

Unveiling the Role of Emotional Intelligence in the Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Performance: Insights from SMEs' Smart Workers

Miriana Ferrara¹ & Nicola Capolupo²

¹ Department of Management & Innovation Systems (DISA-MIS), University of Salerno, Italy

² Department for the Promotion of Human Science and Quality of Life, San Raffaele Roma University, Italy

Correspondence: Nicola Capolupo, Department for the Promotion of Human Science and Quality of Life San Raffaele Roma University, Italy. E-mail: nicola.capolupo@uniroma5.it

Received: December 14, 2024

Accepted: January 16, 2025

Online Published: January 28, 2025

doi:10.5539/ijbm.v20n1p195

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v20n1p195>

Abstract

The rise of smartworking has profoundly reshaped employees' workflows by delineating the opportunity for a better work-life balance. Nevertheless, scholars underlined the risk for remote workers to experience stress and burnout due to the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. In this context, relying on a manager able to understand and motivate is relevant for enhancing employees' individual performance and contributing to a business' survival. This is particularly crucial in small and medium-sized firms (SMEs), where employees' performance can significantly impact business stability. Therefore, this study explores the role of emotional intelligence in SMEs by investigating its moderating effect between work-life balance and individual performance. A quantitative methodology was adopted, and a Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling was performed. A convenience sampling together with a snowball sampling technique was employed to collect data among employees. A total of 114 valid surveys from Italian SMEs were collected through an online questionnaire. The results confirm that smartworking affects work-life balance and work-life balance positively impacts individual performance. More interestingly, it emerges a positive and significant moderating effect of emotional intelligent leadership. This can open up to the valorization of emotional intelligence within firms as a strategic skill, both in public and private organizations, for handling employees' emotions, thereby fostering their individual performance.

Keywords: smartworking, emotional intelligence, work-life balance, leadership, SMEs

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Smart-Working Dilemma in the Aftermath of the Covid-19*

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted global economies and daily life, reshaping traditional work structures and accelerating new practices, particularly smartworking. This form of remote work became a defining feature of the pandemic era, as businesses were forced to adapt to restrictions. Many workers transitioned their tasks to home environments, with varying levels of support from employers. While some companies provided the necessary technology, training, and organizational assistance (Occhiocupo & Pedone, 2023), others left employees to rely on their own resources and motivation. Smartworking (SW) differently impacted on employees' well-being. On the one hand, greater flexibility and autonomy, as well as an improvement of employees' work-life balance, arose as consequences of SW (Ipsen et al., 2021). Moreover, an enhancement of focus, as workers avoided typical office distractions, and reduced costs for businesses, due to their contribution to environmental sustainability, are also discussed by managerial scholars (D'Angelo et al., 2024; Roberto et al., 2023). On the other hand, some scholars investigated the "dark side" of SW. In this regard, it emerged that workers experienced digital overload due to excessive virtual interactions, leading to phenomena such as "Zoom fatigue" (Shoshan & Wehrt, 2022). Social isolation and the lack of face-to-face interactions diminished collaboration and the sense of belonging to a team (Xavier et al., 2024). Additionally, the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life (work-life balance) increased stress and the risk of burnout (Costin et al., 2023). Inequities in access to technology also hindered productivity for some employees (Van Rheede, 2023). These contrasting outcomes have led to varying responses. Companies like Amazon have reverted to in-office

work, citing the need for physical presence to foster collaboration, while others, particularly in Italy, have embraced hybrid or fully remote models. According to the “*Polytechnic University of Milan Observatory*,” (Note 1). SW is steadily growing in Italy, with an estimated 3.65 million remote workers expected by the end of 2024. Italian firms, such as Intesa Sanpaolo and Luxottica, are exploring shorter workweeks, while TIM and Almoviva are implementing remote work strategies.

1.2 The Research Aim

The current challenge of distinguishing tasks that require physical presence from those manageable remotely underscores the need for balance between a sense of belonging and work-life balance (WLB). Here, the role of emotionally intelligent managers becomes critical. Managers with high emotional intelligence (EI) are better equipped to recognize individual employee needs and foster an environment where WLB is prioritized without sacrificing performance. Emotionally intelligent managers can create strategies that align flexibility with team cohesion. For example, they can facilitate open communication to address feelings of isolation, ensure fair task distribution to prevent burning out, and support employees in setting boundaries to maintain WLB. This *equilibrium* not only enhances employee well-being but also drives better performance, as workers who feel supported are more engaged, productive, and committed to their roles. In contrast, rigid policies like mandating a full return to the office risk undermining WLB and alienating top talent, particularly those who have embraced the benefits of remote work. Accordingly, emotionally intelligent managers play a pivotal role in navigating these dynamics, ensuring that both organizational goals and employee satisfaction are achieved. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the largely unexamined role of emotional leadership in moderating the relationship between WLB and individual performance among remote workers. By focusing on this dynamic, the study aims to shed light on how emotionally intelligent leadership can enhance employee well-being and productivity in SW contexts. Using a SEM-based approach combined with bootstrapping techniques, the article analyzes data collected from a survey of employees working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Italy. The findings aim to contribute to the ongoing debate in managerial literature, offering fresh insights into the interplay between leadership, WLB, and performance. Furthermore, the study seeks to provide practical recommendations for policymakers and entrepreneurs on how to sustain agile work models within their organizations.

