WORK-LIFE BALANCE AMONG PRE-PANDEMIC REMOTE WORKERS: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SELF-EFFICACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract*: This research aims to examine the effect of emotional intelligence on work-life balance, mediated by self-efficacy, among pre-pandemic remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the potential challenges in balancing work and personal life, the study focused on emotional intelligence and work-life balance among pre-pandemic remote workers, with self-efficacy being a mediator. Primary data was collected through purposive sampling by distributing self-administered questionnaires among 150 pre-pandemic remote workers. The findings of this study indicated that emotional intelligence had a significantly positive effect on work-life balance, with self-efficacy serving as a mediator among pre-pandemic remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence (self-awareness, empathy and social skills) had a significant positive effect on work-life balance, mediated by self-efficacy among pre-pandemic remote workers. The implications of this research are discussed.*

Keywords*: work-life balance, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, pre-pandemic remote working*

Introduction

The enforcement of the Malaysian Movement Control Order (MCO) left pre-pandemic remote workers with no alternative and minimal time to adapt to remote working arrangements during the pandemic (Mumin, 2020). Sudden changes and the widespread practice of remote working were triggered by restrictions implemented worldwide in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ozimek, 2020). Working under the same roof with other family members, alongside limited access to work resources and the blurred boundaries between work and family matters, proved to be difficult. Balancing careers and personal life was a challenge for many remote workers. Previously, remote workers were highlighted as having faced potential obstacles due to conflicts arising from the lack of separation between work and personal life, low motivation, increased exposure to potential distractions, an inability to engage in collaboration, unpaid overtime, and long working hours (Song & Gao, 2018). Remote working raised work intensity and interfered with work-home boundaries, negatively impacting remote workers' well-being and increasing stress levels (Eurofound & ILO, 2017). Indeed, remote working significantly affected employees' work-life balance (Muralidhar et al., 2020). Work-life balance, both before and during the pandemic, had become a major issue in Malaysia, as the majority of workers appeared to experience higher levels of stress (AIA Vitality, 2019; Noranee et al., 2022). Furthermore, previous studies demonstrated that one of the most challenging aspects of remote working was maintaining work-life balance (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Palumbo, 2020).

From an Islamic perspective, light was shed on a more comprehensive approach that aimed to explain how a person could generally attain happiness. In this conceptual framework, both evidence from the Al-Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were highlighted, and a theoretical framework was proposed. In the Al-Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), humans were urged to maintain a balance between work and life. For example, in Surah Al-Qasas, verse 77, Allah (S.W.T) said:

"But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and (yet), don't forget your share of the world, and do good as Allah has done good to you, and desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters".

Instead, Muslims were encouraged to engage with and participate in the world while worshipping Allah and adhering to His commandments. Muslims were expected to strive for a balanced approach between worldly responsibilities and devotion to their Lord. This represented the Islamic understanding of the true purpose of life. In order to maintain human work-life balance, a certain level of intelligence was required, particularly in managing daily life. There are five aspects of emotional intelligence and their skills from the perspective of the Al-Quran, which are religious, psychological, social, environmental and divine laws (Zekkoub et al., 2023). The Quran cultivated a level of intelligence that, in the last century, attracted considerable interest among researchers and educational psychologists worldwide, particularly through what later became known as emotional intelligence (Zekkoub et al., 2023).

 Emotional intelligence helped mitigate the negative impact of remote working on work-life balance by enabling individuals to better manage stress, navigate emotional challenges, and establish healthier boundaries between work and personal life. Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence were better equipped to handle the challenges associated with remote work, leading to improved work-life balance (Scherer, 2022). According to Hilali and Khan

(2000), the Al-Quran, in Surah Al-Imran verse 200, encouraged patience in overcoming stress, anxiety, and frustration:

"Oh believers! Patiently endure, persevere, stand on guard and be mindful of Allah, so you may be successful".

Therefore, emotions play an important role in human's life because it is used to manage negative emotions as well as establish friendships with other individuals (Ramli & Syed Salim, 2020). Apart from time, energy, personal needs and the need of those who provide profits, Naz et al., (2021) asserted that work-life balance also refers to an employees' ability and capacity to maintain emotional balance. In the context of remote working, although one might experience different aspects of life, work and family matters should be managed equally based on their priorities by using emotional quotient (Madan & Raja, 2019). Another personal resource that was studied in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic was emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence served as a protective factor of well-being. Specifically, it was found to be a predictor of psychological well-being, enabling healthier coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic by reducing emotional distress (Alvarez, 2021).

Problem Statement

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, researches on work-life balance, through an important topic, were often studied in the context of traditional office settings (Chatra & Fahmy, 2018; Dousin, 2017; Khairunneezam et al., 2017). However, there are limited studies conducted on work-life balance in the context of remote working. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the acceleration of remote working had significantly impacted work-life balance. However, it is unclear whether work-life balance can be enhanced by working remotely (Bellman et al., 2020). Among the negative effects of remote working highlighted by earlier researches, especially when it is an enforced remote working, the specialized literature points to increased stress, anxiety problems, technology exhaustion, burnout symptoms and consequently lower job satisfaction, work-life balance and risks of mental health conditions (Molino et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2022). Malaysia was ranked second worst of 60 countries in terms of work-life balance by the Remote Global Life-Work Balance Index on March 2023 (HR Asia, 2024). Furthermore, there are still lack of studies on work-life balance in Malaysia (Hassan & Teng, 2017) especially in the context of remote working prior the pandemic.

