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Article

Towards a Funambulist Leadership in Researchers Well-Being: Managing Equilibriums and Tensions in the Hybrid Work Era

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Abstract: The chaotic adaptation to hybrid work during the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that workers still do not know how professional dynamics function correctly in this new context. In this paper, we focus on new issues that have arisen in this era of hybrid work, with the aim of improving performance, conciliation, and well-being in the specific professional environments of universities and research institutes. We will show the results from a non-representative survey comprising 451 scientists. Aspects such as management and leadership over their work, the purpose to achieve something innovative in their work, and promoting well-being in their work spaces and co-workers, have been observed and identified in the survey. The figure of a leader emerges as someone who is communicative, collaborative, and that helps colleagues and their professional development. We suggest that a tightrope walker leader, that is, one who knows how to strike a balance between individual needs and collective interests, could be the key to ensuring the well-being of scientists.

Keywords: well-being; hybrid work; leadership; scientific collaboration; virtual groups



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1. Introduction

The arrival of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in 2020 has transformed our society. Every aspect of our lives has been changed in trying to adapt to the new context, marked by uncertainty and numerous restrictions. To try to preserve some normality, the use of technology was enhanced, which ended up covering, even more than before, all spheres of our daily lives (García et al. 2020), from social relations to the workplace.

Until then, remote working in Spain was a very unusual practice, compared to the rest of the countries in Europe. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics of Spain, in 2019 only 4.8% of the active population usually performed their job remotely, and 3.5% occasionally, while the average for European Union countries was around 10% (It is the sum of usually and occasionally of remote job). More recently, the vertiginous increase in remote working during the pandemic has been reversing and stabilizing little by little, currently placing the proportion of people in Spain who usually work in this way at 7.9% (Observatorio Nacional de Tecnología y Sociedad 2022).

In this paper we present questions that have arisen in this new era of hybrid work, such as new forms of leadership and emotional well-being at work. People who work from home in Spain list the main advantages as, the avoidance of displacement, the self-management of working time, the reconciliation with their family and personal life, and the better use, or saving, of time. Among the disadvantages, the most marked are the lack of social contact with co-workers, the non-disconnection from work, overload, and the poor organization and coordination of teleworking (INE 2021).

Likewise, in the years since the beginning of the pandemic, more studies have focused on exploring the disadvantages and biases of remote working, with the intention of finding a satisfactory solution. Criticisms include, that the flexibility of teleworking may clash with the right to digital disconnection, or that it implies people should do more hours

of work. On the other hand, people who work from home do not always know how to properly organize the use of their time (for example, separating work time with staff or family), which can have consequences for their health and well-being. In addition, remote workers do not always have, or receive, adequate information to carry out their work in this modality (Collados 2022). Finally, numerous biases have been found regarding remote working, given that more women do it than men, on the one hand, because they are employed in sectors where it is potentially applicable (De La Puebla Pinilla 2020), and, at the same time, because they are also the ones who bear the greatest burden of family responsibilities and care (Galiño and Arochena 2021).

Among the many definitions of 'leadership', there is some agreement on the idea of exerting influence on the part of one person over others, with which it seeks to favor behaviors, activities, and/or relationships with which to achieve the same objective (Barrasa Notario 2022). In line with this, digital leadership can be defined as: 'a social influence process embedded in both proximal and distal contexts mediated by IT that can produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and performance' (Avolio et al. 2014, p. 107). For Barrasa Notario (2022), digital leadership is a way to lead a group composed of people that work in different departments, organizations, and countries. This new type of leadership is the science of leading as mediated by a digital device. The main difference with the more traditional forms of leadership is its technological intermediation, framed within a rapid and changing digital revolution. It is characterized by ways of collecting, managing, interpreting, and disseminating information through these devices (Avolio and Kahai 2003). Video calls, video conferences, or chats are some of the elements that tend to be used in the so-called 'virtual groups'. The fact that interactions and communication are at a distance, and not face to face, is what most distinguishes these virtual groups from traditional ones. Likewise, they can also be composed of people who are dispersed spatially or temporally (Cascio and Shurygailo 2003). Last but not least, digital leadership needs to solve technical problems during interactions at a distance, such as a microphone or a camera that does not work perfectly, or noises produced by technological devices during the meeting (Belli 2018; Santoro Lamelas and Belli 2018). In addition to these problems, there are aspects of human communication that cannot be expressed through a digital social interaction, such as gestures, body posture, and gazes.