1.3 Literature Review

1.3.1 The Smartworking Effect

An increasing number of firms are reflecting on how to best design work systems, carefully weighing the pros and cons of SW. While this mode of work offers clear advantages for both organizations and employees, its success heavily depends on the conditions under which workers operate. Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) analyze how remote work has affected the balance between work and personal life. When employees have greater freedom to organize their tasks and manage their time, they tend to be more motivated and productive (Jafaar et al., 2022). Autonomy, a cornerstone of SW, plays a critical role in mitigating the potential negative relationship between WLB and productivity. This system does not only benefit employees but also enhances organizational outcomes, such as increased productivity, reduced operational costs, and lower absenteeism rates. However, SW is not without challenges. Effective management is essential to address issues related to worker isolation, organizational culture, and security. Albano et al. (2019) highlight both the advantages of remote work and its risks, particularly when mismanaged. They criticize the overly enthusiastic portrayal of SW in managerial literature (e.g., Sarti & Torre, 2017), which often presents it as a universally beneficial “win-win” solution. While SW undeniably offers greater flexibility and autonomy, these benefits do not always translate into an improved quality of work life. A key concern in remote work is the risk of loneliness, which Albano et al. explore by distinguishing emotional loneliness (linked to a lack of meaningful relationships) from physical solitude or loneliness. The physical distance from colleagues and the workplace can erode social connections and professional support, which are crucial for employee well-being. This isolation may lead to feelings of being “out of sight, out of mind” for managers, potentially impacting career advancement and motivation. Moreover, other studies (Ericson-Lidman & Strandberg, 2007; Collins et al., 2016) reveal additional negative effects of remote work, such as an increased risk of burnout and difficulties maintaining a healthy WLB.

1.3.2 The Need for Work-Life Balance

WLB is defined as a condition in which professional and personal life do not excessively overlap, enabling individuals to fulfill their responsibilities in both spheres without compromising physical, emotional, or social well-being. Greenhaus and Allen (2011) describe it as a balance between work and family roles, emphasizing satisfaction over equal time allocation. With the rise of remote work during and after the Covid-19 pandemic,

WLB has become central to discussions on workplace health and well-being. The traditional boundaries between work and personal life have been blurred, as tasks previously tied to the office now often occur at home, creating new challenges for managing this overlap. Palumbo and Pellegrini (2020) explored how remote work affects WLB and identified factors that mediate the relationship between SW and balance. Their study, involving 33,549 workers across Europe, found mixed effects. While SW enhances flexibility and perceived well-being, it also complicates boundaries between work and private life, leading to potential time management issues. Moderate use of remote work improves social relationships and flexibility, but excessive reliance can reduce work engagement and meaningfulness, worsening WLB. Their findings highlight that balancing remote and traditional work may be key to maximizing its benefits. In a related study, Palumbo (2022) examined how work engagement affects accountants' ability to manage work-life boundaries. While active participation in decision-making fosters a sense of responsibility and dedication, it can increase pressure, leading employees to prioritize work at the expense of personal life. Work engagement and job satisfaction act as mediators, mitigating these negative effects and supporting a healthier balance. Palumbo et al. (2022) further address the tension caused by blurred boundaries in remote work. While SW allows for greater flexibility, it can create conflicts between personal and professional responsibilities, potentially harming WLB. However, the study suggests that remote work can increase employee motivation and satisfaction, which in turn enhances perceptions of balance. To optimize the benefits of remote work, firms must focus on fostering motivation and satisfaction while carefully managing the challenges of blending work and personal life. Future research is necessary to deepen the understanding of these dynamics and their impact on worker well-being.

1.3.3 The Role of the Empathetic Manager

In remote work settings, the leader's role is crucial for maintaining team cohesion, productivity, and motivation despite physical distance and digital challenges. The lack of direct supervision can lead to distrust or anxiety, so leaders must foster trust and provide clear communication while balancing autonomy with support. As Dirani et al. (2020) emphasize, effective leadership in SW requires continuous feedback and transparency, ensuring employees feel valued and empowered. Regular meetings, as suggested by Carnevale & Hatak (2020), help monitor work progress and foster interpersonal relationships, which contribute to employee performance and well-being.

EI, a key leadership skill highlighted by Goleman (1995), plays a role in EI intelligence theory by integrating empathy and interpersonal skills as fundamental elements. He stressed that EI often surpasses traditional cognitive abilities, such as IQ, in determining success in both personal and professional life. In the workplace, managers with high emotional intelligence tend to achieve better results and lead more effectively. EI consists of self-awareness, emotion management, motivation, empathy, and social skills. When applied to remote leadership, these competencies help leaders address the challenges of distance, strengthen relationships, and improve employee engagement and performance.