According to the Malaysian Health Minister, Khairy Jamaluddin, suicide cases have increased tremendously in Malaysia in 2021; with an increase of 81% or 1142 suicide cases in 2021 compared to 631 cases in 2020 (The Star, 28 Sep 2022). This alarming issue is due to work matters like stress at work because of poor work-life balance and failure to regulate emotional intelligence could be reason for these issues (Nair et al., 2023). Consequently, work-life balance conflict leads to a decrease of the well-being of employees and increased psychological stress (Fotiadis et al., 2019). The blurring perimeter of physical and organizational boundaries between work and home can also negatively impact an individual's mental (i.e., stress and depression) and physical health (i.e. coronary heart disease) due to extended working hours, lack of or unclear delineation between work and home and limited support from organisations (Oakman et al., 2020). In Malaysia, employees reported working an average of 40.8 hours per week, with many experiencing extended working hours, heavy workloads, and inadequate rest. Such conditions contribute to poor work-life balance and heightened emotional stress (The Sun, 2024). Thus, the failure to secure a work-life balance can lead to severe emotional stress and

poor workplace productivity as the imbalance of work and life can contribute to emotional exhaustion (Fauziah et al., 2024).

The literature on emotional intelligence is vast but comprehensive study of emotional intelligence and its consequences are largely missing (Nanda & Randhawa, 2020). The concern is that after reviewing the extensive literature, various studies were found but segregating emotional intelligence and work-life balance separately (Vasumathi et al., 2019). However, there are very limited studies that can relate it to remote working as well as literature in the field of remote working, which is relatively low and empirical investigations show inconsistent result (Bellman & Hubler, 2020). To date, limited studies have explored how pre-pandemic remote workers utilized emotional intelligence to manage work-life balance during the COVID-19 crisis. Compared to occasional remote working under normal circumstances, remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic is far more challenging as it is mandatory, rather than voluntary and full-time, part-time or occasional (Cartmill, 2020). To navigate such circumstances successfully, individuals require self-efficacy, as belief in one's own ability is essential for achieving success (Jaafar et al., 2016). From an Islamic perspective, self-efficacy is deeply connected to believe. The concept of belief in Islam is faith (*iman*). Faith (*iman*) literally means to affirm, believe, and acknowledge certain truths and acts (Jaafar et al., 2016). Hence, self-efficacy not only enables individuals to manage professional and personal demands effectively but also ensures that this balance is maintained in harmony with faith, thereby aligning worldly achievement with spiritual accountability. Thus, this study contributes novelty by examining self-efficacy as a mediating variable between emotional intelligence and work-life balance in the Malaysian remote work context. While existing literature has largely explored these constructs separately, limited research has examined how self-efficacy explains the mechanism linking emotional intelligence to work-life balance among pre-pandemic remote workers. This study therefore provides new empirical insights into the psychological resources that support employee well-being in the evolving landscape of remote work. In order to explore the challenges in achieving work-life balance among pre-pandemic remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, a concern is raised; can emotional intelligence and self-efficacy bridge the gap?

Thus, this study was filled the gaps by investigate remote worker's emotional intelligence and self-efficacy to achieve work-life balance due to the probability of facing challenges as well as dealing with sudden shift in remote working because of the COVID-19 pandemic might make a difference results (ILO, 2020). This research attempts to shows the link between emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and work- life balance. Furthermore, there are limited studies that examine these constructs in relation to remote working in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Previous research has not been able to address this issue due to the lack of thorough investigations in Malaysia's distinct cultural and organizational environment (Nair et al., 2023). In other words, this gap has become the focus of interest in this study as the researcher needs to address the problems by investigating the mediating effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between emotional intelligence and work-life balance among remote workers in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The purpose of this paper is to fill a critical gap in the present literature and provides insight into the present study. Thus, the main objective of this research is to discover the relationship between emotional intelligence and the work-life balance among pre-pandemic remote workers in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, with the mediating effect of self-efficacy.

Literature Review

The Concept of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize our own and others' feelings, motivate ourselves and manage emotions successfully in ourselves and in our relationships (Goleman, 1998, p. 317). The definitions of emotional intelligence vary and include behaviours associated with information processing, experiential learning, environmental adaptation, thought and reasoning patterns (Matthews et al., 2002; American Psychological Association (APA), 2007). Emotional intelligence could be referred to as the possession of self-knowledge skills and individuals' knowledge of their own identity, thoughts, emotions, feelings and personal traits. In fact, emotional intelligence serves as a skill that affects a person's ability to learn, develop and have a positive feeling about life (Barkhordari et al., 2016). Emotional intelligence encompasses non-cognitive capacities, skills and competencies that help people to manage environmental demands and pressure (Goleman, 1997). Goleman describes emotional intelligence as the capacity to identify and understand both our own emotions and those of others, to self-motivate, and to effectively manage emotions in order to achieve personal well-being and build healthy relationships (Aamir, 2023; Drigas & Papoutsi, 2018).

From the Islamic perspective, successful and positive interaction relies on emotional understanding. In this regard, the Prophet S.A.W. encourages every Muslim to understand the notion of emotional awareness. The Prophet S.A.W. was able to grasp not only his own emotions but also the emotions of others, in which he was also able to influence the emotional condition of those around him. He knew how to navigate people's emotions after reflecting on and managing his own to achieve the desired results (Abdullah, 2022). In recent years, emotional intelligence has gained significant attention within Muslim academic circles. Emotional intelligence is deeply rooted in one's relationship with Allah, cultivated through the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), sincere repentance, devotion in worship, the performance of righteous deeds, and the avoidance of sinful acts. Such practices draw upon Divine guidance, enabling the believer to nurture a pure and contented heart that reflects emotional balance and spiritual maturity (Nadvi & Junaid, 2022).

Remote Working during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The remote work amid the COVID-19 pandemic has also gained the attention of researchers. The COVID-19 pandemic on remote working has significantly influenced research on remote working, as it prompts numerous studies to explore its effects on employees and organizations (Baakeel, 2021; Vincenzi et al., 2022; Kahkonen, 2023). Working remotely is among the initiatives proposed for the sake of realising work-life balance. Working remotely is seen as a potential solution to many contemporary problems from congestion to global warming and work-life balance (Convery et al., 2024; Hald-Mortensen, 2024; Jin & Liu, 2024; Shukla, 2025; Wu et al., 2024). Remote work has shifted from a voluntary and occasional practice to a mandatory arrangement during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating new challenges for employees (Cartmill, 2020).

