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A Systematic Scholarly Review: Leadership Strategies for Virtual Employee Inclusion

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Abstract

This systematic literature review explores how leaders improve inclusion among virtual employees, defined as those either fully remote or hybrid. Based on an analysis of peer-reviewed scholarly literature, five primary leadership strategy areas were identified: work visibility, structured participation, open information sharing, human connection, and consistency of equity. By synthesizing diverse sources using a modified thematic framework, the study explains how each area contributes to inclusion in virtual work environments. The analysis emphasizes that inclusion in digital settings requires intentional leadership design, as it does not occur organically. This study adds conceptual clarity to a fragmented field, offering a structured and practical framework for improving inclusion among virtual employees. Findings may help leaders enhance employee engagement and performance, support organizations in designing more inclusive systems, and inform future research.

Keywords

Inclusive Leadership, Virtual Employees, Workplace Inclusion, Remote Work, Employee Engagement

1. Background

1.1. The Definition of Inclusion

Inclusion refers to employees feeling accepted, valued, respected, and treated fairly in the workplace (Chen & Tang, 2018; Dudek, 2023). Employees feel included when they can participate in workplace activities, express their ideas, contribute to decisions, and know their perspectives are considered by teams and leaders (Carden, 2025; Ohunakin et al., 2019; Passos et al., 2025; Pérez-Escamez et al., 2025). Inclusion is also strengthened when organizations recognize and use diverse viewpoints (Mathuki & Zhang, 2024). Leadership behaviors and organiza-

tional systems help create inclusion by making employees feel respected, supported, and acknowledged (De Silva et al., 2025; Gong et al., 2025; Sovbetov, 2025). Employees who feel included are more likely to experience psychological safety, empowerment, and support, and to have access to important information, opportunities, and resources (Kumari et al., 2025; Harl & Milfelner, 2025; Syah et al., 2025).

Beyond generalizations, inclusion comprises four primary parts: visibility, voice, access to resources, and belonging.

1.1.1. Being Visible

Visibility refers to whether an individual's work is observable, identifiable, and attributed to them in ways that signal value and relevance, particularly in environments where physical presence does not naturally foster awareness (Krehl & Büttgen, 2022; Maj & Hamza-Orlinska, 2024). It is fundamentally grounded in recognition and awareness. Employees are considered visible when their participation is noticed, their contributions are identifiable within organizational processes, and their efforts are acknowledged rather than overlooked (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025; Schertler et al., 2026). This includes both direct recognition and the extent to which work remains attributable to individuals over time, reinforcing their presence within the organization (Martinez-Hollingsworth et al., 2025; Ukpere et al., 2025).

The ways in which work is tracked, displayed, and evaluated influence whether employee efforts are transparent and attributable (Budnarowski et al., 2025; Minetola et al., 2026; Sátiro et al., 2025). Visibility is influenced by whether employees' presence and participation are perceptible within the work environment, contributing to their recognition as active contributors rather than peripheral participants (Elia et al., 2026; Rathod et al., 2025). When employee input is clearly connected to outcomes and acknowledged within organizational processes, individuals are more likely to be seen as contributors (Kumari et al., 2025; Masyhuri et al., 2025). The extent to which communication, collaboration, and knowledge exchange make employees' work noticeable influences how individuals are perceived (Mmakau & Sethibe, 2026), especially in environments with differing communication styles and varying cultural norms (Manzoor & Atiq, 2026).

1.1.2. Having a Voice

Having a voice refers to the extent to which employees can express ideas, concerns, perspectives, and dissent, and have those inputs meaningfully considered in organizational processes. Inclusion, in this sense, involves more than the opportunity to speak. It reflects whether employees' contributions are taken seriously and can influence decisions and outcomes (Carden, 2025; Ohunakin et al., 2019). At its core, voice represents active participation in organizational systems, where individuals are not passive participants but contributors whose perspectives shape direction and action (Ly, 2024; Passos et al., 2025; Pérez-Escamez et al., 2025), encompassing both formal mechanisms, such as structured participation

in processes, and informal opportunities, such as informally providing ideas and perspectives (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025; Masyhuri et al., 2025).

Employees who feel included share ideas and engage in discussions because those aspects inform organizational processes. Employees provide suggestions, raise concerns, and offer differing viewpoints without being excluded from consideration (Gong et al., 2025; Griffin & Karau, 2025). Ultimately, when employees see their input reflected in outcomes, they are more likely to perceive themselves as sufficiently included (Boamah et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2025; Workman et al., 2026).

1.1.3. Having Resource Access

Inclusion occurs when employees have access to resources such as information, tools, systems, and decision-making processes that enable meaningful participation (Ji, 2026; Ohunakin et al., 2019; Pérez-Escamez et al., 2025), enabling employees to shape organizational direction (Carden, 2025; Ly, 2024; Mathuki & Zhang, 2024; Passos et al., 2025; Harl & Milfelner, 2025). Employees can engage in discussions, provide input, and influence outcomes, which supports a sense of autonomy (Boamah et al., 2025; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025; Masyhuri et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2025; Workman et al., 2026).

From an organizational dynamics perspective, employees who feel included are not hindered by organizational and cultural dynamics, which often shape information access by influencing who can participate and whose contributions are enabled. These barriers can create disparities in exposure to information and in access to decision-making channels (Manzoor & Atiq, 2026; Tragantzopoulou et al., 2025).

From a technological perspective, all employees have access to digital platforms, systems, and electronic information. These enhance their participation at work. Additionally, these employees understand how to navigate these systems, which translates into access to information that subsequently enables influence over organizational decisions (Minetola et al., 2026; Siad & Sagar, 2025; Wang, 2018). Successful use of and navigation within a system that enables communication and data access enhances employees' opportunities for participation (Krehl & Büttgen, 2022; Schertler et al., 2026).

1.1.4. Feeling of Belonging

Belonging refers to how connected, valued, and integrated employees feel within the organization (De Silva et al., 2025; Dudek, 2023). It captures the emotional side of inclusion, where employees feel linked to people, culture, and purpose, not just involved in tasks (Saleh & Gajendran, 2024; Sovbetov, 2025). This form of inclusion develops through relationships, interactions, and a supportive environment that fosters connections with colleagues and alignment with organizational values (Ahmed, 2024; Mayowan et al., 2025). Feeling respected and treated fairly strengthens this connection and sense of identity (Kamal et al., 2025; Tragantzopoulou et al., 2025).

Belonging is also shaped by feeling valued, where recognition and appreciation reinforce emotional ties and membership (De Silva et al., 2025; Martinez-Hollingsworth et al., 2025), closely linked to psychological safety and trust (Gong et al., 2025; Griffin & Karau, 2025; Ly, 2024; Makhanya, 2025; Passos et al., 2025). It is strengthened through shared activities and collaboration that help employees see their role within a larger system, while a lack of access or inclusion can weaken that connection (Boamah et al., 2025; Elia et al., 2026; Williams et al., 2016).

In digital and remote settings, belonging depends on social interaction, where limited engagement can lead to isolation and disconnection (Liu et al., 2024; Livingston et al., 2023; Maj & Hamza-Orlinska, 2024; Wright & Silard, 2022). Conversely, strong connections and collaboration reinforce a sense of belonging and support team integration (Brünker et al., 2024; Ihm et al., 2024; Schertler et al., 2026; Workman et al., 2026).

