

# **BACK TO THE OFFICE:** **TOWARDS HYBRID** **MANAGEMENT?**

**Interview with Emmanuelle Léon**

Professor at **ESCP Business School**

Director of the Reinventing Work Chair



IT ALL STARTS HERE

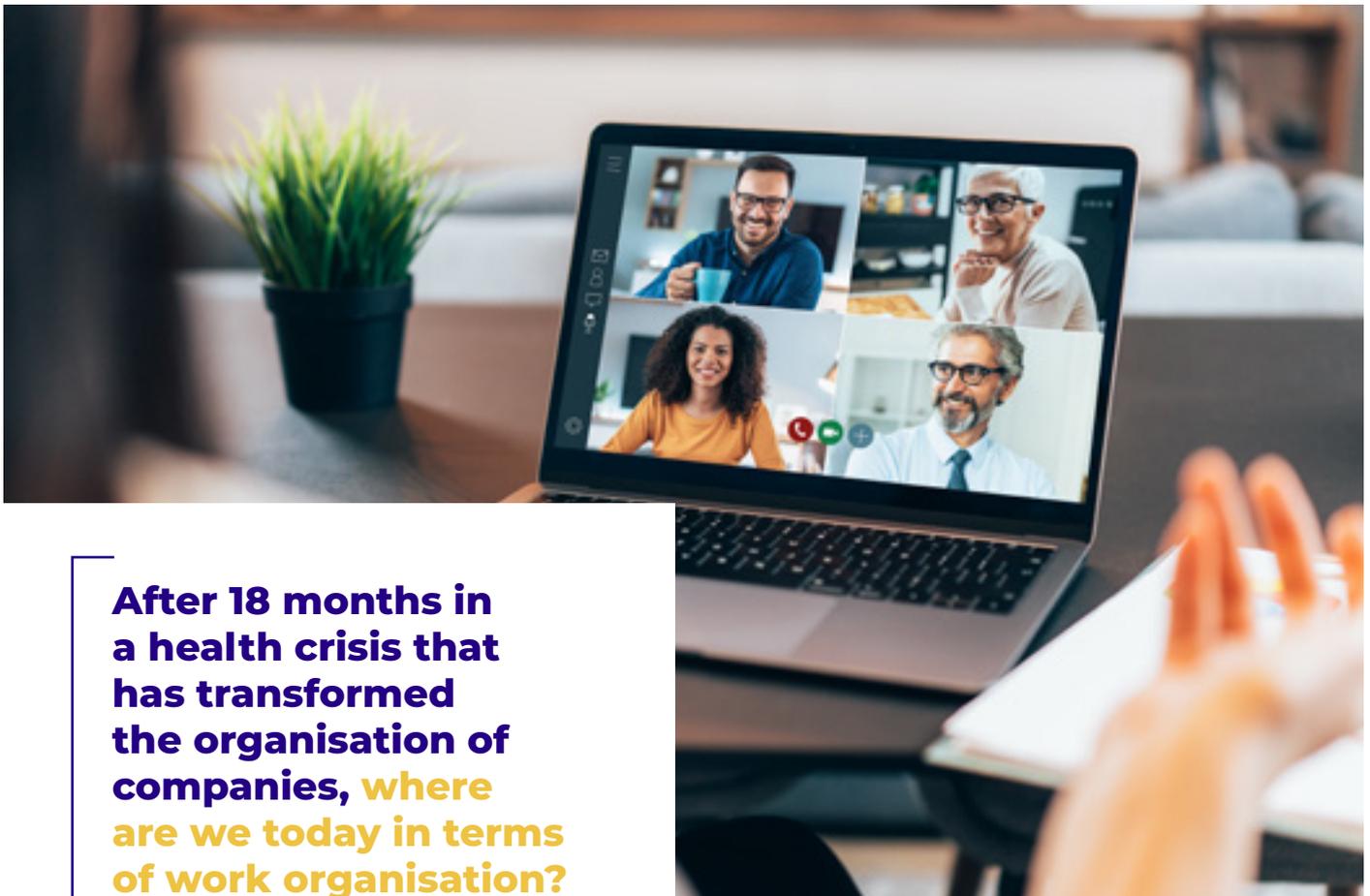
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## Are we moving towards hybrid management?