A study by Abdullah et al. (2020) highlighted that remote working reduces opportunities for social networking and limits non-verbal communication among colleagues, thereby disrupting work-life balance. Costin et al. (2023) found that remote work intensified tensions related to work-life balance, leading to increased burnout and emotional exhaustion among employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies had identifies key stressors for remote

workers during COVID-19 which is, family-work conflict and social isolation (Elisabetta et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2022; Moran, 2023). In addition, remote working during COVID-19 is strongly associated with lower quality of life and higher stress, organizational climate and digital platform use (Moran, 2023). This is supported by Singh et al. (2022) that high usage of digital platforms increased technology exhaustion and reduced subjective wellbeing. Employees who had experience with remote work before the pandemic were better able to cope with the stress of using digital platforms (Singh et al., 2022). Previous studies found that moderate frequencies of working from home several times a month or week are less harmful, but fully remote work tends to increase stress and negatively affect health (Rodriguez-Modrono, 2023). In addition, poor home environments such as poor light, noise and inadequate workspace are significantly negatively impacted mental health among remote workers (Khalid et al., 2022). Thus, the raises concerns that remote work arrangements expose employees to stressors related to isolation, digital overload, and organizational climate aspects impacting mental wellbeing (Abdul Aziz et al., 2024).

Digital Stress and Technostress among Remote Workers

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of digital and information and communication technologies (ICTs), and consequently remote working, has increased substantially (Battisti et al., 2022; Mariani et al., 20203; Matli & Wamba, 2023). The forced transition to remote work during the pandemic led to increased use of digital platforms, resulting in technostress among employees. It discusses the challenges posed by excessive digital platform use for both work and personal activities (Kardova & Hirschprung, 2023). People who had experience with remote working prior to the pandemic handled this better (Singh et al., 2022). Technostress comprises several components, including techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty (Mendiratta, 2024). In remote work settings, these factors are exacerbated by the lack of physical separation between professional and personal life. This blurring of boundaries contributes to elevated technostress, which in turn negatively affects employee well-being (Mendiratta, 2024; Singh et al., 2022).

Previous studies reveal that for the majority of workers (55% of the sample), remote working had a negative and significant economic-financial impact (Battisti et al., 2022). This was primarily due to additional costs associated with digital technologies and platforms such as personal computers, internet connections, licenses for instant communication platforms, and cloud storage as well as higher utility expenses (Battisti et al., 2022). It was found that techno-stressors can increased both burnout and psychological symptoms such as depressive mood and anxiety among remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Consiglio et al., 2023; Davila Moran, 2023). Factors like digital platform overload, organizational climate and lack of support featured repeatedly as stressors leading to poorer psychological health (Farmania et al., 2022; Moran, 2023). Techno-stressors like techno-overload, techno-complexity, uncertain tech demands increase work overload, conflict with family life, and reduce work engagement (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023). On the other hand, the previous study also highlights the impact of technostress on the work-family interface, whereby the intrusion of work into personal time, facilitated by technology, disrupts the work-life balance (Mendiratta, 2024).

Remote Working and Work-life Balance during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Before COVID-19, remote working was largely a voluntary arrangement adopted by selected employees in knowledge-based industries, freelancers, or those in senior positions. These

workers often possessed the necessary digital skills, home-office setups, and self-regulation strategies that supported healthy work-life boundaries (Wang et al., 2021). Remote work was viewed as a privilege, offering greater autonomy, flexibility, and reduced commuting stress, which in turn contributed to improved work-life balance (Allen et al., 2015).

Remote working possesses both negative and positive influence on work-life balance of the employees (Putri & Amran, 2020). Working remotely has been suggested to improve work-life balance in several studies (Grant et al., 2019; Purwanto et al., 2020; Afrianty et al., 2021). Besides, working remotely allows employees to achieve a work-life balance while at the same time supporting organisations in accomplishing tasks while reducing the danger of a COVID-19 outbreak (Abiddin et al., 2022; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Remote work enhances flexibility for employees, allowing them to better manage their professional and personal roles, which contributes to improved work–life balance and reduced stress (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Wang et al., 2021). Teleworking, in the context of remote working is able to improve job performance, promotes work-life balance, control stress levels and decrease turnover intentions of an employee (Contreras et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2015). Prim & Balraj (2024) explored that those with prior remote experience consistently reported better work-life balance during the pandemic lockdowns compared to post-pandemic remote workers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the dynamics shifted significantly. While pre-pandemic remote workers already had experience in balancing professional and personal responsibilities, the crisis introduced new challenges. Mandatory lockdowns blurred home and work boundaries further, and increased family demands (such as caregiving and homeschooling) placed additional pressure on employees (Alfano et al., 2023; Carillo et al., 2021). Even experienced remote workers faced role overload and digital fatigue, though to a lesser degree than first-time remote workers, as they had already cultivated coping mechanisms such as boundary management, time discipline, and digital literacy (Ipsen et al., 2021). Some studies showed that there is no statistically significant relationship between remote working and work-life balance (Vaidya et al., 2023). In this sense, work-life balance could be enhanced or worsened depending on one's permeability of work and life. Work-life conflicts and work-life balance are more prevalent among remote workers who have longer working hours per week (Song & Gao, 2018). Excessive working hours may affect the immediate health of individuals and their family and could affect future health due to the spillover effects on overall quality of life (Tan et al., 2024).

Work-life balance is an important aspect to be discussed and explored is a crucial aspect in today's working environment. During the pandemic, employees are facing issues in managing their work and life matters by working remotely. In order to solve this issue, previous studies have explored the area of emotional intelligence that encompasses self, social skills and social awareness of an individual. It is possible to manage work-life balance with the presence of emotional intelligence (Thorat & Gadkari, 2021). Numerous studies suggested that it is less likely for individuals with excellent emotional intelligence to experience work-family conflict, but are able to achieve better work-life balance (Shylaja & Prasad, 2017; Vernia & Senen, 2021). The role of emotional intelligence is important in handling workers' emotions and others. Thus, emotional intelligence helps employees to manage their emotions effectively, which helps them to cope with challenges better and obtain support from others whenever needed (Shylaja & Prasad, 2017; Thorat & Gadkari, 2023).

