcher's professional LinkedIn network, supplemented by snowball sampling, whereby initial participants referred colleagues who met the study criteria. This strategy helped include a diverse group of professionals, enhancing the credibility and richness of the data. Similar sampling approaches have been used effectively in leadership and ESG research to ensure broad, practice-relevant perspectives (Creswell et al. 2007). The organisations were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in sector, organisational size and degree of hybridity, while sharing a common commitment to explicit EDIB objectives. This approach allowed for analytical rather than statistical generalisation, consistent with qualitative case study research.

Eligible participants were current or recent leaders of hybrid teams with at least three members, where hybrid work was defined as working remotely for at least three days per week. Participants were encouraged to

Table 1. Prior studies linking EDIB-related constructs to ESG and gaps addressed in this study.

Study	Context / unit of analysis	Method / evidence type	Focus (EDIB / ESG)	Key limitation (for EDIB–ESG in hybrid teams)	Gap addressed in this study
Sajjad et al. (2021)	Corporate strategy / ESG leadership	Conceptual argument / synthesis	ESG leadership beyond CSR	Does not show team-level mechanisms, nor hybrid context	Examines leadership practices as mechanisms in hybrid teams
Meng and Zhu (2023)	Leadership composition / firm performance	Associational evidence	Gender diversity → ESG performance	Limited mechanism detail; not hybrid/team enactment	Explains how EDIB enactment links to ESG behaviours in hybrid teams
Henisz et al. (2019)	ESG value creation	Conceptual framing (fivefold value)	ESG value beyond compliance	Not specific to EDIB enactment in hybrid leadership	Provides empirical insight into leader enactment and pillar differences
Sijan Niu et al. (2022)	Digital leadership / ESG integration	Empirical evidence (digital leadership)	Digital leadership enabling ESG	Limited focus on EDIB mechanisms; not hybrid team leadership practice	Specifies EDIB mechanisms (voice, safety, and belonging) as pathways
Kopanakis (2023)	Employees / workplace outcomes	Empirical association	ESG ↔ employee happiness (Social)	Social pillar emphasis; limited E/G or governance embedding	Shows uneven translation across E/S/G and governance gap
Davies and Doherty (2019)	Hybrid organisations	Conceptual framing	Balancing economic/ social/ environmental	Limited focus on EDIB leadership behaviours	Provides leader-practice evidence on how tensions are navigated
Katsamakos et al. (2022)	Digital platforms	Conceptual/ empirical evidence	Digital platforms enabling ESG	Technology emphasis; limited EDIB leadership mechanisms	Connects leadership practice to ESG outcomes in a hybrid team context
Duque-Grisales and Aguilera-Caracuel (2021)	Digital/innovation and ESG	Empirical evidence	ESG via collaboration/ innovation	Not EDIB-specific; not team leadership mechanisms	Links EDIB leadership practices to ESG-aligned behaviours
Torres et al. (2023)	Responsible business / workplace safety	Empirical evidence	Responsible practice → safer environments	Does not isolate hybrid leadership enactment	Provides hybrid-team leader perspective on ESG-aligned practices
Drempetic et al. (2019)	ESG ratings	Measurement critique	ESG rating bias	Focuses on metrics, not enactment	Clarifies why governance embedding and transparency matter
Giese et al. (2019)	ESG rankings	Measurement critique	Size advantages in rankings	Focuses on ranking systems, not leadership mechanisms	Motivates governance-focused interpretation and accountability routines
Puriwat & Tripopsakul (2022)	Digital ESG (DESG)	Framework + empirical association	DESG → brand equity/growth	Digital engagement focus; limited leadership practice detail	Applies digital/hybrid lens to leader enactment of EDIB→ESG links
Pagitsas (2022)	CSOs	Qualitative interviews	ESG leadership constraints	Senior role focus; limited team-level enactment	Extends to hybrid team leaders' enactment and constraints

Table 2. Participant characteristics.

Interview	Age	Gender	Experience as MM	Team set-up	Days in Office
A	35–44	M	5–6 years	Team of ~15	1–2 days a week
A2	35–44	F	7–8 years	Team of ~20	1–2 days a week
B	25–34	M	5–6 years	Team of 6	2 days a month
B2	25–34	F	3–4 years	Team of 5	1 day a week
C	45–54	M	7–8 years	Team of 12	1–2 days a week
C2	35–44	M	7–8 years	Team of 10	1–2 days a week
D	25–34	M	3–4 years	Team of 8	3–4 days a month
D2	25–34	F	3–4 years	Team of 6	2–3 days a month
E	25–34	F	5–6 years	Multiple teams of up to 8	2–3 days a week
E2	35–44	M	5–6 years	Team of 12	2–3 days a week
F	35–44	F	7–8 years	Team of ~15	1 day a week
F2	45–54	M	9–10 years	Team of ~15	1 day a week

voluntarily share demographic information (e.g. neurodiversity status, LGBTQIA+ identity, ethnicity, or disability), supporting the study's focus on inclusivity and aligning with the first research objective.

All participants received an information sheet detailing the study's scope and data handling procedures and provided informed consent in writing before their interviews. Interviews were conducted online at times convenient to participants, ensuring accessibility and minimal disruption to their professional responsibilities. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed iteratively, drawing on prior literature on EDIB and hybrid leadership as well as the study's conceptual framing. Initial questions were designed to explore participants' leadership roles, organisational context and EDIB priorities, while follow-up prompts allowed for deeper examination of emerging themes and tensions. Each participant had the right to withdraw at any stage.