The health crisis and the transformations taking place within companies have given us a glimpse of a new model of work organisation, described as hybrid, a combination of working at the office and working remotely. This model is said to serve several purposes. For employees, it allows them to choose where they work and thus retain the flexibility experienced during this unprecedented period of forced teleworking. For employers, it means continuing and optimising the process of digitalisation that was accelerated by the crisis, transforming leadership models by focusing more on autonomy and trust, but also reducing costs linked to property by reducing the physical space required.

Some praise the virtues of a hybrid world that they see as combining the best of traditional and remote working. But the opposite could also happen! Hybrid working raises many questions: how can we make work more flexible without making it more precarious? How can we adapt it to the new challenges of our society? How can we support digital, human and organisational transformations and sometimes completely rethink the company? This is background work which also aims to innovate in terms of operation, tools and individual behaviour, without forgetting performance management and general management issues. Professor Emmanuelle Léon offers her expert opinion on this issue to help companies understand the situation and to support them in their approach.



**After 18 months in a health crisis that has transformed the organisation of companies, where are we today in terms of work organisation?**

**EL Emmanuelle Léon:** *"It is difficult to make an overall assessment, because the organisational models are still being developed. Nevertheless, three broad categories can be distinguished, often based on the way managers view teleworking.*

*The first category involves those companies that were already using teleworking on a large scale before the health crisis. These managers were comfortable with the idea, mastered the codes and were able to organise their activities and those of their employees remotely. For these companies, large-scale teleworking has been an opportunity to improve the existing situation, and to open*

*up teleworking to certain groups that had not previously been eligible. But this has not affected or profoundly challenged the way they operate.*

*The second category is that of managers who were forced to discover teleworking for the first time and who, after a period of adaptation, realised the benefits they could gain from this mode of organisation. The initial shock was violent, but these are often the companies we mention when talking about the acceleration of digitalisation, new working and management habits.*

*Finally, there is the third category of companies whose managers swear by face-to-face meetings*

*and for whom the return of all employees to the company premises was and remains the solution to all the problems encountered during the crisis. In fact, behind this question of physical presence lies the question of trust. If the level of trust between management and employees was already low before the lockdowns, it could only deteriorate when working remotely. In these companies, we have often seen a growth in remote micro-management practices, increased surveillance, guilt-tripping in the event of non-availability, etc. These managers will do everything possible to get their employees to return to the office, and the employees will accept this because teleworking was such a bad experience.*

*Conversely, a strong organisation based on trust is well suited to working in a hybrid mode. However, this must be thought out in advance. Are the processes clear and the responsibilities well-defined? Is the sequencing of tasks well-organised? Is there a strong routine in activity or does it require constant interaction and innovation? Depending on the answers, hybrid work may or may not be a sensible option."*



## What does this mean?

**EL** *"At the moment, the term "hybrid" is often used for a mix between working at the office and working from home. In the long term, the concept will be more open to the role of third places but, for the sake of clarity, I will limit myself to the first definition. Behind this simple image (office vs. home) lie different cases of use.*

*"Hybrid working with remote and on-site employees who are constantly on the move is an unmanageable situation for a manager!"*

*The first case is the most publicised: a form of à la carte hybridisation with little or no organisation. People come and go as they please. They are sometimes in the office and sometimes at home. The place of work is above all a factor in the expectations and preferences of employees. However, unless the employee is in a job that requires individual, sequenced and*

*routine task performance, this is rarely a good solution. Hybrid working with remote and on-site employees who are constantly on the move is an unmanageable situation for a manager! The best example is hybrid meetings, which do not work if there are more than 4 or 5 participants. In the same room, having employees physically present and others on screens rarely gives good results, and this is nothing new!*

*If we move towards this form of hybrid working, there will be no distinction between office work and remote work. And the much-maligned negative effects of spending the day in virtual meetings will only increase. In this context, the hybrid system will be more like computer-assisted Taylorism than producing the flexibility expected by employees and employers.*

*In the second case, which seems to me to be more virtuous, hybrid working is organised at the level of the team. It is about putting everyone on an equal footing*



*(100% in the office or 100% remote) for part of the working time. This ensures that the manager can easily interact with the whole team. Outside these times, the organisation remains extremely flexible. This is the solution chosen by Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, in a note sent to his teams to organise work from September 2021. Obviously, this solution is more restrictive and needs to be adapted to the context of each team; it will not be a unanimous decision.*