The figure of the digital leader could be characterized by the use of non-coercive means, as well as a greater interest in changes and in the construction of relationships of trust within the team. On the other hand, the digital leader could be more responsible for maintaining stability and responding to the challenges that arise in the short-term, with a more active role in planning and control of tasks. Likewise, when we talk about a digital leader, the relationship with the other members of the group is of 'followers', while for the other it would be of 'subordinates' (Bennis and Townsend 1989; Pautt 2011).

This paradigm shift in the modality of work, and the reinforcement of virtual teams, has brought with it new challenges in terms of leadership and group management (Lilian 2014), which are now beginning to be studied in depth. In this sense, Van Wart et al. (2019) point out three reasons why it is important to understand and study digital leadership. (1) To study the forms of communication in the era in which we live, that of 'constant contact', and their implications. (2) The new means by which work is carried out involve new forms of management and collaborative tools that need to be studied. (3) Changes to ways of working and management also imply adapting forms of leadership.

It has been seen that all these advantages can have associated drawbacks if not implemented or managed properly. In addition, to the latter are added four main challenges within leadership: trust, communication, distance time, and diversity. The dynamics are different from the face-to-face ones, since workers have not always met each other face-to-face or trust each other, hence the relevance of the cohesion and motivation of the group (Berry 2012). In addition, the communication of virtual groups differs from face-to-face communication. The first is in turns, and the second, simultaneously. Likewise, the lack of personal will, participation or planning, together with individual disagreements, are

common and contradictory problems that have a negative impact on the performance of virtual groups. Finally, in the digital context, the traditional trust based on social interaction is replaced by one based on performance (Berry 2011).

Virtual groups also face difficulties and complications, and, unlike groups that work in person, they have to look for ways adapted to their characteristics to build effective teams. In these circumstances it is more complicated to know what activities the rest of the colleagues are doing, unless they explain it (Webster and Sandy Staples 2006). For this same reason, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, being empathetic and open to others, and sharing information are some actions that can help improve the work of virtual groups (Alsharo et al. 2017). 'Virtual coffee', celebrations, and 'care calls' have also been found useful, and even the use of virtual reality as a form of communication has been found more suitable for this environment (Zeuge et al. 2020). Face-to-face meetings, or direct observation, have also been identified as possible means of trying to build trust. However, exaggerated use of them, multi-tasking, or lack of breaks can lead to lower productivity (Fosslien and Duffy 2020) and the appearance of 'zoom fatigue' (Nadler 2020; Wiederhold 2020).

Therefore, it could be said that there is some tension when it comes to managing virtual groups, and that their excess, or the lack of them, can lead to a more or less beneficial situation in the well-being of workers. We use the term 'well-being' as a measure of health-related to work, assuming that psychological symptoms are more likely to be associated with leading practices and related to such symptoms as anxiety, depression, or stress related to work (Kuoppala et al. 2008). Psychological well-being has different dimensions such as life satisfaction, depression symptoms, positive self-concept, and job satisfaction (Friedland and Price 2003; Ryff and Keyes 1995; Warr 1987). Thus, Kossek et al. (2009), point to the perceived control and separation of the family and work spheres as relevant points for 'good teleworking'. On the other hand, inadequate management of these areas when working can lead to greater family conflicts and less happiness, and even encourage discussions regarding the distribution of time of household chores or leisure. Thus, it is not surprising that, frequently, people who work remotely tend to work for more hours, and that they tend to combine their professional and personal lives, which leads to higher levels of stress (Song and Gao 2020).

On the other hand, Heiden et al. (2021) found a greater relationship between academics who had the opportunity for working remotely and stress, compared to those who did not, and again point to the distribution of remote working time as the most influential factor. Thus, the flexibility offered by remote working does not necessarily translate into greater well-being. Having your own space to be able to work remotely, the presence of more people at home when you are working, the number of days of remote working, the time a person spends working, and their responsibilities outside of the work environment are also conditions that positively or negatively influence satisfaction with remote working.

Our research question is located in the field of work that has been discussed, and seeks to contribute knowledge to this field with the aim of contributing to pointing out skills and forms of leadership appropriate to the context of hybrid work in Spanish universities and research centres, and, of course, its relationship with the well-being of researchers. In addition, and given that the lack, or abuse, of certain tasks or actions can lead to greater or less well-being, research is proposed that studies these aspects from the perspective of researchers.

Thus, we propose the following research objectives:

- (a) To find out whether relationships can be established between the well-being of scientists and the way in which working groups are managed.
- (b) Identify what skills, knowledge and actions scientists based in Spain point out as appropriate to the current hybrid work context.