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Emotional Intelligence and Work-life Balance

Emotional intelligence is associated with the ability to effectively navigate interpersonal challenges, resolve conflicts, regulate aggressive tendencies and address work related obstacles (Antonopoulou, 2024). Thus, Goleman (1998) introduced a model that elucidated the five constructs of emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy and social skills which form a suitable model to cultivate work-life balance (Angel & Krishnapriya, 2018; Antonopoulou et al., 2021; Antonopoulou et al., 2022). Building on Goleman's model, this section examines how each emotional intelligence competency supports employees in maintaining balance between professional and personal roles, particularly in the context of remote work. Goleman's model of emotional intelligence includes not just abilities but also personality traits of a person such as empathy and motivation (Arfara et al., 2018). It significantly contributes to the process of fostering healthy interpersonal relationships as it facilitates effective communication, promotes empathy towards others and cultivates stronger interpersonal bonds (Antonopoulou, 2024). For emotions to be managed well, an individual is required to balance career and personal life.

Emotional intelligence significantly contributes to the realization of better work-life balance by improving stress management skills, enhancing productivity, establishing workplace connections as well as intensifying job satisfaction. High emotional intelligence is more likely to establish clear boundaries between work and personal life, leading to healthier balance (Susanti et al., 2024). The research by Ghevira & Trinda (2022) highlights the positive relationship between work-life balance and emotional needs, which portrays that those who possess high emotional intelligence are able to obtain better work-life balance as they are better equipped with the skills to maintain interpersonal connection, handle stress, adapt to changes and communicate effectively. Research proposes that government employees with high emotional intelligence could also handle their stress and emotions more efficiently that leads to a healthier equilibrium between their personal and professional matters.

Previous study of Nadaraja and Harshani (2023), on the other hand, examine the impact of emotional intelligence on work-life balance of Clinical, Non-Executive level employees in ABC Hospital (Pvt) Limited, Sri Lanka. The findings portrayed that a statistically substantial relationship between emotional intelligence and work-life balance among non-executive level workers. Moreover, the previous study had discovered the influence of emotional intelligence on among IT professionals. The findings reported a positive strong relationship between emotional intelligence and work-life balance. As far as the perception on work-life balance based on gender is concerned, it was discovered that a statistically significant difference due to gender exists (Dangwal, 2020). It infers that perception is different among females and males.

To add, Naz et al., (2021) study on the relationship between emotional intelligence and work-life balance among working women at university level. It is found that majority of them possess strong emotional intelligence and work-life balance in Pakistan. The majority of working women were found to have a strong sense of emotional intelligence and high work-life balance. It is discovered that a significant positive correlation exists between emotional intelligence and work-life balance among the Pakistani women. Prior researches have concluded the same as they scrutinized the relationship between emotional intelligence and their success in striking

work-life balance (Bakir, 2018; Koubova & Buchko, 2013; Shylaja & Prasad, 2017; Thorat & Dharwadkar, 2016).

Among the five dimensions of emotional intelligence, self-awareness was found to be a significant on work-life balance, which demonstrates how self-awareness has the ability to help both the work and life (Bakir, 2019; Dangwal, 2020; Nadaraja & Harshani, 2023; Praya et al. 2019; Purushottamashtikar & Manoharan, 2024; Sembiring et al., 2024; Shylaja & Prasad, 2017; Sutton et al., 2015). Moreover, self-regulation was found to be particularly influential in improving work-life balance (Dangwal, 2020; Malik et al., 2019; Purushottamashtikar & Manoharan, 2024; Sembiring et al., 2024). Earlier studies stated that self-motivation is among the primary indicators of emotional intelligence that determines work-life balance (Dangwal, 2020; Hermosilla & Tan, 2023; Madan & Raja, 2019; Malik et al., 2019; Purushottamashtikar & Manoharan, 2024; Sembiring et al., 2024; Shylaja & Prasad, 2017). The previous study showed that the sub-dimension of emotional intelligence, which is empathy, was positively and significantly correlated with work-life balance (Bakir, 2018; Madan & Raja, 2019; Malik et al., 2019; Sembiring et al., 2024; Seo et al., 2020; Shylaja & Prasad, 2017). Meanwhile, several studies mentioned a crucial influences of social skills on work-life balance (Bakir, 2018; Sembiring et al., 2024). Findings revealed that the dimensions of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, and social skills, showed a significant positive relationship on work-life balance. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1 : Emotional intelligence has a significant effect on work-life balance
 H1a : Self-awareness has a significant effect on work-life balance
 H1b : Self-regulation has a significant effect on work-life balance
 H1c : Self-motivation has a significant effect on work-life balance
 H1d : Empathy has a significant effect on work-life balance
 H1e : Social skills has a significant effect on work-life balance

Emotional Intelligence and Self-Efficacy

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy influences the ways individuals think, behave and feel. Specifically, it could be defined as one's belief that his or her own abilities or the likelihood of successfully completing a task will result in a positive outcome (Wong & Yang, 2020). Human behaviours is influenced by self-influence mechanisms, among which self-efficacy is the most significant (Sheikhbardsiri et al., 2016). Individuals with lower levels of emotional intelligence tend to exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy, as they may struggle to regulate emotions, manage stress, and maintain confidence in their abilities (Adeyemo, 2007; Salami, 2010). Individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy are those who are willing to take risks and make sacrifices in order to complete the tasks entrusted to them. Although they may face failure, criticism, or loss, their primary focus lies not on these possibilities but on the actions and strategies necessary to achieve success. Such individuals are prepared to sacrifice time, energy, and resources because they firmly believe that every hardship will eventually be rewarded with success (Jaafar et al., 2016).