The sample included 12 professionals as shown in Table 2. Four participants disclosed neurodivergence, and two identified as LGBTQIA+. The industries

represented ranged from media and event management to software development, pharmaceutical executive leadership, and global consulting.

Interview data were transcribed using Otter.ai, and anonymised transcripts were returned to participants for review and correction, ensuring accuracy and ethical transparency. Personal identifiers were removed or generalised to maintain confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was conducted manually to identify patterns and connections between EDIB practices and observed ESG outcomes. Although software tools such as NVivo were not used, the manual approach allowed for close engagement with the data and was appropriate given the sample size. Inspired by recent qualitative ESG studies (DiTomaso 2021; Piwowar-Sulej et al. 2024), this analysis provided nuanced insights into how inclusive leadership can influence sustainability practices.

To enhance interpretive rigour, the analysis emphasised transparency and traceability between research objectives, interview prompts, and emergent themes, supported by the audit trail presented in Table 3. Coding decisions were checked through repeated comparison with the original transcripts and across interviews, with provisional themes refined where the underlying evidence suggested overlap, inconsistency, or a need for clearer distinction. The anonymised transcripts returned to participants for review also provided an additional check on the accuracy of the source material used in the analysis.

To support consistency in interpretation, emerging themes were repeatedly traced back to the interview prompts, participant accounts, and research questions, with the audit trail used to maintain a clear link between the evidence and the final thematic structure. Researcher bias was managed through this iterative return to the data, by avoiding reliance on frequency alone when determining analytical relevance, and by retaining less common or contradictory observations where these helped explain tensions or weaker patterns in the findings. This was particularly important for the Environmental and Governance dimensions, where the evidence was less consistent than for the Social pillar.

Ethical approval was obtained from the affiliated institution's ethics board. All data were handled securely and in accordance with data protection and research ethics guidelines.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Findings overview and thematic synthesis

This study adopted a thematic analysis methodology as outlined by Creswell et al. (2007) to examine the

responses from twelve in-depth interviews conducted with professionals leading hybrid teams. The framework permitted structured comparison across individual interviews while retaining the necessary flexibility to allow for the emergence of unexpected yet critical themes. Thematic patterns were identified through the coding process, with particular attention given to themes mentioned by at least 60% of participants. This threshold was used as a simple indication of recurring patterns across the dataset, rather than as a measure of statistical representativeness or inter-coder agreement. At the same time, less frequently mentioned themes were not excluded where they offered meaningful insight. These were retained in cases where they helped illuminate tensions, contradictions, or less developed aspects of ESG, particularly in relation to the Environmental and Governance dimensions. The analysis was carried out manually in order to explore patterns and relationships between EDIB leadership practices and their ESG-related implications. The process was iterative, moving back and forth between the data and emerging interpretations. The interview transcripts were first read several times to build familiarity with the material. Initial codes were then developed inductively, capturing recurring ideas around leadership practices, inclusion, and perceived links to ESG. These codes were compared across interviews and gradually organised into broader themes. As the analysis progressed, overlapping codes were merged and distinctions between themes were refined through continuous comparison. The themes were then revisited in relation to the full dataset to ensure they were coherent and meaningfully connected to the research questions. Where an emerging interpretation was not sufficiently supported across the underlying accounts, the theme was either refined, merged with a related theme, or retained as a more tentative finding. In the final stage, the themes were interpreted through the lens of the three ESG pillars, which helped to highlight where alignment was most evident (primarily Social), where effects were more indirect (Environmental), and where practices remained less clearly embedded (Governance).

The interviews provided rich, nuanced data on leadership perceptions and behaviours regarding Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB) in hybrid work environments and their potential influence on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) dimensions. Direct quotations from participants are incorporated to illustrate the emergent themes and ensure transparency and authenticity in interpretation. The emerging themes in and out of the semi-structured interview are depicted in Table 4, while Table 5 shows the connection to the three research objectives.

Table 3. Interview protocol-to-theme audit trail.

Focal construct(s) captured	Indicative interview prompt(s)	Emergent theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	E	S	G
Hybrid work design as an inclusion enabler (flexibility, accessibility)	Q2 "What do you like most ...?"; Q3 "How do you ensure EDIB ...?"; Q7 "What advice ...?"	Flexible Work Arrangements	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Autonomy, empowerment, decentralised decision-making	Q2; Q3; Q7	Autonomy	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Well-being outcomes of hybrid leadership	Q2; Q7	Work-Life Balance	✓		✓		✓	
Motivation, cohesion, engagement in hybrid teams	Q2; Q3; Q7	Employee Morale and Engagement	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Inclusion enacted through communication routines (visibility, clarity, access)	Q1 "leadership style"; Q3; Q7	Inclusive Communication / Purposeful Communication	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Psychological safety through listening behaviours	Q1; Q3; Q7	Active Listening	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Trust-building and follow-through (accountability without surveillance)	Q3; Q7	Trust and Accountability	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Relational leadership, empathy, individualisation of support	Q1; Q3; Q7	Empathetic Leadership / Consistent Empathetic Engagement	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Managing the "presence gap" and social cohesion across office/remote	Q2; Q4 "EDIB challenges ..."; Q7	Balancing In-Person and Remote Interactions	✓		✓		✓	
Leadership adaptation to hybrid constraints (tooling, cadence, role modelling)	Q1; Q4; Q7	Adapting Leadership Approaches	✓		✓		✓	
Values discourse and cultural signalling of inclusion/sustainability	Q6 "How important are ESG policies ...?"; Q5 "impacting ESG ...?"	Organisational Culture and Values Importance		✓	✓		✓	✓
Alignment (or misalignment) between team practice and organisational ESG/governance	Q5; Q6	Organisational Culture and Values Alignment		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barriers to equitable participation (neurodiversity/accessibility; digital capability)	Q4 "EDIB challenges ..."	Digital Inclusion and Accessibility Constraints (e.g., neurodiversity; technological literacy)	✓				✓	✓
Cross-cultural interpretation and inclusion in digitally mediated settings	Q4	Intercultural Communication Challenges	✓				✓	
Environmental effects attributed to hybrid work (often incidental)	Q5	Environmental Outcomes (e.g., reduced commuting; digitised workflows)		✓		✓		
Governance literacy and formal embedding of ESG/EDIB into routines	Q5; Q6	Governance Integration Gap (e.g., ESG reporting literacy; lack of formal scaffolding)		✓	✓			✓