2. Materials and Methods

To address our objectives, a self-administered online survey, composed of 24 questions (taking 11 min to complete), was carried out. This method was chosen for various reasons. The target population of researchers (involved in public Universities or Spanish public research centers such as CSIC) was very dispersed, so this method allowed us access to them. Second, the speed and low cost enabled us to spend more time on the invitation process, reminders, and control of the responses (Nayak and Narayan 2019; Latkovikj and Popovska 2019). A non-probabilistic method was used for sample selection, and an institutional email was requested to participate. Neither quotas nor branch of knowledge distinction was established prior to filling in the questionnaire for two reasons. In the first place, the non-existence of a census of research personnel in Spain meant that the possibility of establishing quotas or reweighting the sample was not possible. Secondly, our exploratory approach can be very suggestive to map the state of the situation among all the knowledge fields involved. Eventually, this study can serve as a benchmark for future research aspiring to a deeper understanding of specific sciences or representativeness.

To address the first objective, we started analyzing, at a descriptive level, items concerning participants', current job situation, emotions, and personal attitudes to individual or collective preferences. This part would eventually help us to configure our regression model. To address the second objective, we analyzed the next two open questions: 'Could you tell me what a good boss consists of for you?' (Q4), and 'In what aspects do you think the modality of work, that is, face-to-face and online, affect the performance of your tasks?' (Q15). Q4 was formulated in this way to pick up the different ways of understanding leadership implicitly associated with the figure of the boss, since this is an aspect that people often tend to get confused about (Bennis and Townsend 1989). Whereas, Q15 served to obtain views on the role attributed to leadership from the researcher's point of view in face-to-face, online, and hybrid work formats. SPSS software was used for quantitative analysis and Atlas.ti for qualitative purposes.

To organize our data collection, we created a database with the institutional email addresses of all the Spanish public universities, as well as the different divisions of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). In the email we explained the relevance of the topic (a study on well-being and leadership in the context of telecommuting in the Public Administration), we invited researchers to participate, and we also highlighted the ethical considerations of the research, according to the 'European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity', such as anonymity, confidentiality, the possibility to stop participating in the study at any time, return of results, etc. Regarding the latter, 93.3% of the participants expressed their interest in knowing the results of the research. This aspect, together with the high participation (451 people) in the period of two and a half weeks suggests the interest and usefulness that this kind of study arouses in the researchers' community.

The questionnaire was open from 24 March to 10 April. Previously, a pretest was carried out to test the questionnaire's validity and readability. Some questions were rewritten on account of their lack of clarity and having multiple possible interpretations. Nevertheless, once the survey was finished, some items (P18A, P18B, P18C, P23) were discarded because not all of the participants understood their meaning in the same way. On the other hand, some of the items used in the questionnaire were adapted from previous scales. The first question was taken from the 'European Values Survey' (EVS, round 2017) and the 'Valued Living Questionnaire' (VLQ) (Wilson et al. 2010). These were also used for question 3 (Q11) and question 6 (Q32, items C and D). In Q11, 'a good boss' item was added in a question which asked for the importance of some aspects in their current job. Q32 is aimed at obtaining different views on individual-collaborative work preferences and attitudes. To determine the importance of freedom and control for researchers, question 2 was asked, extracted from the World Values Survey, wave 7 (WVS, round 2017–2020), but modified to refer to work context and not our lives. Also, some items of the PVQ-21 scale of Cieciuch et al. (2014). were adapted to the workplace to form question 6: 'respect for the rules', 'pleasure in what they do', 'make their own decisions', and 'be successful'. Finally,

we extracted the SEWBI (Socioemotional Well-Being Index) proposed by Bericat (2014) from the ‘Living Conditions of the Andalusian Population during the State of Alarm’ (Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía 2020¹) to evaluate its implications regarding personal attitudes, leadership, and workplace. Our work merges some of Bericat’s items together: ‘I feel stressed by the amount of things I have to do’ (represent ‘calm and peaceful’ and ‘rested upon waking in the morning’ together) and ‘I feel worried about how things are going’ (‘felt depressed’ and not ‘feel energetic’). Even though this version is less accurate (eight items were used instead of ten) it enabled us to add two more items inspired by the theoretical work of Collins (2004) and Kemper (1978) that we thought may be related to well-being: ‘He/She occupies a position with more power and responsibility’ and ‘His/her works and trajectory endorse a greater status in his/her study field within the research group’. According to Kemper and Collins (1990, p. 34) there are two fundamental dimensions in micro interactions. Power: ‘in a social relationship entails conduct by which actors have (or try to gain) the ability to compel other actors to do what they do not wish to do’; and Status: ‘a social relationship is conduct by which actors give voluntary compliance to others actor and is marked by willing deference, acceptance, and liking. It involves the voluntary provision of rewards, benefits, and gratifications without threat or coercion’. Those terms seemed appropriate in the study of research groups and leadership, and moreso in the actual hybrid era work context marked by the numerous transformative processes described above. For this reason, we added the previous two items to test their relevance to the study’s objective.