*As long as the days are set (either remotely or in the office), there is less loss of interaction or information within the team. This type of organisation also makes it possible to differentiate between times of collective production, built around formal and informal exchanges, and times of concentration, which require taking a step back or isolating oneself to finish a task. However, this second form of hybridisation raises other questions, in particular that of the distribution of the workspace within a building. The company may choose to reduce the number of offices, but this means that not all employees can be on site on the same day! There is therefore a real need for reflection on this subject.*

*It will also be very important to ensure that exchanges are not limited to the team. One of the major difficulties we experienced during the health crisis was the decrease in interaction between teams. These exchanges are essential to the smooth running of the company.”*

*“In France, teleworking has long been seen as a reward. But this is changing.”*





## So is there no **perfect solution**?

**EL** *"Every solution has its challenges, but if you are aware of them, it is possible to implement a hybrid system that is suitable for different work situations! Where it gets more complicated is that there are still two other forms of work organisation which can be described as hybrid: between employees who have the right to work from home and those who will no longer have it, and those who would like to work from home but can't, and those who do not want to.*

*In France, teleworking has long been seen as a reward. It was a privilege for the person who had the skills and level of autonomy to work from home. Let's not forget that this privilege was reserved for approximately 7% of employees in 2019! Today, there is a clear perception that teleworking will become more widespread in society as a whole. However, within the same team, some people may be allowed to work remotely and others not. Either because they manage sensitive data, or because their job is complicated to do remotely, or because they are not considered sufficiently autonomous by their hierarchy. But these people have had little or no experience of teleworking during the crisis, so it will be very difficult to explain to them that the situation has changed. If 90% of a team works remotely for a few days a week and the remaining 10% have no choice but to stay in the office, there is a real risk to the social cohesion of the team.*

*The last format of hybrid work organisation concerns employees who, for personal reasons (size of their home, quality of their internet connection, presence of children, etc.) cannot work remotely under good conditions.*

*Of course, one could imagine that the company would then offer third places, but this also comes at a cost. And there is one last case that is almost never mentioned: those who don't want to work from home any longer! Surveys show that 80-85% of people are in favour of teleworking, which means that there are still 15-20% who are not. There are also many reasons for this: difficulty in separating private and professional life, isolation, lack of interaction, lack of a distinction between the office and home, etc.*

*When analysing all these situations, the goal is not to simply say that we should use hybrid organisation, but to look at what type of hybrid organisation the team needs in order to find a balance that benefits both the employees and the company. One of the major risks that I see today is that of removing flexibility, making it a form of obligation on both sides. Work and the business must be at the heart of the process."*

*"The reality is that teleworking and hybrid working have given the "close" manager a new lease of life"*

## **What is the situation for managers?**

**EL** *"Here too, there are different positions on the subject. There are those who see hybridisation as an opportunity with more digital technology, less bureaucracy and more direct contact. And those who have suffered from being deprived of their usual working habits, with the absence of face-to-face meetings, teams that are more difficult to reach, etc. These managers have had no choice but to upgrade their skills quickly, with some frustrations along the way. The reality is that teleworking and hybrid working have given the "close" manager a new lease of life, particularly in terms of providing meaning, facilitating relationships and supporting the team in achieving its objectives. By being available and responsive, some managers were more appreciated at a distance than in person, where they were criticised for lacking charisma. Perhaps it is time to revisit leadership models?*

*You can't just duplicate traditional on-site working habits and transpose them into a hybrid mode. In each case, you have to take the time to adjust and to identify the best ways of operating. One of the main problems is perhaps not the hybrid solution, but the lack of time to think about it!*

## If we exclude those who need to be physically present, can everyone else work from home?

**EL** *"I think we need to stop looking at teleworking as "all or nothing"! In my view, there are four aspects to be taken into account when assessing whether and to what extent a job can be carried out remotely.*

