PhD Research Proposal Sample: Mixed Methods

About this document

A complete research proposal, written by Grad Coach to show what a well-aligned proposal looks like, section by section. The shaded "Coach's note" boxes explain why each part is written the way it is; they are not part of the proposal. This is an illustrative sample, not a real student's submission, and the study it describes has not been carried out. Its references are real and were checked at source.

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SAMPLE PROPOSAL

Speaking Up at a Distance: Hybrid Work, Psychological Safety and Employee Voice in Professional Services Firms

Degree: PhD in Management (three years, full-time)

Proposed method: Mixed methods, explanatory sequential (two-wave survey, then interviews)

Word count (excluding references): approx. 2,400

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE TITLE**
>
> A doctoral title often runs to two parts. The first half is a hook a reader remembers; the second half names the variables and the setting, so a search engine or an examiner knows exactly what the thesis is about. Here, all three variables in the model appear in the title, along with the population.

1. Introduction and Background

Hybrid work has moved from an exception to a norm for many office-based professionals. A recent randomized trial at a Chinese technology company found that letting employees work from home two days a week improved job satisfaction and cut quit rates by a third, with no effect on performance grades, and no evidence of a difference in promotions, over the following two years (Bloom et al., 2024). Evidence like this suggests that, at least for some employees, hybrid work need not harm individual performance.

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A second debate is less settled. Organizations depend on employees telling them about problems: a flawed process, a client risk, a mistake a colleague has missed. Employee voice, the voluntary communication of suggestions, concerns and information about problems to someone higher in the organization, gives leaders information they would otherwise not have. When employees stay silent instead, the organization loses that information (Morrison, 2014).

There are reasons to think hybrid work could make speaking up harder. When Microsoft moved its US workforce to full-time remote work in 2020, employees' collaboration networks became more static and siloed, and communication shifted from synchronous to asynchronous media (Yang et al., 2022). The authors suggest these changes may make it harder for employees to acquire and share new information. Whether the same holds for voice, and under what conditions, is the question this study takes up.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE INTRODUCTION**
> A PhD introduction has to do two things a Master's one can get away with skipping. It must show the field is live (the 2024 trial) and it must show where the open question sits between two bodies of work (hybrid work and employee voice). Notice that the final paragraph ends on the question, not on an answer.

2. Research Problem

Research on employee voice has established that whether people speak up depends heavily on whether they believe it is safe to do so (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liang et al., 2012). Research on remote and hybrid work has established that working away from the office changes how colleagues interact (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Yang et al., 2022). These two bodies of research have developed largely in parallel. Most of what is known about voice comes from studies of co-located workplaces, and most of what is known about hybrid work concerns performance, satisfaction and retention rather than whether employees raise problems. As a result, organizations adopting hybrid work have little evidence about whether it changes who speaks up, and what managers can do if it does.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE PROBLEM STATEMENT**
> The two-part structure is the same as at Master's level: what we know, then what we don't and why it matters. At doctoral level, the gap usually sits *between* literatures rather than inside one. Saying so explicitly ("developed largely in parallel") sets up the original contribution in section 7.

3. Aim, Objectives, Research Questions and Hypotheses

Aim: To explain how hybrid work intensity relates to employees' willingness to raise problems at work, and whether psychological safety changes that relationship.

Objectives:

1. To measure the association between hybrid work intensity and prohibitive voice (speaking up about problems).

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2. To test how psychological safety relates to prohibitive voice, and whether it moderates that association.
3. To explain, through employees' own accounts, how hybrid arrangements shape their decisions to speak up or stay silent.

Research questions:

1. How is hybrid work intensity associated with employees' prohibitive voice?
2. How is psychological safety associated with prohibitive voice, and does it moderate the association between hybrid work intensity and prohibitive voice?
3. How do employees in hybrid arrangements describe their decisions to speak up about problems, or to stay silent?