3. Data Analysis

The SEWBI, as previously commented, is our own adaptation of the labour context of Bericat’s index (Bericat 2014). It is made up of two axes, one of ‘Situation–Person’ and another of ‘Links–Control’. ‘Situation’ refers to the perception that the subject has about a given situation. ‘Person’ refers to the individual’s ability to manage any situation to which they are exposed. Finally, much narrower and more solid could be ‘Links’ and ‘Control’, the index establishes a higher score, it is, a major well-being (Bericat and Acosta 2020). The organization between axis and emotional statements is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Socioemotional Well-Being Index.

Axis	Emotional Statements
<i>Situation-Person</i>	I am proud of what I do in my work and of my results.
	I feel worried about how things are going.
	I feel like I’m enjoying myself.
	I feel satisfied with the activities/functions I perform.
	I feel optimistic about my future.
<i>Links-Control</i>	I feel alone or misunderstood.
	I feel depressed, not wanting to do anything.
	I feel stressed by the amount of things I have to do.

Note: Bericat’s own adaption (2020).

The index was elaborated, recoding the scores of the negative emotional states (‘Feeling worried’, ‘Lonely’, ‘Depressed’, and ‘Stressed’) and adding the eight items. As we used it referring to the workplace and job aspects, we will talk about ‘labour-emotional well-being’. In this way, a higher score obtained represents a greater well-being in the dimensions considered related to the researcher’s workplace, format, and job situation. In Bericat’s words: ‘the socioemotional well-being index indicates how individuals evaluate their social status, general life situation, themselves or their “self”, and their social power’. In this regard, it should be noted that the measurement model of the index necessarily incorporates all the complexity involved in our emotional processes’ (Bericat 2014, p. 19). Then, to

express our logistic regression model, we used McFadden probability increases (McFadden 1974) to standardize variables' values and to make their interpretation easier using base 100. Also, the age was recodified, distinguishing 5 groups (under 30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, and over 61), and weakness significant differences were found.

To analyze the open questions regarding the second objective, grounded theory was used, as it allows theory to emerge from empirical data using a systematic research process, through which categories are constructed (Charmaz 2006). The main advantage of this methodology is that by deriving precisely from empirical data, the theory is more likely to be closer to the participant's realities (Strauss and Corbin 2002; Glaser and Strauss 2017). The scheme of work followed implied a first definition of the categories according to the properties attributed to the scientists. Then, those categories were constantly re-elaborated to approach the most accurate visions of the participants, distinguishing between central categories and their different nuances. Finally, we have related the categories to each other, starting from the nuances, then the central categories, and, finally the 'discursive poles' (Conde 2009), which condense the main idea of the researcher's perception. However, since the answers analyzed came from the open questions, it was not possible to know the socio-structural conditions of the people who made them. Despite this limitation, the high number of responses obtained (414 in the first question and 266 in the second) made it possible to explore more deeply the concerns and opinions of the people most motivated by the research topic. In addition, the results of the qualitative analysis are complemented by those obtained in the quantitative phase and with the proposed logistic regression model.

4. Results

The survey included 451 participants from 30 Spanish Universities and CSIC centres (Spanish National Research Council), with 55.2% of them being women and 44.8% being men. The average age of the participants was 46 years, with a standard deviation of 11 years. The survey may be biased due to the positions held by the participants: primarily university deans and research centre heads. A possible explanation for this fact may be that, when we contacted the deans of the universities or heads of research centres and institutes, they did not disseminate the survey among the rest of the scientific staff and answered it exclusively themselves. For teaching researchers, 13.1% of participants were professors, 29.4% were full professors, 18.2% were hired doctors, 12.9% were doctor assistants, 9.1% were assistants, and 18.2% did not teach classes. By area of study, 22% were in the Human Sciences, 29.5% in the Health and Environmental Sciences, 35.7% in the Experimental Sciences and Technology, and 35.9% in the Social Sciences. Overall, the emotional-labour well-being of the researchers was positive, with a mean score of 23 and a standard deviation of 4. The contrast of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test yielded a score of 0 *, indicating that the variable does not have a normal distribution. No missing values were obtained from the total of 451 responses. In Table 2 we summarise frequencies and percentages distribution in SEWBI.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages distribution in SEWBI.