To further illustrate the nuanced relationships uncovered through this study, [Figure 1](#) presents a conceptual Venn diagram mapping the intersections among EDIB leadership themes, hybrid work enablers, and ESG outcomes. This visual synthesis draws directly on the thematic findings summarised in [Table 5](#) and highlights the multi-dimensional nature of hybrid leadership in contemporary organisational contexts.

4.2. Findings for research objective 1 (RQ1): explore the status of EDIB practices in leading hybrid teams

Leaders consistently highlighted flexible work arrangements, purposeful communication, and empathetic leadership as foundational components of inclusive leadership in hybrid teams. The recurring theme of 'Flexible Work Arrangements,' noted across all interviews (100% agreement), underscores a collective acknowledgement of autonomy, accessibility, and mutual trust as central to contemporary team management. This supports the work of Gratton (2021), who

argued for the productivity and belonging fostered through personalised work structures, and Johnson (2023), who emphasised hybrid flexibility as a driver of employee engagement and retention. As Interview B2 stated, 'Hybrid allows me to better manage my day. I literally had lunch before our meeting, which wouldn't have been possible in the office.' Similarly, Interview C shared, 'Work and personal life are mixing more and more ... you have more freedom in both directions.' Interview F reflected, 'It does allow for people with different learning styles or different ways of understanding the world to potentially operate in a more efficient way'.

Participants cited proactive outreach methods, such as scheduled check-ins, open-door virtual policies, and asynchronous communication tools. These practices allowed leaders to remain present and accessible to their team members, even across geographic and temporal divides. Interview C2 remarked, 'Communication needs to be intentional. I rely heavily on one-on-ones, asynchronous tools, and very clear expectations,' while Interview F2 noted, 'We still do morning huddles ... Even if they're working from home, they dial in. It's not

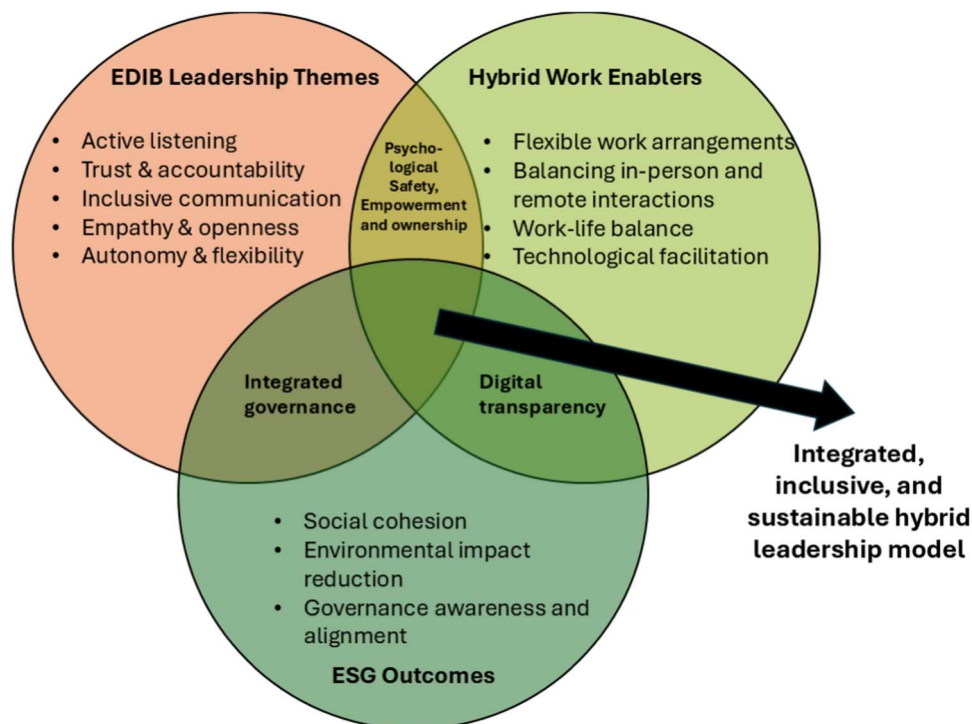
Table 5. Emerging themes in relation to the research objectives.

Theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Flexible Work Arrangements	X		X
Accessibility and Increase of EDIB	X	X	
Balancing In-Person and Remote Interactions	X		
Employee Morale and Engagement	X	X	
Quality of Work and Productivity	X		X
Work-Life Balance	X	X	
Adapting Leadership Approaches	X		X
Autonomy	X	X	X
Organisational Culture and Values	X	X	X
Effective Communication	X	X	X
Open Communication and Empathy	X	X	X
ESG Impact Observed		X	X
Relationship Building	X	X	X
Trust and Accountability	X	X	X
Governance and Expectations		X	X
Cultural Differences	X		
Neurodiversity Needs	X		X
Active Listening Skills	X		X
Inequality and Fairness Challenges	X	X	
Technology Challenges		X	X
Social Justice and Engagement		X	X
Global Team Collaboration	X	X	X
Continuous Learning	X	X	X
Team Success and Creativity	X	X	X
Structured Approach	X	X	X
ESG Impact Not Clear		X	

optional'. Interview E2 added, 'I'd check in regularly with team members, even if just for a quick chat ... I also tried to be clear on deliverables, but flexible on the process'. These affirm Gratton's (2021) emphasis on maintaining cultural continuity in digital spaces and echo Agarwal and Bhal's (2020) multidimensional leadership framework, where transparency, trust, and adaptability are critical.

However, despite these positive developments, notable limitations persist. Several interviewees raised concerns about accommodating the specific needs of neurodiverse individuals, indicating a lack of adequate training or policy mechanisms to support cognitive inclusion. Tsatsou (2020) further emphasises that successful digital inclusion requires moving beyond uniform policy approaches to consider intra-disability diversity and individual preferences, reinforcing participants' reflections on the importance of personalisation and flexibility in EDIB strategies. Interview F acknowledged, 'We flagged issues with neurodiversity ... it took a long time to get traction.' Interview E2 added, 'Sometimes the systems we use aren't accessible for all ... I try to bring it up, but it doesn't always land'. Technological literacy gaps were also flagged as barriers to equitable participation in hybrid teams. As Interview A2 noted, 'Some team members really struggled with the new platforms, they were never trained properly'. Interview B2 shared, 'I had to create custom guides for colleagues who couldn't navigate the tools easily'.

Moreover, challenges in navigating intercultural communication emerged, pointing to a broader deficiency in organisational readiness for leading diverse and dispersed teams. Interview D remarked, 'Sometimes it's not the tech, it's about understanding how different people interpret the same message. That's the gap'. Interview C2 added, 'Cultural context is missing in virtual comms. We try to bridge it, but it's tough'.

**Figure 1.** EDIB themes and their intersection with ESG pillars.

The presence of diversity in teams was often attributed to organisational hiring practices rather than a result of targeted leadership efforts. Interview B shared, *'I value diversity, but honestly, I inherited my team. I wasn't involved in building it'*. Interview D similarly stated, *'Our team setup was largely predefined, I just try to keep it inclusive'*. This highlights a significant insight: while individual leaders show commitment to EDIB principles, structural and institutional supports are lacking, echoing DiTomaso (2021) and Drempetic, Klein, and Zwergel (2019), who warned that diversity, when not embedded in systemic processes, risks becoming superficial. Furthermore, there was limited evidence of organisational strategies addressing intersectionality or the layered experiences of marginalised team members. As Interview D2 noted, *'We touch on it in training, but it's very surface-level'*. Interview F added, *'Intersectionality isn't something I've seen discussed formally, it's up to us to spot it informally'*.

Overall, hybrid team leaders show a clear willingness to foster inclusive environments and reflect an evolving understanding of EDIB. However, their impact is primarily interpersonal and informal, revealing significant opportunities for organisations to institutionalise inclusive practices through policy, training, and systemic support. Interview E2 concluded, *'I think most of us are doing our best, but without backing from the top, it only goes so far'*. Interview A added, *'You can be inclusive one-on-one, but without systems in place, it's hard to make it stick'*. Interview D reflected, *'It's good intentions, but we need structures to sustain it'*.

4.3. Findings for research objective 2 (RQ2): discover how EDIB practices enable or disable ESG implementation.

To show how the thematic findings relate to the research objectives and ESG pillars, Table 6 provides an integrated summary of the major themes and their

participant prevalence. The table maps each theme against the study's three objectives and the relevant ESG dimensions: (1) exploring EDIB practices, (2) assessing their impact on ESG, and (3) identifying effective strategies. By mapping these themes to specific ESG dimensions, the table provides a clear visualisation of how inclusive leadership practices intersect with broader sustainability goals in hybrid team contexts. This detailed mapping also highlights areas of strong Social pillar alignment and reveals critical gaps, particularly in Governance.

Figure 1 complements Table 6 by showing strong alignment with Social outcomes, largely incidental Environmental effects, and weak day-to-day Governance embedding.

Most interviewees perceived their leadership to be contributing positively to their organisations' ESG goals, particularly within the social pillar. However, a more detailed analysis reveals that while EDIB practices such as fostering inclusivity, promoting open communication, and supporting well-being were indeed enabling factors for the social dimension, their connection to the Environmental and Governance aspects of ESG remained ambiguous or weakly articulated.

For example, Interview D2 discussed their organisation's reliance on renewable energy, paperless operations, and minimised travel, noting, *'We have a server which runs on 100% Electric, renewable energy in Finland... We don't really have a physical office'*. This reflects an indirect environmental benefit of hybrid work models. Similarly, Interview C described their company's cultural emphasis on environmental care, though they acknowledged that these practices were informal and lacked codification: *'It's more kind of culture or guidance. I wouldn't call this a policy although everyone should follow that'*.

Participants also described social contributions through initiatives like paid volunteer hours (Interview E), mental health support, and psychological safety

Table 6. Relationships between EDIB leadership themes and ESG dimensions in hybrid teams.