1.2. Importance of Inclusion around Engagement and Performance

Inclusion is a key driver of employee engagement and performance, enabling individuals to contribute fully and sustain effectiveness. Perceived leader inclusion improves engagement, creativity, and performance while reducing strain (Zhang et al., 2024), and is linked to higher satisfaction and organizational effectiveness (Saleh & Gajendran, 2024). It strengthens engagement through psychological safety and meaningfulness (Mashhady, 2025) and improves performance through greater commitment across roles (Chen & Tang, 2018), with consistent links to satisfaction and overall performance (Goswami & Kishor, 2018).

Inclusive leadership is essential. It promotes innovation, motivation, and proactive contributions (Arif, 2025; Ly, 2024; Makhanya, 2025), while inclusion and diversity practices improve job performance and satisfaction (Ohunakin et al., 2019). Supportive environments further enhance well-being, engagement, and performance (Sarich et al., 2023), especially those encouraging knowledge sharing and interaction (Ahmed, 2024; Carden, 2025). Leadership that fosters trust, participation, and empowerment improves engagement and reduces burnout (Bratek et al., 2026; Onan et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2025; Sreedharan & Alqahtani, 2025) and is supported by empathy and interpersonal skills (Amani, 2025).

At the organizational level, inclusion supports stronger decision-making, engagement, and effectiveness (Pérez-Escamez et al., 2025; Saleh & Gajendran, 2024) and is linked to creativity, commitment, well-being, and reduced turnover (Dudek, 2023). It also improves adaptability, productivity, and outcomes through supportive practices and talent management (Kumari et al., 2025; Sovbetov, 2025; Harl & Milfelner, 2025). Non-inclusive environments reduce performance and decision quality (Hassanie et al., 2026; Ukpere et al., 2025), while positive organizational environments further support motivation and performance (Depoo & Hyrslova, 2024).

Inclusion also strengthens belonging, motivation, and retention (De Silva et al., 2025), while cognitive diversity enhances creativity and team outcomes (Mathuki

& Zhang, 2024). Inclusion consistently improves engagement and performance (Gong et al., 2025; Masyhuri et al., 2025; Syah et al., 2025), including in virtual settings where trust and connection are critical (Brünker et al., 2024; He et al., 2025; Schertler et al., 2026). People-centered practices such as recognition, alignment, and development further strengthen engagement and performance (Carvalho et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2025; Martinez-Hollingsworth et al., 2025; Mayowan et al., 2025).

1.3. The Challenge of Inclusion in a Digital World

For this study, virtual employees are defined as those who are either fully remote or hybrid. With virtual employees, inclusion is more complex in digital environments due to the interplay among individual, group, and organizational factors shaping the employee experience, making consistent inclusion difficult in evolving, technology-driven workplaces (Aranha et al., 2019). Inclusion efforts in the digital environment often fall short when organizations rely on isolated approaches, such as training, without addressing broader cultural and structural factors (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024; Zervas & Stiakakis, 2025). Remote work further complicates inclusion by reducing face-to-face interaction, informal communication, and interpersonal connection (Liu et al., 2024; Maj & Hamza-Orlinska, 2024). When employees are remote, leaders have fewer informal cues for understanding employee needs, increasing the risk of disengagement unless communication is intentionally structured (Brünker et al., 2024; Coulston et al., 2025). This can result in isolation, reduced connections, and burnout (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025; Simone et al., 2025).

Among digital employees, digital inequality limits inclusion through disparities in access, skills, and effective use of technology, restricting participation as work becomes more digital (Fisk et al., 2023; Hoyos Muñoz & Cardona Valencia, 2025). These gaps vary across user profiles and persist even when access exists, requiring approaches beyond one-size-fits-all solutions (Asmar et al., 2022; Li & Kostka, 2024; Livingston et al., 2023). At the same time, digital systems introduce structural risks when expectations to adapt to technology overlook existing barriers (De Leyn & Anrijs, 2026), and power can concentrate within systems and decision-making tools (Wang, 2018). The use of AI and algorithmic systems, which can vary among employees, further increases the risk of bias and exclusion if not actively managed across virtual and non-virtual employees (Budnarowski et al., 2025; Rathod et al., 2025; Sátiro et al., 2025; Siad & Sagar, 2025).

Differences in communication patterns, tool use, and digital competence lead to uneven participation and engagement (Krehl & Büttgen, 2022), while remote work conditions amplify disparities in resources and work environments (Ihm et al., 2024). Without redesigning workflows and access, in-person assumptions do not translate effectively to digital settings (Pryse, 2022; Williams et al., 2016). Digital transformation continues to reshape work, reinforcing that inclusion remains an evolving challenge requiring adaptation (Sharma et al., 2025). Although digital

tools can expand participation, they can also introduce barriers depending on access and design (Minetola et al., 2026), and misalignment between leadership and culture can further limit inclusion (Mmakau & Sethibe, 2026).

Reduced physical interaction also increases the risk of misunderstanding and exclusion, particularly in diverse teams (Manzoor & Atiq, 2026). Digital work environments can contribute to stress, overload, and disconnection if not managed effectively (Zhang et al., 2025), reinforcing the need to prioritize communication quality, well-being, and relationships (Kamal et al., 2025). As work becomes more distributed and technology-driven, inclusion can no longer rely on proximity; instead, it requires intentional leadership, structured communication, and coordinated systems (Aparicio et al., 2023; Dharmasiri & Jayakody, 2021). Overall, inclusion in digital environments is not automatic and must be supported through deliberate, adaptive strategies.

2. Impacts of Lack of Leadership Inclusion Strategies

2.1. Impacts on the Individual

The lack of leadership inclusion strategies harms employee well-being, attitudes, and performance. Lower perceived inclusion increases resource depletion, work-to-family conflict, psychological withdrawal, and reduced participation (Aranha et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024), while inclusion supports psychological safety, meaningfulness, and personal investment (Mashhady, 2025). Employees who feel excluded report lower job satisfaction, weaker attachment, and reduced motivation, as leadership behaviors like integrity and support shape trust and experience (Arif et al., 2023; Goswami & Kishor, 2018). It also reduces self-esteem, well-being, and innovation, with poor work design further harming outcomes (Arif, 2025; Kuknor et al., 2025; Sarich et al., 2023).

These effects intensify in digital environments, where a lack of support, skills, or access lowers self-efficacy, engagement, and performance (Liu et al., 2024; Livingston et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2016). Poor communication, weak leadership support, and limited flexibility drive frustration, detachment, and reduced commitment (Lee & Hu, 2025; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025), while inconsistent practices increase disengagement and feelings of being undervalued (Joon et al., 2025; Smith, 2025). Virtual conditions also increase burnout, isolation, and reduced focus (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2022; Guerrero-Adams et al., 2025).