Emotional States	At No Time or at Almost No Time	At Some Point	Much of the Time	All or Almost All the Time
I am proud of what I do in my work and my results	4 (0.9%)	62 (13.7%)	239 (53%)	146 (32.4%)
I feel worried about how things are going	42 (9.3%)	205 (45.5%)	125 (27.7%)	79 (17.5%)
I feel like I'm enjoying myself	9 (2%)	107 (23.7%)	242 (53.7%)	93 (20.6%)
I feel satisfied with the activities/functions I perform	7 (1.6%)	72 (16%)	269 (59.6%)	103 (22.8%)
I feel optimistic about my future	34 (7.5%)	109 (24.2%)	204 (45.2%)	104 (23.1%)
I feel lonely or misunderstood	174 (38.6%)	200 (44.3%)	58 (12.9%)	19 (4.2%)
I feel depressed, not wanting to do anything	257 (57%)	160 (35.5%)	25 (5.5%)	9 (2%)
I feel stressed by the number of things I have to do	34 (7.5%)	160 (35.5%)	153 (33.9%)	104 (23.1%)

Note: Own elaboration.

A very weak significant relationship (Chi-square = 0.039, score = 0,145) was found between the SEWBI and age groups (under 30, 31–40, 41–50, 51–60, and over 61). In general, lower scores were more present in younger groups (Table 3), such as those under 30 (mean = 22.50), or between 31 and 40 years (21.91). While the highest score was obtained in those over 61 (25.20). However, the Kruskal–Wallis test (0 *) showed that these differences were not significant.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics by age group and SEWBI.

	Under 30	Between 31 and 40 Years Old	Between 41 and 50	Between 51 and 60	Over 61 Years Old
Average	22.55	21.91	23.98	23.47	25.20
Median	23	22	24	24	26
Deviation	4.91	4.25	3.75	3.67	3.25

Note: Own elaboration.

Regarding the work format, 19.1% of scientists stated that they currently work fully face-to-face, 29.7% more face-to-face than remote, 16.9% both equally, 27.1% worked more time remotely than face-to-face, and 7.3% totally at a distance. No significant differences were found in terms of emotional-labour well-being according to gender (Mann–Whitney U test = 0.36) or age group (Kruskal–Wallis = 0.012). Additionally, the relationship between emotional-labour well-being and work format was not significant (Chi-square = 0.079).

On the other hand, a positive correlation was found between emotional-labour well-being and ‘the feeling of having freedom and control over their work’ (Pearson correlation = 0.504). As the sense of freedom and control increased, so did well-being. However, the correlation between emotional-labour well-being and ‘trust in coworkers’ (0.334), ‘having a good income’ (0.212), ‘good schedule’ (0.271), ‘opportunity to take initiatives’ (0.355), ‘extended vacations’ (0.286), ‘a job with responsibilities’ (0.170), or ‘having a good boss’ (0.212) were all low. The highest correlation was found between the SEWBI and the ‘feeling of being able to achieve something in your work’ (0.405) (Table 4).

Table 4. SEWBI and current research job situation.

Aspects Present in Your Current Job	Significance	Eta
Good income	0 *	0.212
Good schedule	0 *	0.271
Opportunity to take initiatives	0 *	0.355
Extended holidays	0 *	0.286
A job where you think you can achieve something	0 *	0.405
A job with responsibilities	0.020	0.170
A good boss	0.008	0.212

Note: 0 * (full significance = 0.000). Own elaboration.

So far, it appears that having freedom and control in one's work, trust in coworkers, the feeling that one can achieve something in one's job, and the opportunity to take initiative are important factors in explaining emotional-labour well-being. Additionally, items based on Collins' (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains and Fine and Kemper's (1978) interactional social theory, which examined how participants are demarcated from each other in terms of power and status, were also tested. The items proposed were: *'I feel in line with the rest of the people with whom I work'*, *'He/She occupies a position with more power and responsibility'*, and *'His/her works and trajectory endorse a greater status in his/her study field within the research group'*. The first item was significant, with a score of 0.425 in the Eta, indicating that it positively contributes to emotional-labour well-being. However, no significance was found for the second and third items (scores of 0.058 and 0.069, respectively) (Table 5).

Table 5. Cross Tabulation. Feeling of consonance, Power, Status and SEWBI.

Item	Significance	Eta
I feel in line with the rest of the people I work with	0 *	0.425
Occupy a position with more power and responsibility	0.058	
Their work and trajectory endorse a greater status within the field in which they investigate within the group.	0.069	

Note: 0 * (full significance = 0.000). Own elaboration.