High level of self-efficacy and good emotional intelligence create greater confidence in difficult situations, particularly when employees work from home. Several studies discovered a positive relationship between self-efficacy and emotional intelligence among junior and senior foreign language educators (Babanovic, 2020; Wang & Wang, 2022). This reflected the theoretical expectation of the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy emotional intelligence. This is

line with Gharetepeh et al., (2016) who found out the same. Sun and Lyu (2022) also investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and emotional intelligence which involved role of coping styles as the mediating effect among tertiary students. The results of study indicated that self-efficacy was positively correlated with emotional intelligence. Moreover, Wen et al., (2020) discovered a strong positive relationship between emotional intelligence and entrepreneurial self-efficacy, suggesting that emotional intelligence is one of the variables that influence entrepreneurial self-efficacy. People who possess excellent emotional intelligence tend to have a higher level of entrepreneurial self-efficacy, as a result excellent self-management as well as self-perception.

Previous studies indicated that dimensions of emotional intelligence had a significant effect on self-efficacy. In the context of education, teachers' self-efficacy was positively predicted by dimensions of emotional self-awareness, interpersonal relations, and problem-solving among English teachers in Mashhad institutes (Amirian, 2016). Furthermore, several studies discovered that dimensions of emotional self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving are important predictors of teacher self-efficacy (Bobanovic, 2020; Gharetepeh et al., 2016). Self-regulation is one of the factors that influences the development of self-efficacy (Fathi et al., 2021; Fathi & Derakhsan, 2019). Individuals who reach high levels in various measures of emotional intelligence's trait are more likely to have high levels of self-efficacy regarding emotion-related behaviours, hence, more proficient at regulating and managing feelings as well as emotions in others and themselves (O'Connor et al., 2019). Previous study highlighted that self-motivation within emotional intelligence contributes to enhanced self-efficacy (Atik et al., 2024; Gharetepeh et al., 2016; Nurwendah & Suyanto, 2019; Wasni et al., 2024). Some studies have showed the relationship between social awareness (empathy) and self-efficacy (Amirian, 2016; Kim, 2018). Other elements, such as a person's social skills could contributes to the perception of self-efficacy (Al-Mehsin, 2017; Kheirkhah, 2020; Salavera et al., 2017; Sarani et al., 2020; Spinelli, 2018; Yousuf, 2013). Previous studies revealed that the dimensions of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, and social skills, showed a significant positive relationship on self-efficacy. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2 : Emotional intelligence has a significant effect on self-efficacy
   H2a : Self-awareness has a significant effect on self-efficacy
   H2b : Self-regulation has a significant effect on self-efficacy
   H2c : Self-motivation has a significant effect on self-efficacy
   H2d : Empathy has a significant effect on self-efficacy
   H2e : Social skills has a significant effect on self-efficacy

Self-Efficacy on Work-life Balance

People who have greater self-efficacy are often more assured of their own ability to perform challenging tasks (Chan et al., 2017). They believe in their ability to allocate their time properly for their family and career as well as their ability to deal with any arising issues. Similarly, people who possess greater self-efficacy tend to be satisfied and happy with both their work and lives (Situmarong & Wijayanti, 2017). This implies that there is a better work-family balance for people with high levels of self-efficacy. This may be induced by the confidence of employees in their ability to balance between their job demands and the demands of non-work-related matters, thereby gaining a greater sense of self-efficacy in managing their lives and employment.

Situmarong & Wijayanti (2017) discovered the influence of self-efficacy and gender on work-family balance among employees working in Yogyakarta. The study found that self-efficacy was positively correlated to work-family balance. There is a correlation between self-efficacy and work-family balance among female employees but it is reported that self-efficacy has no effect on work-family balance in male employees. Similarly, Panatik and Badri (2020) revealed the positive influence of self-efficacy to further improve work-life balance condition. Based on the finding, those who have greater self-efficacy have more positive work and life experiences in the form of high work-family enrichment. Kotteswaran & Kala (2018) found that higher occupational self-efficacy significantly improved perceived work-life balance among women entrepreneurs in Vellore, India. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Self-efficacy has a significant effect on work-life balance

Emotional Intelligence and Work-life Balance Mediated by Self-Efficacy
While emotional intelligence directly influences work-life balance, self-efficacy defined as one's belief in their ability to accomplish tasks successfully (Bandura, 1977) has been identified as a critical mediator in this study. A person who possesses greater emotional intelligence promotes a healthier development of self-efficacy. Furthermore, the development of work-life balance is aided by self-efficacy (Situmarong & Wijayanti, 2017). A study on the impact of self-efficacy on work-life balance found that having greater self-efficacy would boost work-life balance (Seong, 2016). In general, greater self-efficacy indicates confidence, making self-efficacy a crucial factor. These findings imply that emotional intelligence alone is not sufficient, rather, its positive influence on work-life balance is strengthened when employees also possess confidence in their own capabilities.

Several empirical studies support this mediating variable. Previous studies have shown the relationship between other variables with the mediating effect of self-efficacy. For example, Zhu et al. (2016) found that self-efficacy is able to mediate the association between emotional intelligence and communication skills. Moreover, self-efficacy substantially mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and organizational commitment, which support the self-efficacy as mediator (Hameli & Ordun 2022). Scholars also argue that without the presence of self-efficacy, the potential of emotional intelligence to enhance work-life balance may be limited, as employees may recognize emotions but lack the confidence to act on that awareness effectively. In this context, self-efficacy was not identified as the sole mediator between emotional intelligence and work-life balance, as other potential variables may also serve a mediating role in this relationship. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, a comprehensive investigation of the interconnections among these three constructs has yet to be fully established in existing literature.