Hypotheses (for RQ1 and RQ2):

- **H1:** Hybrid work intensity is negatively associated with prohibitive voice.
- **H2:** Psychological safety is positively associated with prohibitive voice.
- **H3:** Psychological safety moderates the association between hybrid work intensity and prohibitive voice, such that the negative association is weaker when psychological safety is high.

> **COACH'S NOTE · QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES**
> In a mixed-methods proposal, only the quantitative questions get hypotheses. RQ3 is open-ended because the qualitative phase is there to explain, not to test. Each objective still maps to exactly one question, so the golden thread runs through both strands.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Employee voice and silence

Morrison (2014) defines upward voice as the voluntary communication of suggestions, concerns, information about problems or work-related opinions to someone in a higher position, and silence as withholding that input. Liang et al. (2012) distinguish two forms. Promotive voice proposes ideas for improvement; prohibitive voice raises concerns about practices or behaviors that may harm the organization. The distinction matters here because Liang et al. found that psychological safety was most strongly related to prohibitive voice, the form that means telling someone that something is wrong.

4.2 Psychological safety

Edmondson (1999) introduced team psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In a study of 51 work teams in a manufacturing company, psychological safety was associated with team learning behavior, which in turn mediated its effect on team performance. In a later review, Edmondson and Lei (2014) identify psychological safety as a critical factor in voice, teamwork and learning, studied at the individual, group and organizational levels.

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The link to voice is well supported. In a study of 3,149 employees and 223 managers in a restaurant chain, Detert and Burris (2007) found that managerial openness was more consistently related to employees' improvement-oriented voice than transformational leadership was, and that this relationship was mediated by employees' perceptions of psychological safety. In a two-wave study of 239 employees, Liang et al. (2012) found that psychological safety was the antecedent most strongly related to subsequent prohibitive voice. A meta-analysis of 136 independent samples, covering over 22,000 individuals and nearly 5,000 groups, has since mapped the antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety and compared them across individual and group levels of analysis (Frazier et al., 2017).

4.3 Remote and hybrid work and workplace relationships

A meta-analysis of 46 studies covering 12,883 employees found that telecommuting had small but mainly beneficial effects on outcomes such as perceived autonomy, beneficial effects on job satisfaction, performance and turnover intent, and no generally detrimental effect on the quality of workplace relationships (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). The exception is important for this study: high-intensity telecommuting, more than 2.5 days a week, harmed relationships with coworkers.

Later evidence points the same way at scale. Yang et al. (2022) used email, calendar, messaging and call data from 61,182 US Microsoft employees and found that firm-wide remote work made collaboration networks more static and siloed, with fewer bridges between different parts of the organization, and shifted communication from synchronous to asynchronous media. Bloom et al. (2024), by contrast, found that a two-day-a-week hybrid schedule improved satisfaction and retention without harming performance. Read together, these studies suggest that the *intensity* of remote work matters, and that its costs, where they exist, fall on relationships and information flow rather than on individual output.

4.4 The gap this study addresses

Voice depends on people judging it safe to raise a problem, and on there being someone to raise it with. Hybrid work changes both: it may change who employees interact with, how often, and through which channels. Yet the voice literature has mostly studied co-located workers, and the hybrid-work literature has mostly measured performance, satisfaction and retention. This study brings the two together and asks whether, and under what conditions, hybrid work intensity changes whether employees speak up about problems.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE LITERATURE REVIEW**
>
> Three things mark this as doctoral. First, it reports what each key study actually did (sample, design, finding), not just what it concluded. Second, it points out tension between studies (4.3's "by contrast"), which is where a contribution can live. Third, the review builds the hypotheses: H1 comes from 4.3, H2 from 4.2, and H3 from putting them together.

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5. Conceptual Framework

The study tests a moderation model. Hybrid work intensity (the number of days in a typical working week spent away from the employer's premises) is the independent variable; prohibitive voice is the dependent variable; and psychological safety is the moderator.