Reduced trust, communication, and connection in virtual settings lower motivation and performance (Cowan, 2014; Levin et al., 2025). Digital fatigue, unclear communication, blurred boundaries, and lack of structure further weaken well-being and engagement (Coetzee et al., 2025; Dube & Marnewick, 2016; Hamersly & Land, 2015; Tworoger et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2022), leading to lower productivity and commitment (Majumder & Kunte, 2022). Limited digital access and high stress further reduce confidence and effectiveness (Chapano & Werner, 2026; Hassanie et al., 2026).

Leadership remains central. A lack of recognition, support, and alignment re-

duces motivation and satisfaction, whereas inclusive practices improve confidence and engagement (Onan et al., 2025; Martinez-Hollingsworth et al., 2025; Masyhuri et al., 2025; Mayowan et al., 2025; Workman et al., 2026). Without inclusion, employees face higher burnout and emotional exhaustion, especially in digital environments (Simone et al., 2025; Sreedharan & Alqahtani, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Weak support and exclusion increase disengagement, loneliness, and reduced commitment, harming well-being and performance (Depoo & Hyrslova, 2024; Wright & Silard, 2022), while inclusive leadership improves motivation and psychological outcomes (Griffin & Karau, 2025). Overall, the absence of inclusion increases stress, disengagement, and reduced effectiveness.

2.2. Impacts on the Team

The lack of leadership inclusion strategies weakens team functioning by reducing trust, collaboration, and cohesion. Inclusion is built through daily interactions, and when absent, employee behaviors shift in ways that harm team outcomes (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024). Positive, socially engaging environments support collaboration and knowledge sharing, showing how inclusion directly affects team effectiveness (Ahmed, 2024). Disengagement at the individual level can spread across the team, lowering cohesion and climate, especially in remote settings (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025).

In virtual and hybrid teams, weak leadership amplifies these issues. Teams depend on trust, communication, and shared understanding, and without support, coordination, and effectiveness decline (Cowan, 2014; Depoo & Hyršlová, 2022). Low trust reduces knowledge sharing and motivation (Levin et al., 2025), while poor communication and unclear expectations create misalignment and lower productivity (Gross, 2025; Hambley et al., 2007; Hamersly & Land, 2015; Tworoger et al., 2013). These challenges are greater in global teams, where distance and cultural differences increase the risk of misunderstanding (Morgan et al., 2014).

Communication and conflict management are central. Poor communication weakens team collaboration, while strong communication improves team alignment and trust (Wang et al., 2022). Unresolved conflict reduces performance, while effective management strengthens team cohesion (Gupta et al., 2024). Virtual settings increase risks of coordination issues and isolation without structured leadership support (Dube & Marnewick, 2016; He et al., 2025), and weak leader–member relationships reduce trust and unity among teams (Bratek et al., 2026).

Hybrid dynamics also create challenges. Without intentional management, teams face fragmentation, silos, and reduced shared understanding (Coulston et al., 2025). Low participation weakens engagement and alignment, while inclusive involvement improves coordination and outcomes (Boamah et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2025). Burnout also spreads across teams, reducing collaboration and effectiveness, especially under digital workload strain (Sreedharan & Alqahtani, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). These shared perceptions shape team performance, where positive perceptions strengthen cohesion and alignment, while weak inclusion under-

mines them (Depoo & Hyrslova, 2024). Inclusive and structured participation improves engagement and collaboration, reinforcing the role of inclusion in overall team effectiveness (Raeside et al., 2026).

2.3. Impacts on the Organization

The lack of leadership-inclusion strategies harms organizational effectiveness by shaping structures, systems, and employee experience. A lack of inclusion reduces productivity, limits innovation, and disrupts coordination, underscoring the need to embed inclusion in leadership, systems, and organizational design (Tragantzopoulou et al., 2025). Weak managerial support, limited HR responsiveness, and unfair policies reduce inclusion and performance (Aranha et al., 2019), while inclusive environments improve morale and effectiveness (Saleh & Gajendran, 2025). HRM strategies, including fair policies and structured support, are central to shaping inclusion and perceptions of opportunity (Zervas & Stiakakis, 2025).

Without alignment between leadership and organizational practices, productivity and effectiveness decline (Kuknor et al., 2025; Saleh & Gajendran, 2025). These challenges increase in digital contexts, where digital inequality limits participation, innovation, and efficiency (Hoyos Muñoz & Cardona Valencia, 2025). This is because leadership and organizational alignment, such as with HR, are critical for performance. Strong integration of learning systems and leadership improves capability and outcomes (Lee & Hu, 2025), while weak alignment reduces productivity and long-term effectiveness (Smith, 2025). Sustainable leadership supports retention and stability, whereas its absence creates ongoing performance challenges (Joon et al., 2025).

Organizational performance also depends on managing digital and distributed work. Organizations that adapt through communication and support maintain performance, while others face productivity and stability issues (Guerrero-Adams et al., 2025). In virtual and global teams, weak leadership reduces coordination and efficiency at scale (Hambley et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2014). This also permeates broader processes. Effective conflict management improves decision-making and innovation, while poor management reduces effectiveness (Gupta et al., 2024). Lack of engagement and recognition further weakens performance (Carvalho et al., 2025), while technology and AI systems shape coordination and outcomes (Budnarowski et al., 2025; Minetola et al., 2026).

2.4. Impacts on the Leader

Leaders face direct consequences when inclusion strategies are absent, as their behavior shapes employees' experience and outcomes. Failures in inclusion reflect back on leader effectiveness, credibility, and impact, creating a feedback loop of reduced performance (Kuknor et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). A primary impact is reduced leadership effectiveness, as a lack of openness and support lowers engagement and participation, limiting team performance and innovation (Arif,

2025; Mashhady, 2025; Makhanya, 2025). Leaders also experience erosion of trust and credibility, as non-inclusive behavior can be perceived as unfair or inconsistent, weakening relationships and reducing their ability to influence and align teams (Arif et al., 2023; Bratek et al., 2026; Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024).

Leaders are also more likely to be held accountable for negative outcomes, such as burnout and disengagement, when inclusion fails to buffer job demands (Simone et al., 2025; Sreedharan & Alqahtani, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). At the same time, the absence of inclusion increases cognitive and operational strain, especially in virtual settings, where leaders must compensate by expending greater effort on communication, coordination, and trust-building without the structured systems in place (Coulston et al., 2025; He et al., 2025). Misalignment in responsibility can further lead leaders to underestimate their role in inclusion, reducing accountability and weakening their impact (De Leyn & Anrijs, 2026). Overall, lack of inclusion reduces effectiveness, weakens relationships, increases strain, and undermines leadership success (Onan et al., 2025).

3. Gap in Practice

3.1. Difficulties Leading Remote Employees

Leaders often struggle to lead virtually because virtual leadership is shaped by structural inequalities and operational complexity, requiring leaders to adapt how work is organized and supported. Leaders face challenges stemming from differences in digital access, skills, and employee needs, requiring more flexible and individualized approaches (Asmar et al., 2022; De Leyn & Anrijs, 2026; Li & Kostka, 2024). Operational demands further add complexity, as leaders must redesign workflows, simplify processes, and ensure systems support remote work (Pryse, 2022), while maintaining cohesion, motivation, and engagement without physical presence (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). Training and development require active leadership involvement. Balancing performance, well-being, and fairness all add additional strain on the leader (Lee & Hu, 2025; Joon et al., 2025; Smith, 2025).