In relation to the dimensions of emotional intelligence, prior studies have highlighted that self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills significantly influence self-efficacy (Goroshit & Hen, 2016; Mehsin, 2017; Amirian, 2016; Bobanovic, 2020; Wen et al., 2020) as well as work-life balance (Alsemgeest et al., 2017; Shylaja & Prasad, 2017; Bakir, 2018; Madan & Raja, 2019; Praya et al., 2019; Onu & Gabriel, 2020). Furthermore, earlier research has also established a direct link between self-efficacy and work-life balance (Seong, 2016; Situmarong & Wijayanti, 2017).Based on the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4 : Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and work-life balance

H4a : Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between self-awareness and work-life balance

H4b : Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between self-regulation and work-life balance

H4c : Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between self-motivation and work-life balance

H4d : Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between empathy and work-life balance

H4e : Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between social skills and work-life balance

Methodology

Research Design
This study adopts a positivist stance with a deductive research design, applying a quantitative methodology. The quantitative approach was selected as it best addresses the research objectives by enabling the collection of measurable data. Such data can be obtained through various means, with questionnaires being one of the most common tools (Boucaud, 2017). Quantitative research, rooted in positivism, relies on structured techniques such as surveys to gather and analyze numerical information (Saunders et al., 2012). This makes it suitable for examining relationships between variables and testing hypotheses using statistical methods. In addition, the deductive approach begins with the formulation of hypotheses derived from a comprehensive review of existing literature, followed by data collection and analysis to confirm or refute these hypotheses (Saunders et al., 2012).

Sampling Methods
Purposive sampling was employed in this study, as the selection criteria required participants to be engaged in remote work at the time of the survey. This approach involves deliberately identifying and selecting individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experience in the subject of interest (Creswell, 2011; Etikan et al., 2016). This method targets individuals with defined characteristics relevant to the study, thereby ensuring that the data reflects accurate accounts of remote working experiences (Hickman, 2019). This targeted approach ensures that the sample is relevant and can provide valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by employees (Tongco, 2007), particularly for pre-pandemic remote workers.

Target Population
The target population for this study consisted of individuals who had been engaged in remote work prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the data was gathered during the pandemic period, a cross-sectional research design was employed, as it involves collecting data from the population at a single point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020). The study had targeted 150 pre-pandemic remote workers in the Klang Valley area as respondents. Klang Valley is the best proxy to study urban lifestyle in Malaysia (Ong & Choon, 2017) as the aim of this study is to obtain a better understanding of the current situation of work and personal life of remote workers in the Klang Valley area.

Sample Size

The target sample size of 150 respondents was set as the minimum requirement, in line with Kline's rule of thumb, which suggests that a sample size of 100 to 200 is sufficient for analysis using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The target sample of 150 fulfils the recommended minimum sample size for sampling adequacy. This is supported by Memon et al., (2022) who asserted that a carefully selected small sample (150 and above) is more meaningful than a blindly selected large sample (300 and above). Therefore, the study had targeted 150 pre-pandemic remote workers in the Klang Valley area as respondents.

Data and Collection Methods

The researcher had approached several companies and organizations widely recognized for adopting remote working practices before the COVID-19 pandemic, using a combination of formal and informal contacts. These organizations were selected from sectors where remote working is prevalent through website and online portals, as indicated by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020). This survey was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards and guidelines. Prior to commencing data collection, ethical approval was obtained from International Islamic University Malaysia, ensuring that the research design met institutional and legal ethical requirements. To conduct the survey, the researcher sent a letter of consent outlining the study's details via email to target company and clearly stated the request to access their remote workers to take part in this survey.

Instrument Design

The questionnaire items were developed based on a comprehensive review of literature on emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and work-life balance. The measurement scales were adapted from the Emotional Intelligence Evaluation Scale, the Guide for Constructing Self-Efficacy Scale, and the Work-Life Balance Scale, ensuring the suitability of items for this survey. Specifically, the items were adopted from established studies by Brough et al. (2014b), Chan et al. (2016), Kumarasamy et al. (2015), Mehta and Singh (2013), and Rasiah et al. (2019). Descriptive analysis, factor analysis, reliability analysis and Pearson correlation were run on the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 software. Confirmatory analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM) were carried out using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) to analyse and develop data.

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive Analysis

The majority of respondents of pre-pandemic remote workers (27.3%) were respondents from the education sector. The minority of the pre-pandemic remote workers come from the entertainment sector with 0.7%. In terms of gender, 60% of pre-pandemic remote workers were female, whereas, 40% of pre-pandemic remote workers were male. As for the age, for pre-pandemic remote workers, 46.7% range between 20-30 years old, 42% range between 31-40 years old, and only 6% were 51 years old and above. The minority of respondents were between the ages of 41-50 years old (5.3%). As the marital status, 51.3% of the respondents of pre-pandemic remote workers were married, 46% were single and 2.7% were divorced. Nearly 47.3% of the respondents of pre-pandemic remote workers had no dependents who live in the same house while 37.3% of respondents had 1 to 4 dependents and 15.4% respondents had more than 5 dependents who live in the same house.
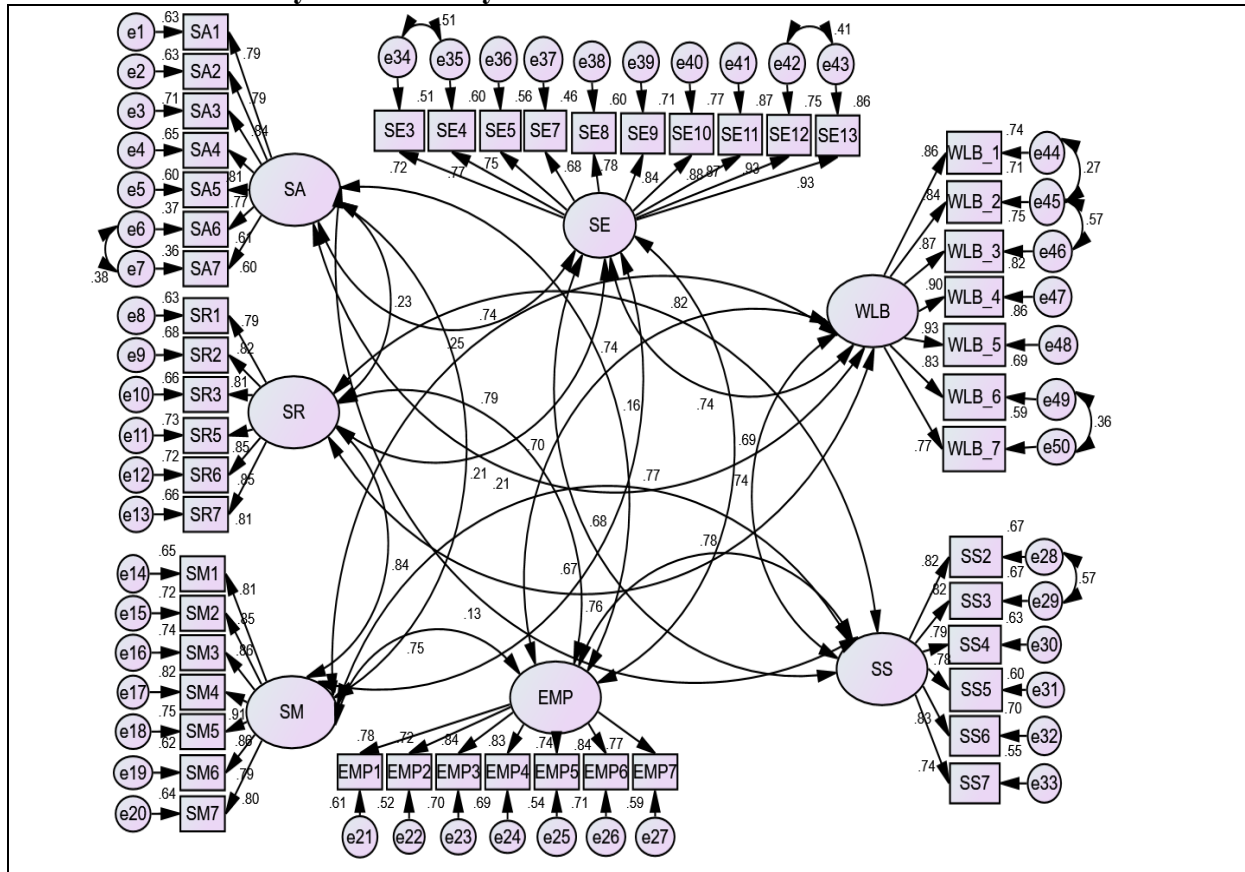
Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Figure: 1 Modified Measurement Model