Element	Variable	Role in the model	Hypothesis
Independent variable	Hybrid work intensity	Expected to reduce prohibitive voice	H1
Dependent variable	Prohibitive voice	Speaking up about problems	All
Moderator	Psychological safety	Expected to raise voice and buffer H1	H2, H3
Controls	Age, tenure, gender, role level, team size	Held constant	None

The reasoning behind H1 draws on Gajendran and Harrison (2007) and Yang et al. (2022): more time away from the office means fewer and more asynchronous interactions with colleagues and managers, and so fewer low-risk moments in which to raise a concern. The reasoning behind H3 draws on Detert and Burris (2007) and Liang et al. (2012): where employees judge speaking up to be safe, they may raise problems through whatever channels remain, so the loss of informal contact matters less.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**
> Every arrow in a conceptual framework is a claim, and each claim needs a source behind it. The paragraph under the table does exactly that: one sentence of reasoning per hypothesis, with the studies it rests on. If you can't write that sentence for an arrow, the arrow shouldn't be in your model.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Philosophy and design

The study takes a pragmatist position, choosing methods by what each research question needs. RQ1 and RQ2 ask about associations across a population and call for a survey. RQ3 asks how people experience a decision and calls for interviews. The design is explanatory sequential mixed methods: quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, and the results shape who is interviewed and what they are asked in the second, qualitative phase (Ivankova et al., 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase has priority.

6.2 Phase 1: Two-wave survey

Population and sampling. Full-time employees of professional services firms (for example, consulting, accounting, legal and engineering services) in the United States and the United Kingdom who work a hybrid schedule. Participants will be recruited through an online research panel with screening

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questions for sector, employment status and working pattern.

Sample size. The sample size is set by the hardest test, H3, which adds a single interaction term to a regression with eight predictors (five controls, two main effects and the interaction). An a priori power analysis for the R^2 increase from one added predictor ($\alpha = .05$, power = .80), assuming a small effect ($f^2 = .02$; Cohen, 1988), gives a minimum of 395 complete responses. This was calculated using the method implemented in G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) and checked by simulation. If the true interaction is smaller than assumed, or if categorical controls need several dummy codes, the minimum rises; the target of 450 usable responses across both waves leaves margin for both and for screening exclusions.

Measures.

- *Hybrid work intensity* (wave 1): the number of days in a typical working week spent working away from the employer's premises.
- *Psychological safety* (wave 1): Edmondson's (1999) team psychological safety scale.
- *Prohibitive voice* (wave 2, four weeks later): the prohibitive voice items used by Liang et al. (2012). Liang et al. collected supervisor ratings; this study adapts the items for self-report, a difference discussed under limitations.
- *Controls* (wave 1): age, organizational tenure, gender, role level and team size.

Common method bias. All measures are self-reported, which risks inflating associations. Following Podsakoff et al. (2003), the study will use procedural remedies: the predictor and the outcome are measured four weeks apart, respondents are assured of anonymity, and scale items are separated in the questionnaire. A statistical check will be reported alongside.

Analysis. After screening and confirmatory factor analysis of the scales, hypotheses will be tested by hierarchical regression: controls first, then the two main effects (H1, H2), then the interaction term (H3). A significant interaction will be probed with simple slopes and the Johnson-Neyman technique (Hayes, 2022).

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE SAMPLE SIZE**
> "We will survey around 400 people" is not a justification. A power analysis is: it names the test, the effect size you assume and why, alpha and power, and the number that results. Examiners will check that the test in the power analysis is the same test you run in the analysis. Here, both are the R^2 increase from the interaction term.

6.3 Phase 2: Interviews

Sampling. Survey participants will be invited at wave 2 to volunteer for an interview. From the volunteers, 20 to 24 will be selected purposively from four groups defined by the survey results: high or low hybrid intensity, crossed with high or low psychological safety. If H3 is supported, the selection will over-sample the groups where the interaction is strongest.

Data collection. Semi-structured interviews of 45 to 60 minutes by video call. The guide will ask participants to describe a recent occasion when they noticed a problem at work and how they decided whether to raise it, and how working away from the office affects those decisions.