Reduced visibility is a central constraint in virtual environments, directly affecting trust, oversight, and leadership effectiveness. Loss of informal in-person interaction limits insight into team dynamics (Brünker et al., 2024). This constrains leaders' ability to build trust, monitor, and motivate employees (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2022). In some cases, transitioning to remote work further widens gaps in team coordination (Guerrero-Adams et al., 2025), while reduced oversight and reliance on digital tools complicate productivity and accountability (Hamersly & Land, 2015). These challenges intensify in the context of limited informal interaction and in global teams, where time zones, cultures, and even local personality differences increase complexity (Hambley et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2014; Tworoger et al., 2013).

Communication and technology limitations shape how effectively leaders engage and coordinate virtual teams. A lack of nonverbal cues and immediate feedback reduces clarity and relationship-building (Dube & Marnewick, 2016; Wang

et al., 2022), while poor channel selection and information overload reduce effectiveness (Farooq & Bashir, 2025; Kraft, 2019). Leaders must adopt more structured communication to sustain engagement and productivity (Hamersly & Land, 2015). At the same time, e-leadership requires new competencies that traditional approaches often fail to address (Cowan, 2014), and many leaders struggle to adapt their communication strategies or fully leverage digital tools (Levin et al., 2025).

Virtual leadership is further constrained by gaps in readiness, employee voice, and guiding frameworks. Leaders often lack the preparation to support and develop employees virtually (van den Hout et al., 2026), while coordination, alignment, and engagement become more difficult in digital settings (Tomomitsu & de Oliveira Moraes, 2026). Telework introduces challenges related to distance, boundaries, and well-being, reinforced by broader digital transformation (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2025). Voice is also shaped by digital systems, as platforms influence how employees share ideas and participate in decisions (Minetola et al., 2026; Wang, 2018), while limited system knowledge and communication structures can restrict participation and shape how ideas are expressed and heard (Krehl & Büttgen, 2022; Schertler et al., 2026; Siad & Sagar, 2025). A broader gap remains in understanding virtual leadership, making it harder to manage performance, relationships, and engagement without clear frameworks (Gross, 2025). Overall, virtual leadership requires managing communication, trust, technology, workload, and evolving work conditions simultaneously, yet leadership frameworks have not fully adapted to digital work, leaving gaps in guidance for effectively leading and including virtual employees (Aparicio et al., 2023; Dharmasiri & Jayakody, 2021; He et al., 2025).

3.2. Difficulties Leading Hybrid Employees

Leaders also have difficulty leading hybrid employees when teams operate in both in-person and remote contexts, with different interaction patterns, access levels, and expectations. Leaders must continuously adapt to geographic dispersion, digital reliance, and varied communication dynamics (Gross, 2025), while balancing tensions such as autonomy versus control and flexibility versus structure (Coetzee et al., 2025).

Inconsistencies in communication, access, and engagement further complicate leadership. Uneven communication flows and delays can weaken coordination and alignment (Manole et al., 2025; Tworoger et al., 2013), while remote employees risk being excluded from informal interactions and key information often prioritized for in-person employees, ultimately reducing team cohesion (Manole et al., 2025).

Maintaining fairness and visibility are also key challenges. Proximity bias can provide advantages for in-office employees by giving them more attention and opportunities (Ljungberg et al., 2025), and uneven access to information can lead to misalignment and inconsistent participation for a hybrid team (Coulston et al.,

2025). Additionally, misalignment between team design and hybrid execution reduces collaboration and trust (Orejuela et al., 2025), while middle managers face additional pressure to coordinate across locations and balance expectations (Teng-Calleja et al., 2024).

4. Study Elements

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to explore how leaders create a sense of inclusion among virtual employees. By examining scholarly literature, the study identifies common themes, strategies, and contextual factors that shape inclusion strategies. The generic business problem is that leaders have difficulty creating inclusion among virtual employees. The specific business problem is that without effective leadership strategies for creating inclusion, leaders are unable to increase inclusion among virtual employees, thereby potentially impacting engagement and performance.

The gap in the literature is that existing scholarly material on leadership inclusion strategies for virtual employees is scattered and lacks synthesis, making it difficult for leaders seeking actionable strategies for inclusion. The related gap in practice is that leaders lack effective ways to help virtual employees feel included, potentially contributing to and correlated with low employee engagement and performance. The project question is: What inclusion-building leadership strategies can leaders use to improve the inclusion of virtual employees, thereby potentially impacting employee engagement and performance?

4.1. Method and Design

This study used a systematic literature review with thematic synthesis to examine leadership strategies that support inclusion among virtual employees. Only peer-reviewed scholarly sources were included to maintain credibility and methodological rigor. A structured and repeatable search process was conducted across academic databases using predefined inclusion criteria focused on relevance, context, and publication quality. Selected studies were critically appraised using an adapted Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist to evaluate methodological soundness, validity, and applicability (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). Data were analyzed using thematic synthesis. This process included iterative coding, pattern identification, and the development of higher-order themes. The approach allowed findings from scholarly research to be integrated while maintaining analytical transparency and conceptual consistency (**Figure 1**).

4.1.1. Search Strategy, Selection, Inclusion, and Deduplication

This systematic literature review draws from credible peer-reviewed studies. Initial search terms were developed to identify sources aligned with the study's purpose. All articles were sourced via ProQuest and Sage databases, as these two were reputable databases accessible to the researcher and had proven successful in prior research. The following search strings were used in the initial search process:

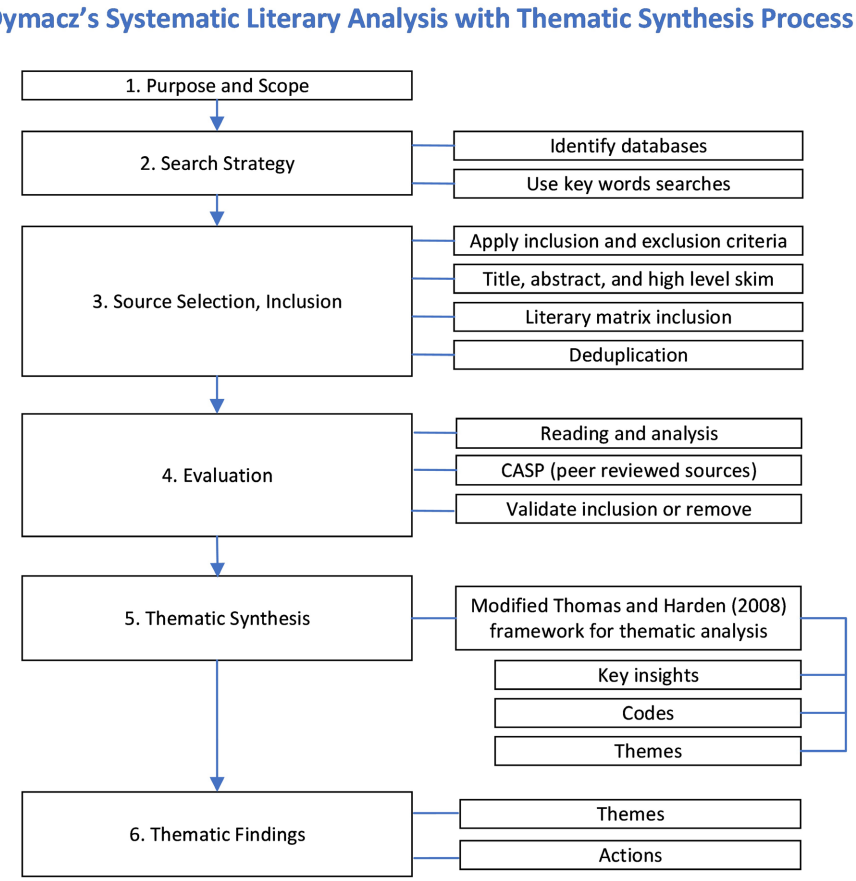


Figure 1. Dymacz's systematic literary analysis with thematic synthesis process.