For Confirmatory Factor Analysis, the acceptance results of CFI should be exceed 0.90 or better and RMSEA should be less than 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Modified measurement model above showed that normed chi square statistics for each of the latent variables (cmin/df) was 1.625, which fall below the threshold point of 5.00 (Hair et al., 2006). Importantly, CFI and RMSEA value were acceptable fit model with 0.900 and 0.065 respectively.

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Table 1: Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Constructs	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Discriminant Validity
Self-Awareness	0.60-0.84	0.839	0.749	0.865

Self-Regulation	0.79-0.85	0.893	0.822	0.907
Self-Motivation	0.79-0.91	0.899	0.840	0.917
Empathy	0.72-0.84	0.876	0.789	0.888
Social Skills	0.74-0.83	0.865	0.797	0.893
Self-Efficacy	0.68-0.93	0.941	0.892	0.944
Work-Life Balance	0.77-0.93	0.939	0.815	0.903

To confirm convergent validity, the criteria require factor loadings to exceed 0.50, the average variance extracted (AVE) to be greater than 0.50, and the composite reliability (CR) to surpass 0.60 (Hair et al., 2010). As shown in Table 1, all variables in this study met these thresholds, indicating that the data demonstrate an established convergent and discriminant validity.

Structural Equation Modelling Results

Table 2: Results of Direct Effect Test

Variables	Relationship	Variables	Estimate	S.E	C.R	*p*-value
WLB	<---	EI	0.701	0.113	6.192	***
SE	<---	EI	0.648	0.087	7.435	***
WLB	<---	SE	0.301	0.114	2.642	0.008

Notes. ***0.05 significant level

The results showed that all the research hypotheses H1, H2, H3 were positively statistically significant. The hypothesis H1 was supported. The critical ratio (C.R) indicated a critical ratio higher than 1.96 which is 6.192, and the p-value was significant (p=0.000). Thus, the results indicated that emotional intelligence (EI) positively influences work-life balance (WLB). For the positive effect of emotional intelligence (EI) on self-efficacy (SE), the hypothesis H2 was supported. The critical ratio (C.R) value indicated that it was higher than 1.96, which was 7.435 and p-value was significant (p=0.000). Consequently, the study supported Hypothesis H2, which proposed that emotional intelligence (EI) has a significant positive effect on self-efficacy (SE). Hypothesis H3 was also supported. The critical ratio (C.R = 2.642) and p-value (p = 0.008) further confirmed this relationship. Therefore, this study accepted Hypothesis H3, which suggested a significant positive effect of self-efficacy (SE) on work-life balance (WLB).

Table 3: Results of Indirect Effect Test (Main hypothesis)

Relationship	Direct effect with mediation (Beta)	Indirect effect (Beta)	*p*-value	Mediation
EI→SE→ WLB	0.656***	0.195	0.004	Partial mediation

Note. *** 0.05 significant level

Based on the bias-corrected bootstrap test results presented in Table 3 above, it was confirmed that self-efficacy (SE) value was significant for this model. The results of mediation of self-efficacy (SE) showed that it significantly and partially mediated the relationship between

emotional intelligence (EI) and work-life balance (WLB) with direct effect (B= 0.656, p= 0.000) and (mediating effect =0.195, p= 0.004). Hence, the results support H4 for this model. In this context, the mediation test was conducted in a single structural model through the bootstrapping method. The researcher had conducted the bootstrapping method using 1000 bootstrap samples and 95% of bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI), which is denoted by lower and upper bounds, excluding the value of 0 (Walters & Campbell, 2004).