No significance was found between the SEWBI and any of the following items, related to attitudes regarding work and its organization: *'I prefer solo work to group work'* (0.123), *'For me it is important to do things that give me pleasure in my work'* (0.143), *'There should be greater incentives for individual effort'* (0.621), *'Competence is good for better results'* (0.087), *'A well-defined work hierarchy is good and necessary to achieve results'* (0.225), and *'You have to obey the rules or guidelines of work even if the person in charge is not nearby'* (0.585). The following were significant: *'Being successful is something important to me'* and *'I prefer to make my own decisions and do what seems right to me'*, although the association is low (0.252 for the first and 0.202 for the second in the Eta test) (Table 6).

Table 6. Cross Tabulation. Attitudes towards work and its organization and SEWBI.

Item	Significance	Eta
Be successful	0.08	0.252
Make my own decisions	0 *	0.202
Incentives for individual effort	0.621	-
ObeY rules and guidelines even if the person in charge is not nearby	0.585	-
Well-defined hierarchy	0.225	-
Pleasure at work	0.143	-
I prefer solo work to group work	0.123	-
Competition is good for better results	0.087	-

Note: 0 * (full significance = 0.000). Own elaboration.

A binomial logistic regression was performed to identify which factors contribute to higher emotional-labour well-being. Index scores were grouped into two categories, using the mean score of 23 as a cut-off point. The first group, called “Lower emotional-labour well-being”, included scores from 9 to 23 (48.6% of responses). The second group, “Greater emotional-labour well-being”, included scores from 24 to 32 (51.4% of responses). The final model included four relevant variables: age, feeling of being able to achieve something, feeling of freedom and control over one’s work, and feeling of being in line with coworkers. The final classification percentage was 73.4%, with a higher percentage in the group with the highest emotional-labour well-being (80.9%), compared to the group with the lowest score (65.4%). The Hosmer–Lemeshow test score was 0.088, indicating a good fit between the observed and predicted values (Table 7).

Table 7. Logistic Regression Model Proposed.

Variables	Average	B	β	McFadden R2
Age	46.01	0.034	0.14	0.49%
Sense of freedom and control	7.2	0.415	0.05	1.90%
Feeling of being able to achieve something	3.38	0.581	0.11	6.27%
Feel in consonance with other team members	2.86	0.75	0.09	7.04%
N = 451				
Constant = −3.277 (0 *)				
Hosmer–Lemeshow test = 0.088				
Classification = 73.4%				

Note: Own elaboration. Please, note * means full significance (=0.000).

All the variables are of a positive trend, which means that a higher score in them increases the probability of being placed in the group of greater emotional-labour well-being. In this way, for each increase in a unit in the age variable, there is an increase in the probability of being in the group of greater well-being by 0.49%, keeping the rest of the variables constant. This increase is 1.90% in the variable ‘feeling of freedom and control over their work’, 6.27% for each increase in a category in the variable ‘feeling of being able to achieve something’, and 7.04% for the variable ‘feel in consonance’.

In the second part of the work, the answers of the open questions were analyzed: ‘Could you tell me what a good boss consists of for you?’, and ‘In what aspects do you think the modality of work, that is, face-to-face and online, affect the performance of your tasks?’.

4.1. Towards a Funambulist Leadership: The Figure of the Leader in Times of Hybrid Work

Regarding the evaluation of leaders and leadership by researchers based in Spain, certain discursive poles appear to be found (Conde 2009), that is, defining extremes around a series of aspects, characteristics, and attitudes that are positively valued in leadership. In this study, two main poles were identified: the pole of responsibility and organization, and the pole of feeling valued. Each pole is defined by a series of attitudes and behaviours that are positively valued or expected around the figure of the leader. They also have points of mutual connection. Together, this helps to understand the role of the leader in the management and organization of work groups beyond the purely labour aspect, and how it plays a special role in promoting a healthy work environment, which is essential for the satisfaction and well-being of team members.

The first pole, 'feeling valued', is composed of different elements, the first of which are the feelings of freedom and initiative. These manifest in different ways, but in general, they all involve the possibility of participation (providing ideas, solutions, proposals, etc.) by the different members of the team. There also seems to be a certain consensus on the need to establish limits within which to exercise this freedom, without which the group would not function correctly.

Closely related to this issue is the second element, which is the communicative dimension, where team members feel heard by the leader, as well as the transparency of the leader when communicating actions, changes, etc. As we can see, this first pole is closely related to the facet of the leader as a guarantor of group cohesion. In this sense, an essential task of a good leader is to promote a healthy work environment that can take into account the specific needs of each of its members, and that allows the sharing of concerns or issues among its members. However, it is not the exclusive responsibility of this pole, since, as we will see, the combined feedback with the second pole contributes to generating a good work climate that leads to greater satisfaction and well-being on the part of the team.