1.3.4 Performance in Smartworking

Performance in SW is closely tied to both the quality of work and its impact on business culture. Firms must adapt their evaluation methods to support employees in remote work environments, focusing on self-motivation, time management, and empowerment. The rise of remote work highlights the need for new evaluation strategies that promote a healthy, productive work environment (Galanti et al., 2021).

Evaluating individual performance is essential for aligning employees with company goals. In remote work settings, performance assessments must reflect not just outcomes but the unique dynamics of remote work. Bentivogli (2020) suggests using Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), including productivity (measured by project completion), work quality (based on feedback), and customer satisfaction (measured by client feedback). Another method is the use of OKRs (Objectives and Key Results), recommended by De Masi (2020), to provide clear goals and measurable results. OKRs ensure transparency and flexibility, which is crucial for remote work, as they can be adjusted quarterly based on changing priorities.

1.4 Hypothesis Development

SW offers flexibility, allowing employees to better balance WLB, but it can also blur the boundaries between personal and professional spheres. This overlap makes it difficult for many workers to "switch off," leading to a decline in free time quality, increased conflicts between work and personal life, and heightened stress. Palumbo et al. (2022) suggest that while SW can negatively affect WLB by merging the two spheres, it can also boost employee motivation and job satisfaction, helping to mitigate some of its negative impacts. Toscano and Zappalà (2020) highlight that remote work, while offering flexibility, can contribute to burnout, especially without sufficient organizational support. They stress that the lack of social interaction and the difficulty in separating

work from personal life can increase stress and lead to burnout. Iqbal et al. (2020) point out that remote workers often struggle to disconnect after work, leading to extended work hours and increased stress. They recommend setting personal boundaries, such as turning off notifications, to create a healthier balance. Anakpo et al. (2023) emphasize that while SW can improve job satisfaction and productivity by offering flexibility and reducing commuting, it can also cause social isolation and make it difficult to separate work from personal life. Therefore, the first hypothesis follows:

Hp1: SW affects the balance between work and personal life (WLB).

Inegbedion (2024) highlights the critical impact of WLB on employee engagement, identifying job satisfaction as a key mediator. A healthy WLB fosters greater job satisfaction, which in turn strengthens employee commitment and dedication to the organization. The study suggests that investing in WLB initiatives can enhance not only employee well-being but also overall performance to business' processes. Similarly, Palumbo et al. (2022) explore how SW affects the balance between work and personal life. They argue that a better WLB leads to increased job satisfaction, which positively influences individual performance. However, the study emphasizes that poorly managed WLB policies can result in conflicts between personal and professional life, potentially undermining productivity. Bocean et al. (2023) provide further evidence by examining the relationship between WLB and employee satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic using structural equation modeling on a sample of 452 Romanian workers. Their findings indicate that a positive WLB significantly improves employee well-being, satisfaction, and motivation while reducing turnover risk. The study underscores the heightened importance of WLB during the pandemic, given the challenges posed by remote work and family demands and calls for organizational policies to support balance and preserve productivity. Lamane-Harim et al. (2023) focus on the role of organizational culture in promoting WLB in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Spain. Their study demonstrates that companies fostering a culture of balance see reduced employee turnover and increased loyalty. Workers in such environments report less stress and greater satisfaction, contributing to team stability and long-term competitiveness. Finally, Anakpo et al. (2023) investigate how SW impacts employee performance and productivity. They highlight the benefits of remote work, including reduced commuting time and increased flexibility, which can improve WLB. However, they also note the risks of blurred boundaries between work and personal life, which can lead to overwork and mental fatigue. This imbalance, if poorly managed, compromises concentration and efficiency, ultimately reducing performance.

The second hypothesis follows:

Hp2: WLB influences individual performance.

Emotionally intelligent managers play a critical role in enhancing employee WLB and performance. Cola (2022) emphasizes that emotionally intelligent leaders understand and address employees' emotional needs, fostering trust, collaboration, and motivation. This reduces conflict and stress while improving job satisfaction and performance. Managers with high EI are particularly effective under pressure, using self-awareness, empathy, and social skills to create positive work environments and help employees manage WLB challenges. Supporting this, Nanda & Randhawa (2020) propose that EI mediates the relationship between WLB and employee well-being, reducing stress and increasing job satisfaction. Similarly, Joyce et al. (2021) highlight that EI helps employees handle work pressures constructively, enhancing their ability to maintain balance, reduce burnout risk, and boost both personal and professional outcomes. Chigeda et al. (2022) further show that EI equips leaders to manage stress and pressure effectively, promoting resilience and mitigating risks like burnout, while organizational WLB policies enhance employee engagement and satisfaction. Nathaya et al. (2022) underline the importance of EI in stabilizing WLB, reducing burnout, and improving job satisfaction. Employees with higher EI are better at adapting to stress, managing challenges, and sustaining psychological well-being. Lubis et al. (2023) add that motivation acts as a key moderating factor, amplifying the positive effects of EI, leadership, and WLB on employee performance. Combining EI with strong leadership and ethical practices fosters respect, intrinsic motivation, and improved outcomes.