Table 4: Results of Indirect Effect Test (Sub-hypothesis)

Relationship	Direct effect with mediation (Beta)	Indirect effect (Beta)	*p*-value	Mediation
SA→SE→ WLB	0.030	0.042	0.023	Full mediation
SR→SE→ WLB	0.177	0.093	0.062	No mediation
SM→SE→ WLB	0.238	0.058	0.120	No mediation
EMP→SE→ WLB	0.212	0.104	0.007	Partial mediation
SS→SE→ WLB	0.916	0.071	0.045	Partial mediation

Notes. *** 0.05 significant level

The results of the sub-hypotheses, as presented in Table 4 above, demonstrate that the mediation of self-efficacy (SE) was significantly and fully mediated the relationship between self-awareness (SA) and work-life balance (WLB) with direct effect (B= 0.030, p= 0.646) and (mediating effect =0.042, p= 0.023). Hence, the results support H4a. Conversely, self-efficacy (SE) did not significantly mediate the relationship between self-regulation (SR) and work-life balance (WLB) with direct effect (B= 0.177, p= 0.203), (mediating effect =0.093, p= 0.062). Hence, the results do not support H4b. Similarly, self-efficacy did not significantly mediated the relationship between self-motivation (SM) and work-life balance with direct effect (B= 0.238, p= 0.081) and (mediating effect =0.058, p= 0.120). Hence, the results do not support H4c. In this study, the results support self-efficacy as mediator, in which it significantly and partially mediated the relationship between empathy (EMP) and work-life balance with direct effect (B= 0.212, p= 0.003), (mediating effect =0.104, p= 0.007). Thus, the results support H4d. Meanwhile, the mediation analysis showed that it significantly and partially mediated the relationship between social skills (SS) and work-life balance (WLB) with direct effect (B= 0.196, p= 0.005) and (mediating effect =0.071, p= 0.045). Hence, the results support H4e. To conclude, this study found that only self-awareness, empathy and social skills had a significant effect on work-life balance with the presence of self-efficacy as a mediator.

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in comprehending how people interpret and perceive organizational dynamics, specifically through self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills. These components of emotional intelligence allow people to manage and recognize their own feelings, behaviours and thoughts, which in turn leads to a healthier work-life balance. Although remote working has been known for several decades, the results must be different before the COVID-19 pandemic remote working, which often voluntary and reserved for most valuable workers, compared to during the COVID-19 pandemic it was

compulsory requirement irrespective of employee preferences (Wang et al., 2021). In the context of remote work, Islam emphasizes the principle of balance (*wasatiyyah*) across professional, spiritual, family, and social obligations. This notion resonates with the study's finding that emotional intelligence significantly influences work-life balance, mediated by self-efficacy, among pre-pandemic remote workers. Self-efficacy is crucial, as an individual can only perform successfully when he or she believes in their own ability (Jaafar et al., 2016). Individuals with strong belief in their capacity to complete tasks or fullfill obligations tend to demonstrate high levels of commitment (Jaafar et al., 2016).

Based on the findings of this study, remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to emotional exhaustion among pre-pandemic remote workers, as their emotional intelligence helped prevent its occurrence. However, they faced difficulties in managing their emotions and sustaining self-motivation while working remotely during the pandemic, which affected their ability to achieve work-life balance. Thus, there are some strategies for helping employees to manage their emotional and motivate them to prevent it from affecting personal and professional life. Thus, Human Resource Development (HRD) can gain deeper insights into assessing employees' self-regulation and self-motivation in achieving work-life balance, particularly among pre-pandemic remote workers. Existing training research on remote workers has largely concentrated on stress reduction or lifestyle-related motivation to maintain well-being (Demerouti, 2023). HRD is encouraged to develop innovative strategies and training programs aimed at enhancing employee competencies, sustaining motivation, and alleviating psychological stress. Thus, organisations should conduct regular well-being training for employees who are working remotely such as mindfulness training, which can reduce emotional exhaustion, minimize self-control depletion and improve relational energy (Ng et al., 2022).

These findings might be valuable for policymakers to adopt several measures as a direct response to the pandemic. In this sense, many companies have aligned and adjusted their techniques with globalization to undertake their duty of care in ensuring that their employees are safe and healthy by adopting remote working cultures. Irrespective of the post-pandemic scenario, new policies need to be put forward to seize the potential benefits of remote working. In this regard, the findings of this study suggested the need to establish work-life balance and supportive culture, which is crucial in supporting workers' family and personal life in different contexts. Due to the post-pandemic circumstances, a clear-cut policy must be established in terms of remote working feedback while obeying the rules for physical distancing and fulfilling employees' legal obligation. Employers and Organisation Safety and Health (OSH) professionals may consider a virtual site-check to ensure that the potential health and safety hazards are assessed during remote working. Taking these steps would assist in mitigating such risks (ILO, 2020). This proactive approach strengthens organizational responsibility and contributes to sustaining productivity and health in remote working arrangements.

Limitation and Future Research
From a methodological standpoint, this study employed a quantitative research design, which limits the ability to capture an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation. There might be more noteworthy issues concerning emotional intelligence and work-life balance among pre-pandemic remote workers could be explored through qualitative approaches such as interviews, case studies, or focus group discussions. Thus, future research could employ qualitative research method as well as mixed method approaches for investigating the same phenomenon.

The data were collected exclusively from respondents in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, which the findings may not represent all Malaysian pre-pandemic remote workers. Thus, future research that covers a wide range of investigation is needed to gain broader views of different regions and cultures in Malaysia. The survey should be extended to other regions in Malaysia by using cross-regional data from various regions and cultural contexts, such as Johor Bahru, Melaka, Perak and Penang. It is strongly recommended that future studies conduct cross-regional comparisons, taking into account cultural and contextual differences that may influence remote working practices and work-life balance.

Furthermore, this study employed a cross-sectional method as the data was collected at one single time during the COVID-19 crisis. This could be considered a limitation because the situation is quite different as employees and organizations have experienced emergency remote working. Thus, a longitudinal research design would offer deeper insights into the long-term dynamics of how emotional intelligence influences work-life balance. Such an approach would be valuable in tracing the development and changes in the effects of remote working overtime and in determining whether the COVID-19 pandemic has led to substantial structural shifts in work arrangements and employee well-being.

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