- "Inclusive leadership" AND "remote work"
- "Inclusive leadership" AND "virtual teams"
- "Leadership strategies" AND "employee inclusion" AND "remote employees"
- "Employee inclusion" AND "hybrid work"
- "Employee engagement" AND "inclusion" AND "remote teams"
- "Psychological safety" AND "virtual teams" AND leadership
- "Knowledge sharing" AND "virtual teams"
- "Sense of belonging" AND "remote employees"
- "Communication" AND "remote teams" AND leadership
- ("Inclusive leadership" OR "leadership strategies") AND ("remote work" OR "virtual teams") AND ("inclusion" OR "engagement" OR "belonging")

Boolean operators, including AND and OR, were used to refine the search results. The publication year was used as a search parameter, focusing on literature published between 2022 and 2026, with greater emphasis on studies published from 2024 onward to remain relevant to current organizational environments.

Articles and sources were selected based on their relevance to the research question. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Focus on leadership strategies for increasing inclusion among virtual employees

- Published in English or reputably translated into English
- From a credible scholarly journal
- Marked as peer-reviewed
- Accessible full-text format

Exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Articles not related to leadership strategies, inclusion, or virtual/hybrid employees
- Articles not published in English or without a reliable English translation
- Sources that were not peer-reviewed or not published in credible scholarly journals
- Articles without accessible full-text availability
- Opinion pieces, blogs, editorials, dissertations, or non-scholarly publications without empirical or scholarly support

The main databases accessed were ProQuest and Sage. First, articles were screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria. Second, abstracts were reviewed to determine alignment with the study criteria. Third, sources that met the inclusion criteria received more in-depth attention by skimming the articles. A total of 108 peer-reviewed sources were found across 80 journals. Current articles were defined as those within 5 years of the research, meaning 2022 through 2026. These amounted to 93 articles. Prior to 2022, there were 15 articles. The majority of articles were from the past three years, with 13 from 2024, 53 from 2025, and 14 from 2026. Deduplication was performed to ensure that the located articles were not duplicates of those previously included in the literature matrix. If the article was previously included and was therefore a duplicate, it was removed from the analysis. Otherwise, if the article was unique, it was placed into a literary matrix.

Table 1 shows the structure of the literary matrix used.

Table 1. Literary matrix structure.

Column Name	Framework Inspiration	Data Type	Column Description
Index Number	Generic literary analysis	Numeric	Unique identifier to each source
APA Citation	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Full APA citation of source
Author	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Author portion of APA citation
Year	Generic literary analysis	Numeric (YYYY)	Year of source publication
Age	Generic literary analysis	"Past" or "Present"	Past (if <2022) Present (if 2022+)
Journal	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Name of journal
Link	Generic literary analysis	URL	Link to source
Database	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Source database name
High-Level Type of Source and Method	Generic literary analysis	Choice: Qualitative, Quantitative, Conceptual/Theoretical, Mixed, Case Study, Literary Analysis	Type of source

Continued

Detailed Type of Source and Method	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	Type of source
Purpose of Article	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The main focus and topic of the source
Population Focus	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The population that the source is describing or exploring
Industry Focus	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The industry the source is focusing on
Country Focus	Generic literary analysis	Alphanumeric	The country which the source is centered on
Journal Quality	Generic literary analysis	Choice: M, H, L	Overall quality of the journal
Key Insights	modified Thomas and Harden	Alphanumeric	The main takeaways of the source
Ethics Evaluation	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	Whether there was ethical approval and participant rights protection, such as informed consent and confidentiality
Rigor Method	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	Whether the chosen research methodology appropriately fits the study's aims and is thoroughly justified
Rigor Design	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	Whether the study design is suitable and well-executed for addressing the research question.
Rigor Recruitment	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	If the participant recruitment strategy was clearly explained, appropriate, and ensured relevant representation
Rigor Data Collection	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	Assesses the methods used to gather data (e.g., interviews, observations) and whether they were systematically applied and suitable
Rigor Data Analysis	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	Evaluates whether the analysis process was clearly described, systematically conducted, and grounded in the data
Findings Presentation	CASP	Choice: M, H, L, N/A	Whether the results are clearly presented, logically derived from the data, and supported by evidence

4.1.2. Evaluation of Sources

After placement of information from 108 articles into a literary matrix, the sources were fully read and evaluated using an adapted version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist to support consistent assessment across the scholarly literature (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). The CASP tool was used to evaluate methodological rigor, including the clarity of research objectives, the suitability of the research design, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and the transparency of findings. Additional evaluation criteria were also applied to assess source relevance, publication recency, and overall credibility. Based on this combined appraisal approach, each source was categorized as high, medium, or low quality. This adaptation supported a more structured and

comparative evaluation process while remaining aligned with established critical appraisal practices. The option to remove any articles after the CASP evaluation was not used, as all articles were deemed sufficiently valuable for inclusion.

The CASP evaluations were guided by predefined criteria to reduce subjectivity. Studies rated as high demonstrated clear methodological alignment, strong data collection and analysis procedures, transparent reporting, and appropriate rigor for the selected design. Medium ratings were assigned when studies met most quality expectations but contained moderate limitations, such as weaker recruitment detail, limited generalizability, or reduced methodological transparency. Low ratings reflected substantial methodological weaknesses, missing rigor elements, or insufficient reporting. N/A was used when a criterion was not applicable to the study design or article type. Ratings were determined by consistency in methodological clarity, sampling adequacy, analytical rigor, ethical transparency, and the overall trustworthiness of the findings, rather than by personal interpretation alone.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of CASP article rating counts, showing how many articles fell into the High, Medium, Low, and N/A criteria for each of the gradable CASP dimensions.

Table 2. Quantification of article CASP ratings.

CASP Dimension	H	M	L	N/A
Journal Quality	90	18	0	0
Ethics Evaluation	75	20	13	0
Rigor Method	91	17	0	0
Rigor Design	88	20	0	0
Rigor Recruitment	33	60	5	10
Rigor Data Collection	92	15	1	0
Rigor Data Analysis	89	19	0	0
Findings Presentation	107	1	0	0

All 108 articles were retained in the review because the overall body of evidence demonstrated consistently strong quality in the areas considered most critical to this study, particularly journal quality, methodological rigor, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings. While some studies showed moderate or lower ratings in areas such as recruitment or ethics reporting, the researcher determined that the overall strength and relevance of the studies supported their inclusion in the review.