With this in mind, the third hypothesis is formulated:

Hp3: Managers' EI moderates the relationship between WLB and employee performance.

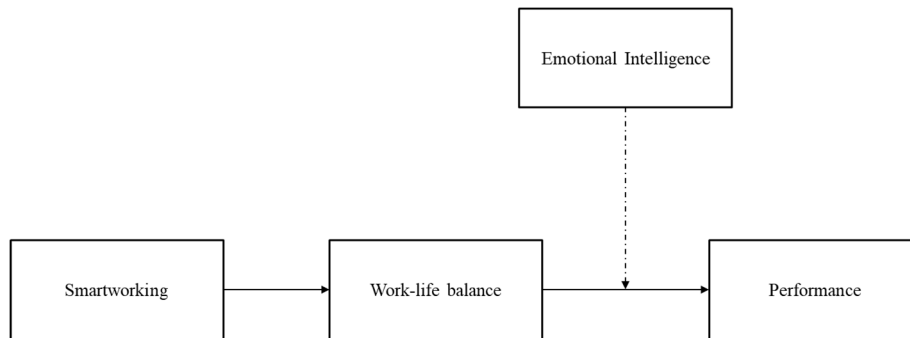


Figure 1. Conceptual model

2. Method

2.1 Methodology of Research

Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is a methodological approach used in social sciences since the 1980s (Wold, 1982; 1985). It is based on a “soft model” designed as an alternative to the traditional covariance-based SEM by Jöreskog (1973). While conventional SEM requires normally distributed data and large sample sizes, PLS-SEM is more flexible, suitable for small samples, and capable of analyzing complex models, making it particularly useful for exploratory and predictive studies. A pre-test was conducted with a pilot sample of 15 workers to gather feedback on the interpretation and linguistic appropriateness of the items, which had been translated from a different context. Statistical analysis was performed using the SmartPLS 4 software (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2022), which incorporates a consistent algorithm and a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure (PLSc). The bootstrapping was configured with 5000 iterations, improving the reliability and robustness of the model’s parameter estimates. The methodological approach followed several stages to ensure rigor and consistency with the proposed theoretical model. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to validate the distinction between constructs and assess the model’s goodness of fit. Correlations between variables and descriptive statistics were analyzed to provide an overview of the collected data. Additionally, path analysis examined direct and indirect relationships between variables, while moderation analysis explored the influence of external factors on the hypothesized effect.

2.2 Sampling Procedures

Different sampling techniques were used to select the workers for analysis: the convenience sampling technique and the snowball sampling technique. The convenience sampling technique selects participants based on their accessibility and availability rather than probabilistic criteria. While practical, this method has significant limitations, as noted by Cresswell (2018). These include potential bias in the collected data and the inability to generalize findings to the broader population. Consequently, this technique is more suitable for exploratory or preliminary studies aimed at gathering initial insights rather than producing generalizable results. The snowball sampling technique, on the other hand, is particularly effective for reaching hard-to-identify groups. This approach begins with an initial group of participants, often chosen for their knowledge or direct involvement in the topic of study. These participants then refer the researcher to other relevant individuals, creating an expanding network of participants, akin to a “snowball” effect. This method is ideal for studies requiring access to niche or less accessible populations.

2.3 Participant Characteristics and Size

SMEs were chosen as the context of investigation for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, they serve as the backbone of the economy in many European countries, playing a critical role in driving innovation, employment, and economic growth (Capolupo et al., 2024). In Europe, SMEs constitute 99.8% of all businesses, underscoring their pervasive influence across various industries and markets (DiBella et al., 2023).

Secondly, there is a growing body of research highlighting the relevance of emotional intelligence management within SME settings. Prior studies have explored the unique challenges and opportunities these organizations face when leveraging emotional intelligence as a strategic tool, making SMEs a fertile ground for further investigation in this domain (Boohene et al., 2020; Cuéllar-Molina et al., 2019; Karia, 2021).

Finally, the study addresses a pressing issue faced by Italian SMEs: their difficulty in attracting and retaining talent. This challenge is compounded by a tendency among some SMEs to revert to traditional work models,

abandoning the flexibility offered by smartworking (Note 2).