EDIB Leadership Theme	Environmental (E)	Social (S)	Governance (G)
Flexible Work Arrangements	Indirect benefits (e.g., reduced commuting emissions)	Strong enhancement of work-life balance and belonging	Weak linkage; limited governance embedding
Inclusive Communication	Limited direct impact	Critical for psychological safety and team trust	Supports transparency but not formal governance structures
Empathy and Active Listening	-	Enhances engagement, morale, and well-being	Not systematically integrated into governance
Autonomy and Trust	Potential environmental innovation via empowered choices	Drives accountability and ownership	Lacks formal governance alignment
Adapting Leadership Approaches	-	Fosters inclusion of diverse perspectives	Not formally structured in governance
Organisational Culture & Values Alignment	Possible environmental awareness in values	Aligns team culture with ESG social objectives	Informal rather than policy-driven governance
Relationship Building & Mentorship	-	Strengthens social cohesion and retention	Weak formal integration

practices. Interview E stated, *'Our firm gives us 40h a year for volunteering, whatever cause matters to us. It's part of how they show they care.'* Interview E2 noted, *'We talk a lot about mental health, the culture supports it, and I make space for it in one-on-ones.'* Interview B2 remarked, *'I want my team to feel supported, so I often check in emotionally, not just on deadlines. That's a priority for me.'* Interview E also echoed the emphasis on psychological safety: *'Sometimes people just need to talk about things outside of work, and I make sure they know they can do that with me.'* These efforts resonate with Henisz, Koller, and Nuttall (2019), who identified employee engagement and operational efficiency as ESG value drivers.

However, Governance was largely underexplored. Many leaders admitted to unfamiliarity with ESG reporting, strategic alignment, or the formal structures guiding governance in their organisations. Interview B disclosed, *'I'm not very familiar with our ESG strategy, it's not something that's discussed in our day-to-day.'* Interview A2 reflected, *'Governance? I wouldn't know where to look for that information, honestly.'* Interview F2 added, *'It's just not on the radar. ESG is more something the board looks at. We just get on with the work.'* This mirrors the concerns raised by Piwowar-Sulej et al. (2024) about superficial ESG messaging unaccompanied by substantive action.

A few participants noted unintentional positive ESG outcomes, such as reduced commuting emissions and more inclusive hiring. Interview B mentioned, *'We've hired more internationally since going hybrid, people we never would have considered before. That changes the makeup of the team and brings new perspectives.'* Interview D also reflected on reduced environmental impact: *'We don't do printouts anymore. Everything's digital now, and people are more conscious of their choices.'*

Thus, while EDIB practices positively influence ESG, particularly the social dimension, their full potential remains unrealised without structured integration into governance frameworks or environmental strategies. Current practices function more as enablers of team cohesion and social credibility than as catalysts for comprehensive ESG transformation. Interview D summarised this challenge aptly: *'There's definitely impact in terms of trust and inclusion, but it's not measured, it's more a feeling than a KPI.'*

4.4. Findings for research objective 3 (RQ3): identify which EDIB practices are currently most effective on ESG.

The most effective EDIB practices for ESG enhancement, based on this study's data, include inclusive

leadership styles, transparent communication, and flexibility granted through autonomy. Mentorship and coaching, as described in Interview B2, emerged as tools not only for knowledge transfer but also for reinforcing belonging and inclusion. The interviewee reflected, *'We always have at least an hour or two per week to debrief and to wind down... No matter how urgent it is, we will drop it for at least 30 min... and talk about how we all feel... We're here to make money, but we're also humans.'* This approach fostered psychological safety and team cohesion, aligning with the social pillar of ESG.

Interview A2 further exemplified inclusion in practice by noting, *'I've always tried to make sure that all the voices are heard. I make time to have catchups with everyone, and I listen, even when it's not work-related.'* Such intentional listening facilitates trust-building and reflects a deep commitment to equitable leadership, a foundational EDIB principle with ESG implications.

Interviewees A, C, and D described efforts to align team values with broader company missions, illustrating the connective role of clear communication in bridging EDIB and ESG. Interview C2 explained, *'Within our company, we're very much into environmental care... there's a long history of it. It's more of a culture than a policy, but everyone understands it's part of what we do.'* This illustrates how team-level value alignment can embed sustainability thinking in everyday practice, even in the absence of formal governance.

Interview D2 elaborated on the importance of embedding shared values into team culture, stating, *'That value dialogue, that value and appreciate multiculturalism, which are aware of the SDGs... That's how we guide ourselves.'* This statement points to the potential for EDIB-driven cultures to contribute to long-term ESG commitments. However, the translation from intention to measurable impact remains challenging. As Hirsch (2021) noted, hybrid work creates fertile ground for sustaining cultural cohesion and ethical performance, yet only when supported by institutional scaffolding.

Despite these best-case scenarios, governance structures were notably absent in participants' strategies. Interviews A and B both acknowledged limited knowledge of their companies' governance protocols, suggesting a gap that could limit long-term ESG success. Interview A noted, *'I wouldn't really know what our governance policies are beyond what's on the intranet... I just try to be a decent manager.'* Similarly, Interview B remarked, *'I think we're doing well in terms of team morale and performance, but ESG and governance feels a bit like another department's thing.'* This aligns with

observations by Pagitsas (2022), who documented that many sustainability officers face a split role, balancing corporate demands with change management, often with insufficient institutional support.