The second pole, called 'responsibility and organization of work', represents all the tasks and facets that are expected to be carried out by the leader, that is, all the functions that are assumed to be carried out. Within this pole, we would mainly find management, coordination, organization, and guidance with respect to tasks and work in general, as well as the assumption of responsibilities, that is, errors, in the event that things do not turn out as planned. Although a certain degree of consensus is shared to respect the leader's decisions, it is also expected that these decisions are not made solely and exclusively based on a mandate based on a superior hierarchical position, but rather, they are demonstrated through the leader's knowledge (leadership for wisdom, as some of the participants, have come to call it) and their career in this field (inspiring leadership). In line with this, the fact of 'preaching by example' is a highly valued aspect among research team members.

All these considerations help to outline the figure of the 'good leader' (Figure 1) as defined by Spanish-based researchers, which in turn are complemented by the 'sense of balance' that we find in all of them. In general, the leader is expected to be a conciliatory, pragmatic, decisive, communicative, transparent person, who sets an example, makes decisions, assumes responsibilities and mistakes, is actively involved in work, is available and empathetic, and considers the specific particularities of each person and their tasks at certain times.

However, all this implies that the leader must navigate a gradient of different responsibilities, which is not always easy. In general, the discursive poles indicated seem to contribute, as a whole, to promoting and ensuring a healthy work environment, focused on generating an atmosphere of mutual trust internally. This is reflected in the form of constructive criticism, promotion of a climate of internal collaboration rather than competition, and being an approachable figure who allows for sharing of concerns or proposals and shows interest in them. Additionally, the leader should possess the ability to make clear and decisive decisions when necessary.