4.1.3. Thematic Synthesis

After source evaluation, thematic analysis was conducted using a modified version of the thematic synthesis framework developed by Thomas and Harden (2008) to

support systematic coding and structured narrative development. The analysis followed several sequential steps. First, relevant text segments and key insights on virtual employee inclusion were extracted from each article via paraphrasing and documented in the thematic analysis table (see Table 3). Multiple key insight entries were recorded for each article to capture distinct findings, observations, leadership practices, communication behaviors, and employee experiences discussed throughout the literature. Second, the extracted insights were manually reviewed and inductively coded by the primary researcher to identify recurring concepts and shared patterns across sources. Descriptive codes were developed from recurring ideas identified in the key insight entries and were continuously reviewed and refined throughout the analysis to maintain consistency and alignment with the research objective. Third, similar descriptive codes were grouped and consolidated into broader thematic categories through iterative comparison across literature. The final five themes were selected based on their recurrence across multiple sources, conceptual relevance to the research problem, and ability to meaningfully explain factors influencing virtual employee inclusion. The synthesis remained inductively grounded in the literature while being systematically structured to support the study's objectives, and the final thematic findings were presented in narrative form. Finally, upon themes being generated, actions were created through analysis of themes, which were specific and practical activities that leaders could do in order to improve inclusion, as later shown in Table 4 and Figure 2.

Table 3. Thematic analysis codes and themes.

Theme	Codes
Work Visibility	Performance Visibility
Work Visibility	Transparent Work Tracking
Structured Participation and Collaboration	Collaborative Decision-Making
Structured Participation and Collaboration	Collaborative Support
Structured Participation and Collaboration	Structured Team Participation
Open and Accessible Information Sharing	Communication Transparency
Open and Accessible Information Sharing	Inclusive Communication Practices
Open and Accessible Information Sharing	Knowledge Sharing
Building and Maintaining Real Human Connections	Employee Belonging
Building and Maintaining Real Human Connections	Relationship Building
Building and Maintaining Real Human Connections	Social Connection
Consistency of Equity	Fair Treatment

Table 4. Virtual inclusive leadership strategic actions table.

Strategic Category	Leadership Strategy	Work Visibility	Structured Participation	Open Information Sharing	Human Connections	Equity Consistency
Interactions	Coach participation		YES		YES	
Interactions	Show empathy and recognition				YES	YES
Interactions	Support individuals		YES		YES	
Interactions	Run regular check-ins	YES	YES		YES	YES
Interactions	Schedule updates	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Interactions	Facilitate meetings actively		YES		YES	YES
Interactions	Balance participation		YES			YES
Interactions	Enable feedback input		YES	YES	YES	YES
Interactions	Hold one-on-ones				YES	
Interactions	Create informal touchpoints				YES	
Interactions	Maintain communication routines			YES	YES	YES
Processes	Equalize information access			YES		YES
Processes	Ensure equal opportunities					YES
Processes	Correct visibility gaps	YES				YES
Processes	Audit outcomes	YES	YES			YES
Processes	Address fairness gaps					YES
Processes	Link work to goals	YES				YES
Processes	Set visibility expectations	YES	YES	YES		YES
Processes	Design structured workflows	YES	YES	YES		YES
Processes	Set communication norms	YES	YES	YES		YES
Processes	Define participation rules		YES			YES
Processes	Structure decision input		YES	YES		YES
Processes	Document and share decisions			YES		YES
Processes	Structure onboarding				YES	YES
Processes	Standardize performance management	YES	YES			YES
Processes	Apply consistent standards	YES	YES	YES		YES
Tools	Standardize interactions		YES	YES	YES	YES
Tools	Use structured channels			YES		YES
Tools	Use visibility tools	YES		YES		YES
Tools	Use collaboration workflows		YES	YES		YES
Tools	Centralize communication			YES		YES
Tools	Ensure tool access			YES		YES

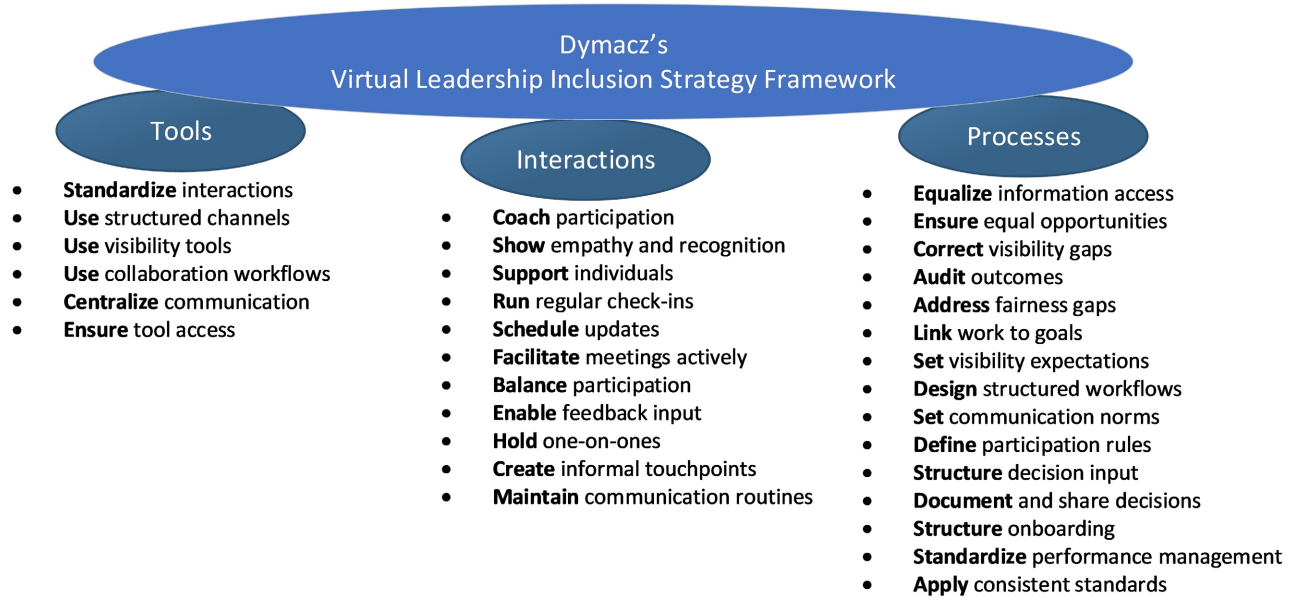


Figure 2. Dymacz's virtual leadership inclusion strategy framework.

5. Thematic Findings

5.1. Themes

Using the thematic analysis, 12 codes were generated. Five themes were then generated from the codes through analysis. These are shown in **Table 3**.

5.1.1. Work Visibility

The first thematic finding is that leaders must intentionally design systems that make employee contributions visible, understood, and recognized in virtual and hybrid environments.

Leaders must establish clear expectations for how work is shared, tracked, and communicated, since visibility does not occur organically in virtual settings. Setting goals, reinforcing performance discussions, and maintaining feedback mechanisms ensure alignment and consistent visibility of contributions (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2022). Without these expectations, visibility becomes uneven, favoring more vocal or physically present employees.