- The first is to distinguish between individual and team work. There is a tendency to think that the performance of a team is greater than the sum of the individual performances. Nothing could be further from the truth, as Professor Hackman's work proves! One of the main reasons for this is the tendency, which is amplified by distance, to do less effectively in groups what each person could have done separately asynchronously.*
- The second aspect is therefore related to the synchronicity of the work. Can the employee perform his or her tasks asynchronously or does he or she have to be present with other people at the same time?*
- The third aspect is whether the work is routine or if there is a need for innovation. Routine work will be more easily done from a distance than work in which creativity is expected.*
- The fourth and final aspect depends on the issues covered. The more complex and/or sensitive the issue (performance evaluation, personal difficulties of an employee, conflicts within the team, etc.), the more important non-verbal communication will be, and the more valuable physical presence is.*

*Thus, while individual, asynchronous, routine and daily work can easily be done remotely, other activities require consideration of the most efficient way to achieve the objectives. This analytical grid highlights the fact that the most important term in the expression "hybrid work" is not "hybrid" but "work!"*



*"The question is not what to do with your offices, but about looking at the purpose of your workspace."*



**You mentioned the issue of workspace.  
What will offices look like in a future  
hybrid system?**

**EL** *"Today, this is a complex issue, because everyone is still finding their way. To help business leaders, my advice is to look at things from a different perspective. The question is not what to do with your offices, but about looking at what the purpose of your workspace is.*

*I see several possibilities. The first is related to attracting talent. The workspace, as a reflection of the company culture, is inseparable from the brand as an employer and makes people want to be recruited - or not. This is often the case with the big names*

*in Silicon Valley technology, such as Apple or Google.*

*The second is related to integration. The workspace is a place where your employees develop a sense of belonging, and this has been badly shaken up by the health crisis. In research conducted by Cranfield University among people working from home, they spoke spontaneously about their work, their team and their managers, but not a word about their company! A workspace is a place of integration. For a long time, it even symbolised the status of*

*each person within the company: closed offices for managers, open spaces for others, etc.*

*The third dimension is that of allocation. The office becomes completely flexible and modular. Initially set up for mobile workers such as consultants, auditors or salespeople, flexispaces are beginning to be used much more widely with the aim of optimising floorspace. With the growth in teleworking, this optimisation will continue, and we are already seeing many companies letting go of their physical spaces to keep costs down. But we must be careful not to take this process too far. Flexispace showed its limits during the health crisis: it was impossible to disinfect the same spaces occupied by different workers several times a day, for example. Not to mention the fact that most people in a flexispace tend to spontaneously settle in the same place, and that having to move all your belongings out every night and back in the morning has not always been popular. Another point that is often overlooked is that our memory capacity is increased when we stay in the same place, i.e. it is easier to remember a conversation in the location where it took place.*

*Finally, the last issue is performance. In the service sector, property is often the second largest cost item after salaries. So the first "performance" we ask of a space, especially at the moment, is that it should cost as little as possible! Other ways of understanding*

*performance are also possible, however: it has been shown that workspaces, and especially the freedom to choose them, are correlated with employee commitment.*

*Research has also shown the role of space design on employee behaviour. Let's take the example of the coffee machine. If you are looking for productivity within a team, it is a good idea to set up a dedicated coffee area for that team. However, if you are looking for innovation, that's a different story! Innovation is often the result of informal encounters and impromptu discussions. Some companies have even taken the decision to take lifts out of high traffic areas and install large staircases instead. The aim is for people to cross paths, circulate, challenge each other, etc. It is then assumed that the interactions in the workspace will generate discussions that can lead to new ideas, and therefore to innovation."*



## Earlier, you talked about the importance of trust. How can trust be integrated into a hybrid work model?

**EL** "Everyone agrees that trust is the cement of the relationship between employer and employee. If you don't have trust in the office, you won't have more trust remotely! But it is also a word with two different meanings. Trust can be task-oriented, when we trust someone's expertise (what they know) and their reliability (whether they keep their commitments). Trust can also be interpersonal: it depends on the level of intimacy (i.e. being able to express oneself freely to one's manager, being able to talk about personal matters so that the other person can show empathy and benevolence) but also on the level of self-orientation. This term is about assessing how much your manager really cares about you and your development, or whether they are only concerned with their own career development.