A total of 114 employees from Italian SMEs participated in the study. Data collection was conducted through a Google Forms questionnaire, structured into six sections. The first section consisted of four profiling questions, covering gender, age, and educational level. The sample distribution is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample distribution

Category	Modality	Distribution
Gender	Male	58,8%
	Female	41.2%
Age	15-19	3.5%
	20-29	50%
	30-39	17.5%
	40-49	20.2%
	50-59	7.9%
	60 and more	0.9%
Education level	University degree	62.3%
	Master's degree	14%
	Others	23.7%

2.4 Variables of the Study

The second section of the study focuses on the SW use frequency, using a dichotomous item based on Palumbo's (2020) study. The third section assesses WLB through three items from Irfan et al. (2023) that examine how well workers balance work and personal life, considering time and energy management, organizational support, and work flexibility, with responses rated on a five-point Likert scale. The fourth section evaluates EI leadership with sixteen items based on the Majeed & Jamshed (2021) EI model, which includes self-awareness, awareness of others' emotions, emotion regulation, and the use of emotions. Respondents indicate the importance of emotional management and social support from their manager. The final section measures performance using the IWPQ (Koopmans et al., 2014), which covers three performance dimensions: task performance (efficiency and effectiveness), contextual performance (contribution to the work environment), and counterproductive behaviors (negative actions affecting the organization). Respondents rate, using a Likert scale, how their work organization and collaboration with colleagues have contributed to their performance.

3. Results

3.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Table 2 displays the reliability and validity of four variables. For SW, the item loadings range from 0.76 to 0.81, with good internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.84) and construct reliability (CR = 0.88). The AVE of 0.62 confirms adequate variance. For WLB, item loadings range from 0.74 to 0.79, with acceptable reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.82, CR = 0.86) and an AVE of 0.60, ensuring construct validity. EI shows good correlation (item loadings 0.77 to 0.83) and high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.85, CR = 0.89), with an AVE of 0.65 confirming strong validity. Performance shows very high item loadings (0.86 to 0.88), excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.90, CR = 0.93), and an AVE of 0.71, indicating strong construct validity and the explanation of a significant portion of the variance.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Variable	Items loading (range)	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Rho_A	AVE
SW (n.items=1)	0.76 - 0.81	0.84	0.88	0.85	0.62
WLB (n.items=3)	0.74- 0.79	0.82	0.86	0.81	0.60
EI (n.items=16)	0.77- 0.83	0.85	0.89	0.86	0.65
Performance (n.items=6)	0.86- 0.88	0.90	0.93	0.91	0.71

3.2 Model Fit

The fit indices provide information on how well the model fits the observed data, as shown in Table 3. The SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) measures the discrepancy between the observed and estimated covariance matrices. Values below 0.08 indicate a good fit, while values above 0.10 signal potential fit issues. The dULS index identifies absolute unweighted discrepancies between observed and estimated matrices. Although there are no strict thresholds for dULS, lower values indicate a better fit. As shown in the table, the initial SRMR value of 0.07 is below the upper threshold for an acceptable fit, making it adequate. The minimum dULS value of 1.608 indicates good correspondence in some parts of the model, while the maximum value of 3.589 remains acceptable. Lastly, the minimum dG value of 0.831 shows a strong correspondence between the observed and estimated matrices, with a maximum of 3.596 still within acceptable limits.

3.3 Path Analysis Results

Table 3 shows the results related to the pathway connecting SW, WLB, and performance, highlighting the moderating effect of EI. In this model, all relationships are positively significant, suggesting that SW and effective management of WLB have a positive impact on work performance and that the intervention of EI further amplifies this impact.

The SW → WLB path shows a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.25$) with a Standard Error of 0.06, implying that the adoption of SW is associated with an improvement in WLB. This effect is highly significant, with a p-value less than 0.01, indicating that the relationship is robust and statistically relevant. In other words, SW significantly contributes to better time and responsibility management between work and personal life, likely due to its flexibility and the ability to better manage work hours.

The WLB → Performance path indicates a positive effect ($\beta = 0.35$), suggesting that a better WLB leads to improved work performance. The standard error value of 0.08 confirms a precise and robust estimate of this relationship. This effect is highly significant ($p < 0.01$), emphasizing the importance of a good WLB for achieving high work performance. This result suggests that employees who manage a good balance between their work and personal needs tend to be more productive and satisfied with their roles.

Lastly, the WLB*EI → Performance path (thus including the moderating role of EI) shows an even stronger effect ($\beta = 0.57$) with a standard error of 0.06, indicating that EI positively amplifies the effect of WLB on work performance. The effect is highly significant ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that managers' EI plays a key role in further enhancing employee performance for those who maintain a good WLB.

Table 3. Path analysis results

Path	Effect (β)	Standard Error	p-value
SW → WLB	$\beta = 0.25$	0.06	$p < 0.01$
WLB → Performance	$\beta = 0.35$	0.08	$p < 0.01$
WLB * EI → Performance	$\beta = 0.57$	0.06	$p < 0.01$

Notes. *Model fit SRMR = 0.07, 0.107; dULs = 1.608, 3.589; dG = 0.831; 3.596.