The absence of unified, cross-industry EDIB frameworks also emerged as a constraint. Industry-specific norms shaped both the challenges and possibilities of hybrid leadership. For example, Interview F noted *'Some clients just don't respond well to virtual meetings. You need that face-to-face to build trust, especially in our sector'*, which highlights the difficulty of sustaining social trust virtually. Conversely, those in NGOs or tech sectors were more adept at leveraging hybrid models for inclusion and sustainability. Interview E2 stated *'We've seen that our best talent often prefers hybrid flexibility. We let people tailor their weeks, and we trust them to deliver'*. Interview E echoed this sentiment, adding, *'When people feel in control of their schedule and they're not micromanaged, they thrive. That also helps the company's social image and retention stats'*. Such autonomy-supportive leadership practices feed directly into ESG's social and even reputational dimensions. These findings suggest that while some EDIB practices can universally support ESG, others must be tailored to industry context.

Across interviews, the practices showing the strongest links to ESG were trust-building through autonomy, active listening, and consistent, empathetic engagement. These interpersonal strategies, while effective at the team level, require translation into organisational policy and metrics to generate lasting, scalable ESG outcomes. This aligns with the early findings by Fang, Kwok, and Schroeder (2014), who emphasise that hybrid and virtual teams must overcome paradoxical tensions in knowledge integration, while dispersed expertise offers value, it also presents barriers to cohesive knowledge processes. Addressing these challenges explicitly through EDIB-informed leadership could improve not only social cohesion but also the operationalisation of ESG goals across different levels of the organisation. This is consistent with Wilson-Menzfeld et al. (2025), who show that digital exclusion, rooted in unequal access, skills gaps, and socio-economic disparities, can undermine the inclusivity efforts of even the most well-intentioned hybrid leaders, limiting scalability and broader ESG effectiveness. Interview F summed this up succinctly: *'I can do my part and lead with empathy and fairness, but without top-down policy, it's hard to make real ESG change'*.

Moreover, several interviewees recognised the value of informal peer mentorship. Interview B shared, *'Sometimes it's just about letting your junior team members shadow you, see how you handle things. That builds confidence and trust without needing a big programme'*. Others, like

Interview E, discussed the value of transparent expectations: *'We set clear outcomes and let people find their best way to get there. That's empowering and inclusive'*.

In summary, while there's no singular EDIB blueprint that applies across all industries, hybrid team leaders demonstrate consistent use of practices that enhance ESG performance, particularly within the social dimension. Yet, until these are formalised, embedded, and measured at the institutional level, their true potential will remain underutilised.

4.5. Discussion

Building on the integrated thematic synthesis in Table 6 and the conceptual visualisation in Figure 1, this section interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and considers their implications for leadership theory and practice. The discussion examines the three ESG pillars in turn and distinguishes where the findings confirm, extend, or challenge existing work on EDIB, hybrid leadership, and ESG implementation. Overall, the findings complement recent research linking leadership to ESG performance by showing that these relationships are contingent and unevenly enacted across ESG dimensions. More specifically, we interpret the findings across the three ESG pillars in turn, using Table 6 and Figure 1 to explain (i) the mechanisms through which hybrid EDIB leadership shapes Social outcomes, (ii) why Environmental outcomes are largely indirect, and (iii) why Governance remains weakly embedded in leaders' day-to-day practice. To make this contribution explicit, the discussion distinguishes where the findings confirm, extend, or challenge existing work on EDIB, hybrid leadership, and ESG implementation. In this respect, the findings complement recent quantitative studies linking leadership to ESG performance by suggesting that such relationships are more contingent and locally enacted than often assumed. Rather than operating as a uniform driver across all ESG dimensions, leadership appears to shape sustainability outcomes unevenly, with stronger and more direct effects in the Social domain and more indirect or weakly embedded links in Environmental and Governance areas. This study contributes to an emerging research gap at the intersection of inclusive leadership, hybrid work, and sustainability strategy by evidencing how EDIB practices translate unevenly across ESG pillars.

5. Social outcomes: EDIB leadership mechanisms in hybrid teams

As highlighted in Table 6, EDIB themes such as flexible work arrangements, inclusive communication, and

empathetic leadership most clearly support the Social pillar of ESG. This confirms and extends prior findings by Gratton (2021), who argued that flexible, people-centred leadership enhances psychological safety and belonging, ultimately improving engagement and retention. Similarly, Johnson (2023) emphasised the importance of tailored hybrid arrangements for cultivating a sense of inclusion, a point echoed by the participants who described hybrid flexibility as a fundamental tool for fostering equity. This research also positions hybrid work as a dynamic cultural accelerator rather than a passive context. It shows that hybrid settings can intensify inclusive leadership practices, encouraging rapid adaptation and new forms of team cohesion that traditional in-office models may inhibit. At the same time, the findings indicate that these inclusion gains are not automatic: they depend on leaders intentionally redesigning communication, visibility and support practices, reinforcing the argument in Gratton and Johnson that hybrid inclusion is enabled through purposeful leadership design rather than proximity alone.

Moreover, the themes ‘Employee Morale and Engagement’ and ‘Work-Life Balance’ (both over 83% agreement) emphasise the nuanced interpersonal gains hybrid leaders can achieve. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the motivational power of increased autonomy, illustrating that when team members have agency in structuring their time and workspaces, they report higher satisfaction and productivity. This extends the interpretation of autonomy beyond efficiency, suggesting it functions as an inclusion mechanism that signals trust and strengthens belonging, thereby linking everyday hybrid leadership behaviours more directly to ESG’s Social outcomes. Interview A2 described, *‘When they feel trusted, they step up even more. It’s not about checking in on them; it’s about checking in with them’*. This distinction underscores the importance of relational leadership, suggesting that mutual trust can be a catalyst for both individual and collective performance.