Competence and reliability on the one hand, privacy and self-orientation on the other. In other words, there are people we are happy to entrust tasks to, and others with whom we are just happy to have a coffee. Ideally, of course, both types of trust should coexist! Before the crisis, research on remote management suggested that task-oriented trust was the best way to achieve results, and that interpersonal trust was established gradually, especially through face-to-face meetings. The pandemic completely reversed this trend and managers who were able to show empathy came out of the first lockdown as winners. As teleworking becomes more widespread, it is interesting to see

employees in some companies who would like their manager to stop checking up on them and respond to difficulties in completing tasks instead. It would seem that, after such an unusual period, task-oriented confidence is returning to its rightful place!

When working remotely, there is a notion of responsibility being shared between the company, the manager and the employees. It is up to the company to provide everyone with the means to do their job in good conditions. This means IT equipment, of course, and the current negotiations also involve the costs covered by employers (internet costs, electricity, heating, etc.), but also work on the organisation of teams (matrix, number of people per team, how long the team will work together, occupation time of the positions).

The manager still has the same roles of leading and managing their team, but the means of doing so are different, depending on whether the work is done remotely or in person. There are many training courses on this subject. Finally, employees must take more initiative, particularly in communicating their difficulties to their managers, anticipating problems, proposing solutions, etc. In a remote relationship, we cannot continue to expect the manager to be the superhero, with dozens of people to manage, a team that changes regularly and disengaged employees. Responsibility must be shared."

## What are the risks of hybrid working?

**EL** *"They are often more difficult to identify than in a face-to-face setting, as some are invisible. The first is isolation. This feeling may stem from the attitude of some managers who use the alibi of distance to stop managing! Not answering questions from their teams, not taking the time to interact, they will only contact you if they have problems (i.e. if you don't achieve your objectives!). It may also mean isolation from the working group. Remotely, employees have the opportunity to decide with whom they will interact. WhatsApp groups are formed for a few people in the team and isolate the others. However, even remotely, this difference in treatment is perceptible and can generate conflicts.*

*The second risk after isolation is burn-out. To demonstrate their commitment, employees tend to extend their availability. The computer is on from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and at the slightest notification, they rush to respond. In the long run, this is obviously problematic for the mental health of workers.*

*Finally, the third risk is musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). We often talk about MSDs in physically demanding jobs such as handling, manual work or cashier work, but in the service sector they have also developed, because the home office is not as well equipped. We have people who spend all their time on small, poorly adjusted screens, with a chair that is not adapted to them, with bad posture, poor ergonomics, etc. The result is that they are prone to back pain, neck pain, etc."*

*"You have to rethink your organisation and use good practice when working remotely."*



## What can the company do to facilitate the return to work?

**EL** "The office has become a lost paradise for teleworkers who cannot get used to working remotely. The problem is that it is not perfect in any way if you come back to work exactly as before. It will be stressful, and commuting will always eat into the day. You have to rethink your organisation and use good practice when working remotely. This can be done by taking control of your schedule and limiting meetings to 45 minutes, asking employees to take mandatory breaks, giving them time to express themselves and share ideas, etc.

You have to take a different approach to improve both on-site

and remote work. Let's take an example: waiting for someone for more than 5 minutes for an online meeting is an ordeal. Why not impose this discipline on the office and start all meetings on time? On the other hand, when I hear teams tell me that remote working forces them to set schedules and to be clear and concise, this is a very good thing. But does that mean it wasn't the case when working at the office? Things need to be structured. If a meeting consists of 20 people sitting around the table listening to the manager talk for an hour, there is no point. Send an e-mail instead!

*"Physical presence only values oral communication and the best speakers, whereas remote working allows more introverted profiles to flourish."*

You have to be virtuous in your ability to use the right tools to respect your audience. Remote working has other advantages. In meetings, it allows shy people to get more involved when voting anonymously or to ask questions in writing in an instant chat. Physical presence only values oral communication and the best speakers, whereas remote working allows more introverted profiles to flourish.

At the same time, we should not pretend that the pandemic and lockdown did not happen.

Finally, tasks must be adapted to the location. A task in the office that may take 15 minutes may take 3 hours at home, as you have to contact each remote team member. And the reverse is also true! Management also has an important role to play: the leadership model will have to change. For a long time the leader had to be competent and charismatic. Nowadays, it is especially important to be competent and responsive because of the difficulties of remote interaction. In remote working, everything is multiplied. People who are dull in person are even more boring remotely!"