4. Discussions and Conclusions

The results of this study suggest a positive effect of SW on WLB (Hp1), indicating that remote work enables employees to manage their time more effectively. Studies such as those by Anakpo et al. (2023) corroborate this result, that remote work improves WLB, particularly when employees have greater autonomy over their schedules. However, Mutebi and Hobbs (2022) highlight that while SW reduces commuting stress and enhances work flexibility, it may negatively impact productivity if not adequately supported by organizations. The second hypothesis (Hp2) posits that WLB positively impacts performance. Research by Inegbedion (2024) suggests that a well-managed WLB improves job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. Similarly, Angelici and Profeta (2024) found that employees with more control over their time were significantly more productive, reporting improved satisfaction and reduced stress. Their findings support the idea that policies fostering WLB can enhance both well-being and performance.

The third hypothesis (Hp3) confirms the moderating role of EI in the relationship between WLB and performance. This study supports Nanda & Randhawa (2020) and Marseno and Muafi (2021), demonstrating that emotionally intelligent managers can significantly improve employee engagement and performance by fostering a healthy WLB. EI helps employees better manage stress and work-life challenges, increasing job

satisfaction, motivation, and productivity.

One significant implication of this study is the potential impact on policy decisions. If these results are extended to a larger sample, they could inform decision-makers about the importance of maintaining SW in specific contexts. For flexible work policies, hybrid models can be implemented, allowing employees to split time between remote and office work, supported by clear guidelines and flexible hours to promote productivity and inclusiveness.

Indeed, firms may rethink or consolidate internal policies and optimize employee experience, addressing risks such as social isolation and work overload. Public policy too could benefit from guidelines that balance flexibility with employee well-being, promoting strategies to maximize SW's benefits. Thus, remote work regulations could, for instance, focus on psychological support, emotional management, and maintaining WLB (Van Dick et al., 2024).

The study highlights the critical role of strategic HR management in ensuring the success of SW, since it underscores the need for concrete support systems for employees. Implementing stress management initiatives and EI training can foster a more productive and positive work environment. Managers must transcend their traditional roles as coordinators and evolve into empathetic leaders, particularly under competitive pressures. EI emerges as a vital competency, enabling leaders to understand and manage emotions, effectively address crises, and cultivate trust within their teams (Sharma et al., 2023), ultimately enhancing workplace climate and performance. Consequently, companies should prioritize the introduction of EI training for managers through workshops and online seminars focused on self-awareness, empathy, and communication, complemented by personalized one-on-one coaching to refine leadership skills.

Moreover, with the rise of hybrid work models, companies need to continuously update their policies to adapt to the evolving work environment. This involves adopting agile practices that can quickly respond to changes without compromising employees' well-being. Management models must support effective collaboration, even remotely, while maintaining high levels of engagement and a sense of community within teams.

The long-term effects of SW and EI on employee performance and well-being present significant opportunities for future investigation, particularly for entrepreneurs. Understanding how these factors influence innovation, team dynamics, and talent retention over time could provide critical insights into building sustainable and adaptive business models in an ever-evolving economic landscape. Accordingly, SMEs will need to prioritize mental health and work relationships, investing in continuous training and technological solutions that enhance both well-being and productivity. Only by adopting an EI-driven approach will companies successfully reconcile productivity and well-being, addressing the challenges of an increasingly flexible and interconnected future of work (Landry, 2019).

The study highlights some methodological limitations that must be considered to contextualize the findings and guide future research. First, the sample size is small, and the sampling technique does not ensure adequate representativeness of the target population. Findings are specific to the Italian context and may not be directly applicable to other cultural or economic environments. Another limitation concerns the scales used for data collection, which were selected based on an exploratory review by the author rather than a systematic literature review. While this approach may be effective in certain situations, it may not ensure the methodological and theoretical robustness of the measures employed.