To achieve visibility expectations, leaders should design structured workflows and communication systems that make progress and contributions transparent. This includes using digital tools, defined workflows, and scheduled updates to ensure consistent visibility across team members (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; Farooq & Bashir, 2025; Kraft, 2019; Tomomitsu & de Oliveira Moraes, 2026). These systems replace informal observation and ensure work is consistently recognized.

From an organizational perspective, visibility increases when employees understand how their work connects to broader goals. Leaders must consistently clarify how individual contributions support team and organizational outcomes, reinforcing engagement and perceived value (Majumder & Kunte, 2022). This alignment ensures contributions are not only visible but meaningful, especially in a

hybrid environment that requires standardized visibility practices to prevent disparities between remote and in-person employees. Establishing shared norms, structured meetings, and consistent communication expectations ensures equal visibility regardless of location (Manole et al., 2025; Orejuela et al., 2025; Teng-Calleja et al., 2024). Standardization reduces confusion and uneven recognition.

5.1.2. Structured Participation and Collaboration

The second thematic finding is that leaders must actively structure participation so all employees have a consistent and fair opportunity to contribute.

Leaders must define how and when employees are expected to participate in discussions, collaboration, and decision-making. Clear expectations, combined with regular check-ins and communication structures, ensure consistent engagement across team members (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2022). Participation depends on structured collaboration processes. Leaders should implement defined workflows, scheduled interactions, and communication norms that promote consistent engagement and accountability (Farooq & Bashir, 2025; Gross, 2025; Hambley et al., 2007; Hamersly & Land, 2015; Kraft, 2019).

Leaders must also actively manage participation during meetings and team interactions. This includes distributing input across team members, preventing dominance by a few individuals, and ensuring all voices are heard (Raeside et al., 2026; Sivunen, 2006). Coaching-based approaches further encourage active involvement and reduce passive participation (van den Hout et al., 2026).

Decision-making processes must be intentionally structured to include diverse input. Leaders should create mechanisms for employee involvement, ensuring that participation is not dependent on personality, location, or communication style (Majumder & Kunte, 2022). This strengthens both engagement and perceived fairness.

5.1.3. Open and Accessible Information Sharing

The third thematic finding is that leaders must ensure information is consistently accessible, transparent, and inclusive across all employees.

Leaders must ensure that all employees have equal access to knowledge, decisions, and opportunities, particularly in environments where informal communication is limited. Leveraging digital tools and increasing communication frequency support accessibility and cohesion (Krehl & Büttgen, 2022).

Transparent communication requires structured systems that consistently distribute information. Leaders should use centralized channels, defined communication practices, and appropriate formats to ensure clarity and reduce misunderstandings (Cowan, 2014; Farooq & Bashir, 2025; Hamersly & Land, 2015; Levin et al., 2025; Kraft, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). Similarly, open communication should actively support employee involvement. Providing opportunities for input, feedback, and dialogue ensures employees feel informed and included in decision-making processes (Majumder & Kunte, 2022; Sivunen, 2006).

Leaders must prevent disparities caused by in-person information flow. Ensur-

ing remote employees receive the same information as in-office employees reduces exclusion and misalignment (Koglin et al., 2025; Ljungberg et al., 2025; Manole et al., 2025). Effective information sharing requires managing communication channels intentionally and addressing digital inequality. Ensuring access to tools, platforms, and clear communication reduces barriers to participation and inclusion (Aparicio et al., 2023; Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; Dharmasiri & Jayakody, 2021; Raeside et al., 2026).

5.1.4. Building and Maintaining Real Human Connections

The fourth thematic finding is that leaders must intentionally create and sustain human connections to prevent isolation and strengthen a sense of belonging in virtual environments.

Leaders should design regular points of interaction that go beyond task execution. Facilitating dialogue, recognition, and team interaction helps employees feel part of a cohesive group (Guerrero-Adams et al., 2025; Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). This can be done by leaders communicating with authenticity, responsiveness, and emotional awareness to compensate for the lack of in-person interaction. This strengthens trust and improves collaboration (Coetzee et al., 2025; Farooq & Bashir, 2025; Gupta et al., 2024; Kraft, 2019; Morgan et al., 2014).

Similarly, consistent support, recognition, and individual attention reinforce relationships and engagement. Coaching-based leadership and empathy-driven interactions deepen trust and team cohesion (Majumder & Kunte, 2022; Sivunen, 2006; Teng-Calleja et al., 2024; van den Hout et al., 2026), especially in hybrid environments. Here, leaders must intentionally create opportunities for relationship-building across locations. This includes structured onboarding, in-person interactions when possible, and informal engagement opportunities (Koglin et al., 2025; Manole et al., 2025). Maintaining connection requires consistent outreach and communication routines. Reinforcing a sense of belonging, empathy, and support reduces isolation and strengthens long-term engagement (Amani, 2025; Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; Griffin & Karau, 2025; Tomomitsu & de Oliveira Moraes, 2026; Wright & Silard, 2022).

5.1.5. Consistency of Equity

The fifth thematic finding is that leaders must ensure fairness by applying expectations, opportunities, and support consistently across all employees.

Leaders must provide consistent access to communication, development, and opportunities regardless of work arrangement. Fair and ethical practices strengthen trust and inclusion (Joon et al., 2025; Sivunen, 2006). This is especially essential for a hybrid environment that creates disparities in visibility and opportunity. Here, leaders must actively monitor and correct these gaps, ensuring remote employees are not disadvantaged in promotions, recognition, or development (Koglin et al., 2025; Ljungberg et al., 2025; Teng-Calleja et al., 2024).

Standardizing performance management, communication, and development processes ensures consistency and reduces bias. Systems must be designed to en-

sure equal access and evaluation for all employees (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; Carvalho et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2025). With this, leaders must continuously assess perceptions of fairness and identify structural inequalities. Addressing these issues prevents disengagement and supports equitable employee experiences (Tragantzopoulou et al., 2025; Ukpere et al., 2025). Consistently applied fairness strengthens trust in leadership and organizational systems. Ensuring equal access to recognition, support, and opportunities for advancement creates a sustainable foundation for inclusion.

5.2. Actions

Themes were then analyzed for practical actions that leaders could take to improve inclusion. **Table 4** shows the interconnection between actionable leadership strategies and five themes. The actionable strategies have been grouped into strategic categories, generated through analysis of the leadership strategies.

Additionally, **Figure 2** shows the strategic category groupings, stripping away themes and focusing solely on actions leaders can take to improve inclusion strategies for a simpler, action-oriented understanding. These executable strategies were grouped into tools, interactions, and processes, with actionable verbs bolded in the figure to indicate the specific actions leaders can take to improve inclusion among virtual employees.

6. Discussion and Reflection

6.1. Past Agreements and Disagreements in Research

Researchers largely agree that inclusion is not simply about representation but about active participation, recognition, and meaningful involvement in organizational life. Across multiple studies, inclusion is consistently framed as a condition in which employees can contribute, express themselves, and feel valued within organizational systems (Carden, 2025; Ohunakin et al., 2019; Passos et al., 2025). This shared perspective extends to the idea that inclusion operates through mechanisms such as voice, access to resources, and a sense of belonging, all of which enable employees to function effectively and engage with their work (Dudek, 2023; Gong et al., 2025). There is also strong agreement that inclusive environments are positively associated with key outcomes, including engagement, satisfaction, and performance, reinforcing inclusion as both a social and performance-related construct (Chen & Tang, 2018; De Silva et al., 2025; Goswami & Kishor, 2018). Additionally, researchers converge on leadership as a central driver of inclusion, particularly in shaping participation, recognition, and equitable access across both traditional and digital work environments (Kuknor et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024).