Themes around ‘Balancing In-Person and Remote Interactions’ and ‘Adapting Leadership Approaches’ point to the hybrid leader’s delicate role in negotiating physical and virtual spaces. Several participants noted that while virtual settings provide accessibility and comfort, maintaining periodic in-person connections reinforces social bonds and strengthens trust. Interview E2 explained, *‘Our virtual huddles keep us connected, but our occasional in-person retreats solidify that foundation’*. These insights echo Hirsch (2021), Katsamakos, Miliareisis, and Pavlov (2022), and Kopanakis (2023), who identified the interplay between virtual flexibility and face-to-face authenticity as crucial for sustaining organisational culture in hybrid models. Importantly,

participants describe in-person contact as a deliberate ‘inclusion stabiliser’ (rather than a default), suggesting that belonging in hybrid teams is actively maintained through intentional rhythm-setting, consistent with the literature emphasising culture as something leaders must continually reproduce in hybrid contexts.

The data also revealed that inclusive communication and active listening were consistently cited as foundational practices in building trust and psychological safety. These practices directly align with Agarwal and Bhal’s (2020) multidimensional leadership framework, where transparency and empathy are core elements of ethical leadership. However, while strong in their social impact, these practices were weakly connected to Governance and Environmental outcomes, highlighting a misalignment echoed in Henisz, Koller, and Nuttall (2019) and Piwowar-Sulej et al. (2024), who noted that many organisations still lack robust structures that translate socially oriented leadership behaviours into ESG governance routines and environmental priorities at the organisational level.

Interestingly, the theme ‘Organisational Culture and Values Importance’ (83% agreement) reveals that leaders perceive a strong connection between team culture and organisational ESG commitments, though this connection often remains informal and not explicitly articulated in policy. Interview C highlighted, *‘We live those values daily, but translating them into policy? That’s still a big gap’*. This underscores the risk of cultural values remaining performative rather than operationalised into formal governance practices, echoing concerns from Dremptic, Klein, and Zwergel (2019). Seen through this lens, leaders’ accounts suggest a ‘values-policy gap’: inclusion and sustainability are enacted culturally within teams, but do not consistently become routinised through governance mechanisms. This confirms raising legitimacy risks consistent with Dremptic et al.’s critique.

6. Environmental outcomes: largely indirect and unevenly embedded

In Table 6, the link between EDIB practices and the Environmental pillar appears largely indirect. For example, reduced commuting through flexible arrangements contributes to lower carbon footprints (Interview D2), yet such outcomes are often incidental rather than intentional strategic priorities. This observation underscores the findings of Davies and Doherty (2019), who demonstrated that hybrid organisations face tension when trying to balance operational efficiency with environmental and social logics. This helps explain why environmental impact is described primarily as a

by-product of hybrid work design (e.g. reduced commuting), rather than as an explicit leadership-led strategy, limiting the extent to which leaders can evidence intentional Environmental outcomes.

Themes such as ‘Trust and Accountability’ and ‘Autonomy’ further highlight that fostering independence among team members not only builds morale but also allows for decentralised, proactive problem-solving. Interview B2 described, ‘*Empowerment isn’t just a buzzword. When they know they own their tasks, they bring solutions rather than problems*’. This leadership approach could be instrumental in advancing environmental innovations at a team level if properly supported by higher-level governance structures. This challenges a purely top-down view of ESG implementation by suggesting that team-level autonomy may generate local sustainability innovations, but only when governance structures exist to capture, coordinate and scale them across the organisation.

7. Governance outcomes: the values-policy gap and ‘translation failure’

On the Governance side, there was widespread acknowledgement among participants of a limited understanding or integration of governance practices into daily leadership approaches. Many participants admitted they had little familiarity with ESG reporting frameworks or strategic governance requirements. This supports DiTomaso’s (2021) observation that diversity and inclusion efforts often lack formal policy embedding, leaving leaders to navigate these priorities based on personal values rather than guided strategy. In practical terms, this positions limited ESG governance literacy as a mechanism of ‘translation failure’: leaders may enact EDIB in teams, but cannot reliably connect these practices to ESG accountability, reporting or decision processes without clearer organisational guidance.

Furthermore, the themes summarised in Table 6, particularly ‘Organisational Culture and Values’ Alignment’, reveal that while cultural emphasis on sustainability and inclusion is present, these values are more performative than systematically integrated. An important insight emerging from this study is the gap between implicit, value-driven EDIB actions and the absence of formalised, strategic ESG integration. This challenges any assumption that strong ESG narratives necessarily imply strong governance, showing instead that values discourse can remain decoupled from the formal routines required for ESG implementation. This highlights a crucial, under-explored dimension of hybrid leadership: the reliance on personal ethical frameworks in

the absence of institutional support. This reflects Dremptic et al.’s (2019) critique of ESG reporting legitimacy, which questions whether surface-level narratives truly translate into structural change.

8. Theoretical and practical implications for EDIB–ESG alignment

Overall, the findings confirm that flexible, people-centred hybrid leadership can strengthen inclusion, belonging, and engagement (supporting ESG’s Social pillar), but they challenge any assumption that such practices automatically translate into Environmental and Governance performance. The study extends prior work by showing how hybrid arrangements can actively amplify inclusive leadership (through intentional redesign of communication, autonomy, and visibility), while simultaneously exposing a persistent tension: EDIB is often enacted through personal ethics and local team practice in the absence of organisational scaffolding that embeds ESG into governance routines and environmental strategy. This reinforces the broader literature’s concern that ESG progress depends not only on values and messaging, but on structural embedding (e.g. the routines, roles and accountability mechanisms) that convert socially oriented leadership practices into Environmental and Governance performance.