To address these shortcomings, future research should extend the questionnaire to professional associations, enabling the inclusion of larger and more representative samples.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal and publisher adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Albano, R., Parisi, T., & Tirabeni, L. (2019). Gli smart workers tra solitudine e collaborazione. *Cambio: Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali*, 17(1), 61-73.
- Anakpo, G., Nqwayibana, Z., & Mishi, S. (2023). The impact of work-from-home on employee performance and productivity: A systematic review. *Sustainability*, 15(5), 4529. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15054529>
- Angelici, M., & Profeta, P. (2024). Smart working: Work flexibility without constraints. *Management Science*, 70(3), 1680-1705. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2023.4721>
- Bentivogli, M. (2020). *Indipendenti: Guida allo smart working*. Rubbettino Editore.
- Bocean, C. G., Popescu, L., Varzaru, A. A., Avram, C. D., & Iancu, A. (2023). Work-life balance and employee satisfaction during COVID-19 pandemic. *Sustainability*, 15(15), 11631. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151511631>
- Boohene, R., Gyimah, R. A., & Osei, M. B. (2020). Social capital and SME performance: The moderating role of emotional intelligence. *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*, 12(1), 79-99. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEEE-10-2018-0103>
- Capolupo, N., Virglerova, Z., Rosa, A., et al. (2024). The relationship between biases and entrepreneurial decision-making: Evidence from Italian and Czech SMEs. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 20, 3323-3348. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-024-00983-5>
- Carnevale, J. B., & Hatak, I. (2020). Employee adjustment and well-being in the era of COVID-19: Implications for human resource management. *Journal of Business Research*, 116, 183-187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.05.037>
- Chigeda, F., Ndofirepi, T. M., & Steyn, R. (2022). Continuance in organizational commitment: The role of emotional intelligence, work-life balance support, and work-related stress. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, 42(1), 22-38. <https://doi.org/10.1002/joe.22168>
- Cola, G. (2022). L'intelligenza emotiva nel contesto lavorativo. *E Risorse Umane*, 159.
- Collins, A. M., Hislop, D., & Cartwright, S. (2016). Social support in the workplace between teleworkers, office-based colleagues and supervisors. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 31(2), 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12065>
- Costin, A., Roman, A. F., & Balica, R. S. (2023). Remote work burnout, professional job stress, and employee emotional exhaustion during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1193854. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1193854>
- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches: A crash course in statistics*. Sage Publications.
- Cuéllar-Molina, D., García-Cabrera, A. M., & Déniz-Déniz, M. D. L. C. (2019). Emotional intelligence of the HR decision-maker and high-performance HR practices in SMEs. *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, 28(1), 52-89. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-10-2017-0033>
- D'Angelo, C., Negro, A., & Cassarino, I. (2024). The relationship between smart working and workplace social capital: An Italian case study on work sustainability. *Sustainability*, 16(14), 6033. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16146033>
- De Masi, D. (2020). *Smart working: La rivoluzione del lavoro intelligente*. Marsilio Editori spa.
- Di Bella, L., Katsinis, A., Lagüera-González, J., Odenthal, L., Hell, M., & Lozar, B. (2023). *Annual report on European SMEs 2022/2023*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/028705>

- Dirani, K. M., Abadi, M., Alizadeh, A., Barhate, B., Garza, R. C., Gunasekara, N., ... & Majzun, Z. (2020). Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: A response to Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(4), 380-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1780078>
- Ericson-Lidman, E., & Strandberg, G. (2007). Burnout: Co-workers' perceptions of signs preceding workmates' burnout. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 60(2), 199-208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04399.x>
- Galanti, T., Guidetti, G., Mazzei, E., Zappalà, S., & Toscano, F. (2021). Work from home during the COVID-19 outbreak: The impact on employees' remote work productivity, engagement, and stress. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 63(7), e426-e432. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000002236>
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Allen, T. D. (2011). Work-family balance: A review and extension of the literature. In J. C. Quick & L. E. Tetrick (Eds.), *Handbook of occupational health psychology* (pp. 165-183). American Psychological Association.
- Inegbedion, H. E. (2024). Work-life balance and employee commitment: Mediating effect of job satisfaction. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1349555. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1349555>
- Ipsen, C., van Veldhoven, M., Kirchner, K., & Hansen, J. P. (2021). Six key advantages and disadvantages of working from home in Europe during COVID-19. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(4), 1826. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041826>
- Iqbal, S., Suh, J., Czerwinski, M., Mark, G., & Teevan, J. (2020). Remote work and well-being. *The New Future of Work Online Symposium*. Retrieved from <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/publication/remote-work-and-well-being/>
- Irfan, M., Khalid, R. A., Kaka Khel, S. S. U. H., Maqsoom, A., & Sherani, I. K. (2023). Impact of work-life balance with the role of organizational support and job burnout on project performance. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, 30(1), 154-171. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ECAM-01-2022-0061>
- Jaafar, N. A., & Rahim, R. A. (2022). Telecommuting and employee productivity: Mediating role of work-family conflict and autonomy. *Proceedings*, 82(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2022082001>
- Jöreskog, K. G. (1973). Analysis of covariance structures. In P. R. Krishnaiah (Ed.), *Multivariate analysis-III* (pp. 263-285). Academic Press.
- Joyce, A. T., Latif, H. A., Rahaman, M. M., & Saha, H. (2021). The impacts of emotional intelligence on individual performance and work-life balance: A conceptual exploration. *Journal of Academic Research in Accounting, Finance and Management Sciences*, 11(11), 801-812.
- Karia, N. (2021). A comparative benchmark model for SMEs: Viable entrepreneur emotional intelligence. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 28(3), 813-829. <https://doi.org/10.1108/BIJ-06-2020-0291>
- Koopmans, L., Bernaards, C. M., Hildebrandt, V. H., Van Buuren, S., Van der Beek, A. J., & De Vet, H. C. (2014). Improving the individual work performance questionnaire using Rasch analysis. *Journal of Applied Measurement*, 15(2), 160-175.
- Lamane-Harim, J., Cegarra-Leiva, D., & Sánchez-Vidal, M. E. (2023). Work-life balance supportive culture: A way to retain employees in Spanish SMEs. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34(10), 2074-2106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2022.2090244>
- Landry, L. (2019). Why emotional intelligence is important in leadership. *Harvard Business School Online*. Retrieved from <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/emotional-intelligence-in-leadership>
- Lubis, Y., Lubis, F. R. A., Syaifuddin, S., & Nasib, N. (2023). The role of motivation in moderating the impact of emotional intelligence, work-life balance, leadership, and work ethic on employee performance. *Society*, 11(2), 665-686.
- Majeed, N., & Jamshed, S. (2021). Nursing turnover intentions: The role of leader emotional intelligence and team culture. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 29(2), 229-239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.13144>