At the same time, researchers diverge in how inclusion is operationalized and achieved, particularly in digital and hybrid contexts. Some studies emphasize structured systems, such as performance tracking, AI-supported visibility, and

formal recognition processes, as necessary to ensure inclusion and fairness (Budnarowski et al., 2025; Sátiro et al., 2025). In contrast, other research highlights relational and cultural dimensions, arguing that inclusion depends more on leadership behaviors, trust, and interpersonal connection than on formal systems alone (Griffin & Karau, 2025; Mmakau & Sethibe, 2026). There is also disagreement regarding the role of digital technologies, with some studies suggesting that technology enhances visibility, access, and participation (Elia et al., 2026), while others argue that it can reinforce inequality, amplify power imbalances, and create new forms of exclusion if not carefully managed (Siad & Sagar, 2025; Wang, 2018).

Several areas of research remain inconclusive, particularly regarding the long-term effectiveness of inclusion strategies in complex and evolving work environments. While there is agreement that inclusion improves outcomes, there is less clarity on which specific practices are most effective across different contexts, especially in hybrid and fully digital settings (Aranha et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2025). Researchers also highlight that inclusion is influenced by multiple interacting factors at the individual, team, and organizational levels, making it difficult to isolate causal relationships or establish universal best practices (Dalessandro & Lovell, 2024; Zervas & Stiakakis, 2025). Additionally, the rapid evolution of digital work introduces ongoing uncertainty, as emerging technologies, changing work structures, and shifting employee expectations continue to reshape how inclusion is experienced and managed (Aparicio et al., 2023; Minetola et al., 2026).

6.2. Implications and Recommendations

6.2.1. Work Visibility

Leaders must implement structured visibility systems by setting clear expectations for how work is tracked, shared, and communicated, and by using standardized tools such as dashboards, recurring updates, and performance check-ins (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2022; Tomomitsu & de Oliveira Moraes, 2026). They should consistently link individual contributions to team and organizational goals and enforce equal visibility practices across remote and in-person employees to prevent recognition disparities (Majumder & Kunte, 2022). The supporting evidence across the reviewed literature generally reflected non-onsite work environments, including both fully virtual and hybrid employee settings.

6.2.2. Participation and Collaboration

Leaders must define and enforce participation norms by structuring meetings, workflows, and decision-making processes to require input from all team members (Gross, 2025; Hambley et al., 2007). They should actively facilitate discussions by distributing speaking opportunities and using structured methods such as round-robin input or guided prompts to ensure consistent engagement and reduce dominance by a few individuals (Sivunen, 2006). The findings were supported by studies examining employee inclusion and collaboration in remote and hybrid work arrangements, rather than in traditional fully on-site environments.

6.2.3. Information Sharing

Leaders must centralize communication through designated platforms and ensure that all key information, decisions, and updates are consistently documented and shared (Cowan, 2014; Levin et al., 2025). They should standardize communication practices, eliminate reliance on informal or in-person information flow, and ensure all employees have equal access to tools, updates, and opportunities to contribute (Farooq & Bashir, 2025; Krehl & Büttgen, 2022). The evidence consistently focused on digital and non-onsite workplace environments in which communication and access to information depended heavily on virtual systems and platforms.

6.2.4. Real Human Connections

Leaders must intentionally create structured opportunities for interaction by scheduling regular one-on-ones, team check-ins, and informal moments of engagement (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). They should demonstrate consistent responsiveness, recognition, and empathy, while embedding relationship-building into routines such as onboarding, coaching, and ongoing team interactions to strengthen trust and belonging (Coetzee et al., 2025; van den Hout et al., 2026). The supporting literature broadly emphasized relationship-building challenges and inclusion practices among employees working partially or fully outside traditional onsite settings.

6.2.5. Equity

Leaders must standardize performance management, communication, and development processes to ensure equal access to opportunities, recognition, and advancement (Carvalho et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2025). They should regularly audit outcomes such as promotions, visibility, and participation, identify disparities between remote and in-person employees, and take corrective action to maintain fairness and inclusion across all employees (Koglin et al., 2025; Ljungberg et al., 2025). The reviewed evidence primarily addressed fairness, visibility, and inclusion concerns affecting employees operating in remote, hybrid, or other digitally connected non-onsite work structures.

6.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study relies exclusively on secondary data from peer-reviewed literature, which limits its ability to capture real-time organizational dynamics and practitioner-specific insights. While peer-reviewed sources enhance rigor, they may not fully reflect rapidly evolving practices in virtual work environments.

Second, the study relied on a defined search strategy, inclusion criteria, and selected databases, which may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant studies not captured within those parameters. Although efforts were made to ensure comprehensive coverage, the possibility of selection bias remains.

Third, the use of an adapted critical appraisal approach, including categorizing sources into quality levels, introduces a degree of researcher judgment that may

affect consistency in evaluation despite the use of structured criteria. Similarly, the thematic synthesis process, while systematic, involves interpretive coding and categorization, which may introduce subjectivity in how themes were identified and organized.

Fourth, the study focused primarily on literature published between 2022 and 2026 to ensure relevance to modern digital work environments, which may limit the inclusion of foundational studies that provide historical context. Finally, the study emphasizes broadly generalizable leadership strategies, which may not fully account for industry-specific, organizational, or cultural differences that influence inclusion practices in virtual and hybrid settings.

Finally, the study examined literature from an international perspective rather than focusing on a single country or geographic region. While this broader scope supports generalizability across diverse virtual work environments, it may reduce the precision of findings related to specific national, cultural, regulatory, or regional workplace practices.

7. Conclusion and Future Research

This study contributes to the literature by providing a structured synthesis of leadership strategies that support inclusion among virtual employees. By integrating findings from peer-reviewed studies, the review identifies five core areas where leaders must act: work visibility, structured participation, open information sharing, human connection, and consistent equity. Together, these areas demonstrate that inclusion in virtual environments is not incidental but must be intentionally designed through leadership behaviors, communication practices, and organizational systems. The findings reinforce that inclusion is correlated to employee engagement, performance, and organizational effectiveness, particularly in digital and hybrid work contexts where traditional forms of interaction and visibility are limited.

Despite these contributions, several opportunities for future research remain. Empirical studies are needed to test the effectiveness of specific leadership strategies identified in this review, particularly across different industries and organizational contexts. Future research should also explore how emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and digital collaboration tools, shape inclusion outcomes and potentially introduce new forms of bias or inequality. Additionally, longitudinal studies would provide insight into how inclusion strategies evolve over time and their sustained impact on employee engagement and performance. Finally, further research is needed to examine contextual differences, including cultural, organizational, and role-based factors, to better understand how inclusion strategies can be adapted to diverse virtual and hybrid work environments.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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