From a practical perspective, this study highlights the urgent need for organisations to move beyond interpersonal and cultural reliance and to formalise inclusive leadership through policy, training, and structured governance frameworks. Integrating EDIB into governance mechanisms and environmental strategy would allow leaders to leverage existing social strengths while bridging critical gaps. The alignment with Pagitsas (2022), who discussed the dual role of sustainability officers in advocating and implementing ESG, becomes particularly salient here: leaders cannot rely solely on good intentions but must be supported by clear frameworks to create measurable outcomes. Accordingly, the findings suggest that hybrid leaders can function as ‘local ESG translators’ only when governance arrangements clarify ESG ownership and provide usable reporting guidance and feedback loops, echoing Pagitsas’ (2022) emphasis on the implementation burden leaders face when institutional support is limited.

In summary, the study extends the hybrid leadership literature by showing how hybrid environments can accelerate inclusive practices through responsive, empathetic communication and intentional relationship-building (Boian et al. 2024), yet it also demonstrates that these interpersonal strengths do not, on their own, resolve the persistent governance gap reported

by participants. In line with Khorakian et al. (2024), remote work satisfaction and digital literacy emerge as practical moderators of inclusion, reinforcing digital upskilling as a core EDIB intervention rather than a discretionary technical add-on. Consistent with Meske and Junglas (2021), autonomy and relatedness appear central to sustaining employee support for digital work transformation; however, the findings indicate that these conditions translate into broader ESG impact only when organisations provide clear ESG ownership, accessible governance guidance, and accountability routines that embed EDIB into ESG implementation.

9. Conclusions

Our study advances understanding of how EDIB (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging) leadership practices in hybrid teams shape ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) outcomes. Drawing on twelve semi-structured interviews with hybrid team leaders, the analysis examined (i) how EDIB is enacted in hybrid settings, (ii) how such practices enable or constrain ESG, and (iii) which EDIB practices are perceived as most effective in supporting ESG aims.

9.1. Key findings

- **EDIB leadership practices**, particularly active listening, purposeful communication, and empathetic engagement, **most strongly support the Social dimension of ESG, fostering psychological safety, inclusion and belonging.**
- **Flexibility and autonomy are widely perceived as inclusion enablers in hybrid teams**, supporting engagement and work–life balance, but their impact is uneven where digital accessibility needs are not systematically addressed.
- **Environmental outcomes are often incidental rather than strategically embedded:** most are linked to reduced commuting and digitised workflows rather than explicit leadership-led environmental initiatives.
- **Governance remains the weakest pillar in day-to-day leadership practice**, with EDIB frequently enacted through personal values and local team routines but only inconsistently embedded in organisational ESG governance systems.

These findings should be interpreted as indicative of how EDIB leadership is enacted and experienced in practice, rather than as evidence of direct ESG performance outcomes.

9.2. Theoretical contribution

The study contributes by integrating EDIB leadership and ESG implementation within the specific organisational conditions of hybrid work, an intersection that remains underexplored. It extends existing scholarship by showing how hybrid leadership practices operate as mechanisms through which EDIB is enacted and translated into ESG-aligned behaviours, with uneven effects across ESG dimensions, while also revealing a persistent tension: inclusive behaviours can generate social sustainability gains, yet without formal organisational scaffolding they do not reliably translate into governance or environmental performance. This misalignment echoes concerns in the broader ESG literature regarding the gap between stated commitments and structural embedding, and highlights hybrid leadership as a critical site where these tensions become visible and consequential.

9.3. Practical and governance contribution

For current and aspiring hybrid leaders seeking to improve both team performance and ESG outcomes, the following Five-Point EDIB-ESG Leadership Framework is proposed. This framework draws from interview data, academic theory, and emerging best practices, providing an actionable roadmap for inclusive leadership aligned with ESG values:

1. **Actively listen to your team members:** Engage in frequent, meaningful one-on-ones and feedback loops to ensure psychological safety and inclusivity.
2. **Be aware of your organisation's ESG policies and strategies:** Familiarity with formal commitments allows leaders to align their practices with corporate objectives.
3. **Monitor ESG trends across and beyond your industry:** Broadening your understanding of ESG enables anticipatory leadership and innovation.
4. **Foster alignment between your team's culture and the firm's ESG values:** Create shared purpose through transparent communication and inclusive goal setting.
5. **Trust and empower your team to take ownership of their work and its impact:** Move towards a mentor-advocate leadership model that values autonomy and promotes team-driven solutions.

9.4. Limitations and future research

This qualitative study prioritised depth over breadth, and the sample size limits generalisability. The focus

on leaders may under-represent how EDIB and ESG are experienced by non-managerial employees. Future research should incorporate multi-stakeholder perspectives, adopt mixed methods (including ESG performance indicators), and undertake longitudinal and sector-specific studies to examine how EDIB-ESG alignment develops over time, particularly in relation to Governance, which emerged as consistently under-embedded in this study.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Timo Holtappels**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Ioannis Christodoulou**: Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Moustafa Haj Youssef**: Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Michael Christofi**: Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Solon Magrizos**: Writing – review & editing.

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