- Marseno, W. A., & Muafi, M. (2021). The effects of work-life balance and emotional intelligence on organizational commitment mediated by work engagement. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy*, 3(2), 1-15.
- Mutebi, N., & Hobbs, A. (2022). The impact of remote and hybrid working on workers and organisations. *UK Parliament POSTbrief*, 49.
- Nanda, M., & Randhawa, G. (2020). Emotional intelligence, work-life balance, and work-related well-being: A proposed mediation model. *Colombo Business Journal*, 11(2), 1-23.
- Nathaya, A. D., Hidayat, N., & Dalimunthe, S. (2022). The effect of emotional intelligence with work-life balance and burnout on job satisfaction. *Journal of Business and Behavioural Entrepreneurship*, 6(1), 21-35.
- Occhiocupo, G., & Pedone, A. (2023). L'impatto dello smart working sui processi di reskilling e upskilling nel lavoro privato e pubblico: Primi elementi di analisi. *Economia & Lavoro*, 10(1), 83-102.
- Palumbo, R. (2020). Let me go to the office! An investigation into the side effects of working from home on work-life balance. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 33(6/7), 771-790. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-06-2020-0150>
- Palumbo, R., & Pellegrini, M. (2020). Lo smartworking e la contaminazione fra lavoro e vita privata: Implicazioni e spunti manageriali. In *Tempi di vita e di lavoro nel rapporto tra legge e contrattazione collettiva*. Collana Quaderni Fondazione Vigorelli.
- Palumbo, R. (2022). Involved at work and disinvolved out of work: Unraveling the implications of involvement on accountants' work-life balance. *Management Decision*, 61(13), 26-53. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-01-2022-0012>
- Palumbo, R., Flamini, G., Gnan, L., Pellegrini, M. M., Petrolo, D., & Fakhar Manesh, M. (2022). Disentangling the implications of teleworking on work-life balance: A serial mediation analysis through motivation and satisfaction. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 9(1), 68-88. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOEPP-01-2022-0007>
- Ringle, C. M., Wende, S., & Becker, J.-M. (2022). *SmartPLS 4*. Oststeinbek: SmartPLS. Retrieved from <https://www.smartpls.com>
- Roberto, R., Penna, M., Felici, B., & Rao, M. (2023). Smart working and flexible work arrangements: Opportunities and risks for sustainable communities. In *Intelligent Environments* (pp. 243-283). North-Holland.
- Sarti, D., & Torre, T. (2017). Is smart working a win-win solution? First evidence from the field. *Well-being at and through Work*, 9, 231.
- Sharma, S., Aljapurkar, A., Purandhare, S., & Joshi, M. (2023). Emotional intelligence in HR. *Prayukti - Journal of Management Applications*, 3(2), 105-118.
- Shirmohammadi, M., Au, W. C., & Beigi, M. (2022). Remote work and work-life balance: Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and suggestions for HRD practitioners. *Human Resource Development International*, 25(2), 163-181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2022.2047110>
- Shoshan, H., & Wehrt, W. (2022). Understanding "Zoom fatigue": A mixed-method approach. *Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 827-852. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12374>
- Toscano, F., & Zappalà, S. (2020). Smart working in Italia: Origine, diffusione e possibili esiti. *Psicologia Sociale*, 15(2), 203-223.
- Van Dick, R., Baethge, A., & Junker, N. M. (2024). Implications of remote work on employee well-being and health. *Frontiers in Organizational Psychology*, 2, 1498944. <https://doi.org/10.3389/forgp.2024.1498944>
- Van Rheede, F. (2023). *A study of how digital inequality impacts remote work: Perception of Information Technology professionals in the Cape Town, South African public sector* (Doctoral dissertation). National College of Ireland.
- Wold, H. (1982). Soft modeling: The basic design and some extensions. In K. G. Jöreskog & H. Wold (Eds.), *Systems under indirect observations: Part II* (pp. 1-54). North-Holland.
- Wold, H. (1985). Partial least squares. In S. Kotz & N. L. Johnson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of statistical sciences* (pp. 581-591). Wiley.

Xavier, H. B., de Barros Sampaio, S. C., Falcão Sobral, M. F., & Cormican, K. (2024). From the table to the sofa: The remote work revolution in a context of crises and its consequences on work attitudes and behaviors. *Education and Information Technologies*, 1-40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-024-12444-1>

Notes

Note 1. Polytechnic University of Milan Observatory. Available online at: <https://www.osservatori.net/smart-working/comunicato-smart-working-italia-numeri-trend/>

Note 2. Source: <https://lab24.ilsole24ore.com/operai-specializzati-digitali-richiesti-pmi/>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).