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Analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the survey results informing, but not limiting, the coding.

6.4 Integration

The two phases connect at two points. The survey results select the interview participants and shape the interview guide. In the discussion chapter, the findings of both phases will be presented together in a joint display, showing where the interviews explain, extend or contradict the survey results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

> **COACH'S NOTE · INTEGRATION**
> The most common weakness in mixed-methods proposals is two studies stapled together. Say exactly where the strands connect (here, participant selection, the interview guide and the joint display), and examiners will see one study.

7. Original Contribution

The study aims to make three contributions.

1. **To theory.** It connects the employee voice and hybrid work literatures, testing whether a well-established antecedent of voice, psychological safety, changes how a new working arrangement relates to speaking up.
2. **To method.** It separates the predictor and outcome in time and pairs the survey with interviews selected from its own results, so the qualitative findings explain the specific patterns the survey finds.
3. **To practice.** If psychological safety buffers the effect of hybrid work on voice, managers of hybrid teams have a lever they can act on that does not depend on bringing people back to the office.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE CONTRIBUTION**
> This is the section that separates a PhD proposal from a Master's one. A doctorate must add something original to knowledge, so say what, in which literature, and how it differs from what exists. Notice the claims are modest and specific. "This study will fill a gap" is not a contribution; "it tests whether X changes the effect of Y on Z" is.

8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be sought from the university's research ethics committee before data collection. Participants will give informed consent at each phase and may withdraw at any point before analysis. The survey collects no names or employer names. Wave 1 and wave 2 responses will be linked by a code the participant creates, not by personal data. Interview participants may describe colleagues, managers and incidents at their employer, so transcripts will be pseudonymized and identifying details removed. Data will be stored on encrypted university storage under the university's data management policy.

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9. Feasibility and Risks

Risk	Likelihood	Response
Fewer than 450 usable responses across both waves	Medium	Over-recruit at wave 1; budget for a second recruitment round in month 15
High attrition between waves	Medium	Short wave 2 survey; payment on completion of wave 2
Common method bias	Medium	Temporal separation and anonymity (6.2); statistical check reported
Too few interview volunteers in one of the four groups	Low	Invite all eligible wave 2 respondents; widen the group boundaries if needed
Timeline slippage	Medium	Thesis chapters drafted alongside data collection; three months of slack in year 3

COACH'S NOTE · RISKS

Doctoral committees want to know you can finish. A short risk table, with a real response to each risk, is more convincing than a paragraph promising the study is feasible.

10. Proposed Thesis Structure

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Conceptual framework and hypotheses
4. Methodology
5. Phase 1 results: the survey
6. Phase 2 findings: the interviews
7. Discussion: integrating the two phases
8. Conclusion, contributions and limitations

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11. Timeline

Period	Activity
Year 1, months 1-6	Full literature review; refine model and hypotheses
Year 1, months 7-9	Confirmation review; ethics application
Year 1, months 10-12	Survey pilot; finalize instruments
Year 2, months 13-16	Survey waves 1 and 2 (second recruitment round if needed)
Year 2, months 17-20	Quantitative analysis; draft chapter 5
Year 2, months 21-24	Interviews and transcription
Year 3, months 25-28	Qualitative analysis; draft chapter 6
Year 3, months 29-31	Integration and discussion; full draft
Year 3, months 32-33	Revisions and submission
Year 3, months 34-36	Slack for delays; viva or defense preparation

12. Limitations

The study measures associations, not causes: employees who choose hybrid work may differ from those who do not in ways the controls cannot capture. Psychological safety is measured as an individual perception, although Edmondson (1999) defines it as a shared team belief, and respondents are not grouped by team, so team-level effects cannot be estimated. Voice is self-reported, whereas Liang et al. (2012) used supervisor ratings, so self-reports may overstate how often employees speak up. Findings from professional services firms in two countries may not transfer to other sectors or national cultures.

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