## What are the essential qualities of the hybrid manager?

- EL** *"They have to stay in control. This means defining objectives, allocating responsibilities, communicating with the right tools, and setting an example, especially in terms of disconnection! Hybrid managers must work on their verbal and non-verbal communication and be aware of the importance of soft skills. Research shows that the most 'transformational' leaders do not use the same lexicon as others: the vocabulary they use is positive, encouraging. Remotely, one could almost say that the verbal takes its revenge on the non-verbal!"*

*A good hybrid manager must be curious, aware of trends, and able to contribute to his or her team. But they must also encourage their team to develop, to be a source of ideas themselves. Thus, at a project launch, everyone should express their skills but also their expectations of the project, how they intend to contribute, what they can bring to it. Finally, although it may seem obvious, the manager must of course master the technological tools and the habits and customs associated with them."*

## How can we support junior employees or young graduates who are starting out in a hybrid world of work?

**EL** *"There are legitimate fears, because teleworking can only succeed when there is a certain level of knowledge of the company and mastery of one's role in the organisation. Young people are not particularly keen on working remotely. They need to feel connected to the organisation, to improve their skills, to connect with their colleagues and superiors, and to appropriate internal behavioural codes. This is all part of a normal learning process. When you go from five days a week in the office to two or three days, the physical time is very limited, especially as there is no guarantee that your manager will be present at the same time as you! We therefore have to learn how to integrate an employee remotely if this cannot be done in person.*



*This means meeting as many people as possible, arranging appointments, etc. Because we are not sure that people will meet by chance, we need to institutionalise these face-to-face or virtual meetings. The manager must be even more "present", even from a distance, to create these events. These days, artificial intelligence tools can be very useful in this process. Hence the importance of a highly structured mentoring system in companies and personalised support in the office and remotely. Some companies have a complete package delivered to their new recruits with goodies, best practice guides, gifts, and books to read, for example. It is an approach that facilitates integration and shows the new recruit that the company is happy to welcome them, even remotely. But these gestures will only make sense if they are accompanied by a real integration process."*

## Conclusion

Hybrid working is neither virtuous nor problematic. The important thing is to refocus the discussion around 'working'. The way the employer organises management, production, collaboration and communication flows will make all the difference. In this sense, hybrid working acts as a sounding board. It amplifies the structural deficiencies of organisations and catalyses the frustrations of employees when they have to be expressed. Hybrid working is therefore an opportunity for all organisations to improve their internal processes, their collaboration tools and to use it as a lever for growth.

The performance of an organisation is multidimensional by nature. Hybrid working is not what makes a company fail or succeed. However, it can help change old habits or perpetuate them, unite teams or divide them, create a tight-knit group or encourage disengagement. Let us not forget that all human resource management practice is based on the perceptions of managers: hybrid working will be no exception to this rule.

# Emmanuelle Léon



Emmanuelle Léon is Associate Professor of Human Resources Management at ESCP Business School, Paris. Since December 2019, she has been leading the Reinventing Work chair in partnership with Bivwak! and BNP Paribas.

Emmanuelle Léon has been conducting research projects on teleworking, remote management and (new) workspaces for 20 years. She is more broadly interested in the transformations induced by digital technology and artificial intelligence on management, a subject on which she published a book in 2018 with Editions Pearson (with C. Dejoux), nominated in 2019 for four prizes, including that of the Ministry for Labour.

She regularly participates as an expert in academic and professional conferences in France and abroad. Her online training course "Approaches and Skills of the Distance Manager" (ESCP Business School and Skill First), developed in 2019, was available free of charge during the lockdown and is a reference on the subject, with 7,000 registrations in one month.

**Emmanuelle Léon is also:**

- Scientific leader of research and working groups at ANVIE on the changes in work spaces and teleworking;
- Member of the Circle of Transformation Leaders;
- Member of the Scientific Council of the Business & Legal Forum for Ethics and Performance.

In addition, Emmanuelle Léon was a Visiting Fellow at the Industrial and Labour Relations School (IRL) at Cornell University - where she conducted several research projects within the Center of Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS), and participated in the International Teachers Programme (ITP) at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University.

A graduate of ESSEC, with a PhD in management science (on the subject of remote management), she began her career in management consulting with Accenture.

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