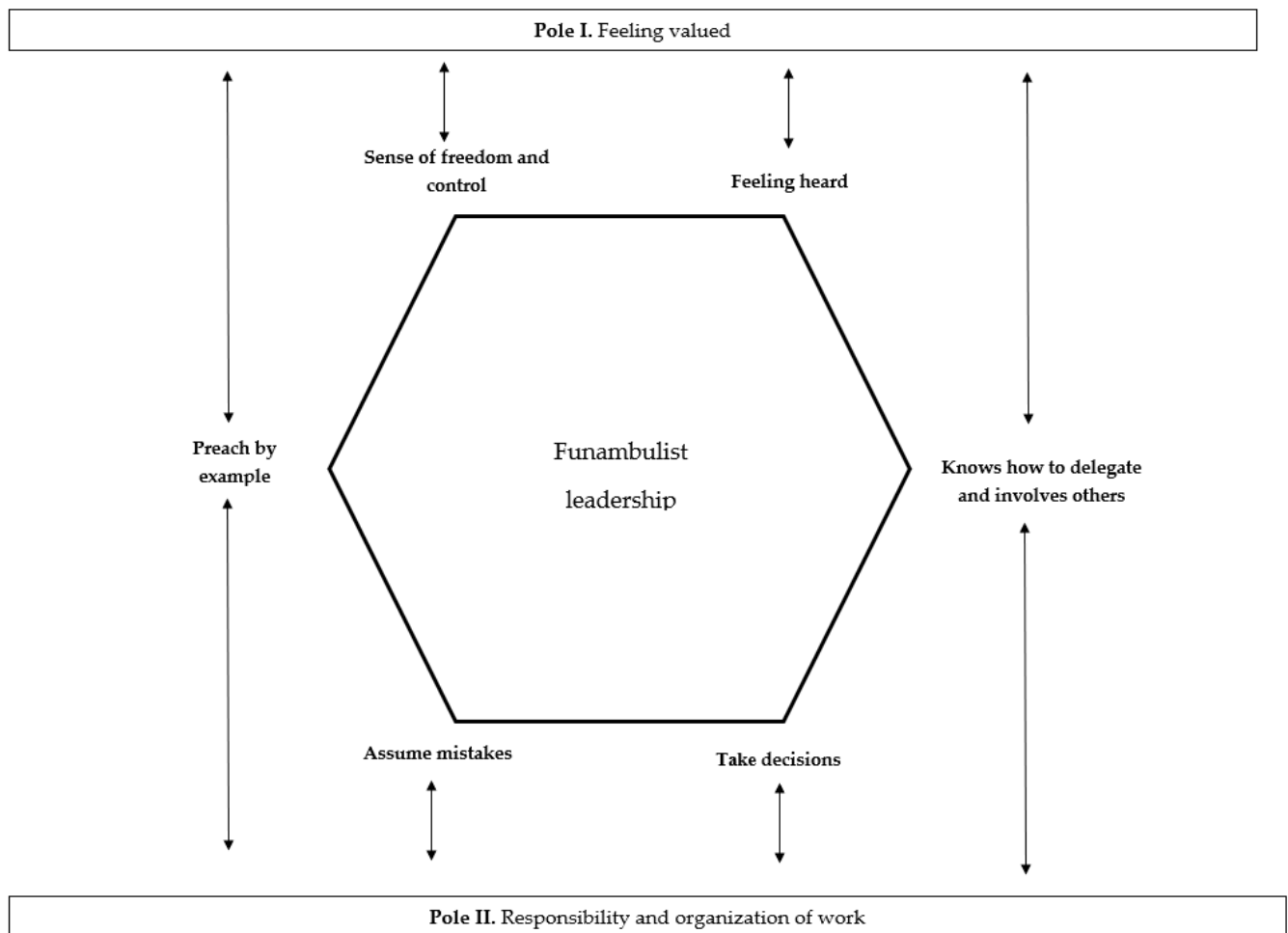


Figure 1. Outlining the funambulist leader: attitudes, perceptions and assumptions. Note: own elaboration.

4.2. Valuing Remote Work: From Social Relationships to Performance

As far as performance is concerned, there is no clear consensus in this regard. Three main positions have been identified: those who affirm that it improves in the online format, those who believe that performance remains stable regardless of the mode of work, and those who believe that performance is lower in remote working.

Although all of this also seems to depend on the degree of commitment of its members and adequate material conditions in the home (space, equipment, etc.). Numerous limits and warnings are set regarding the excessive use of telecommuting, which can become demotivating and foster a feeling of loneliness, or even feel less satisfactory despite having the same performance.

Extract 1

'The performance of online work is the same as in face-to-face work, but less satisfactory'

There are also those who relate remote work with greater distractions or less ability to concentrate, although, as we have already pointed out, this is very marked by the specific conditions of each participant. For people who find themselves in this situation, it seems interesting to try to combine both modalities, making the most of the advantages of each one:

Extract 2

'I think it will depend on what we do and how we do it. On a personal level, when I work online from home it means more effort and performance, but satisfaction drops because

you find yourself alone and lose the essence of contact with other people. Therefore, I think a tandem would be good'

On the other hand, there is consensus regarding the lack of closeness and interaction or misunderstandings that the performance of activities in this format can generate. In addition to this deeply impersonal character in social relationships, contradictory patterns in the organization of work and in the tasks to be performed also seems to be common. Together with the lack of physical contact, these communication problems are the main disadvantages identified that negatively influence well-being. Likewise, the remote format makes it difficult to generate a pleasant work environment, affecting the cohesion of the team, as well as the incorporation of 'new signings', since it is more complicated to try to transmit the 'group philosophy':

Extract 3

'The non-presence affects, if the group is not consolidated, the group atmosphere, relations between members and incorporation of the new signings to the group's philosophy'

Added to all these inconveniences is a greater mental load, or the lack of disconnection from work, as a result of overexposure to screens.

Extract 4

'After these years of the pandemic, my performance, satisfaction and ability to concentrate have been negatively affected by overexposure to screens. In turn, a generalized dynamic has been created according to which, given the spread of connection terminals (laptops, mobile phones with Internet connection, omnipresent Wi-Fi, etc.), everyone must be available at all times to participate in meetings and so on. This culture of immediacy and full availability negatively affects individuals and makes them lose interest and motivation. At least that is what I have perceived in my environment'

4.3. Meeting Spaces as Moments of Cross-Fertilization 'Beyond the Purely Work-Related'

Online meetings seem to be the best option when they are routine or follow-up, as well as of a short duration. However, if you have to make strategic decisions, or establish objectives, goals, or steps to follow, face-to-face sessions are more appropriate, or else there is a risk that confusion will paralyze or delay the performance of activities:

Extract 5

'It depends on the moment. I feel very comfortable working remotely and I think that for research, face-to-face work is often unproductive. However, for strategic meetings I consider attendance essential. It has happened to me that because I did not understand the idea, the work has been delayed. In person it is easier to talk to see if the point from which everyone starts to design the rest of the steps has not been well understood'

There are also those who affirm that horizontality is blurred in online meetings, with people with a higher rank tending to abuse the word. In addition to being colder, it seems that it is easier to reach misunderstandings, which could be easily resolved with the nuances that face-to-face interactions make possible, for example, in coffee breaks or in any other informal event, which in turn would result in greater well-being.

Extract 6

'There is a part of human relations that is more satisfactory if it is face-to-face, which probably plays an important role in the state of mind of the worker. In the purely professional aspect, discussions, decision making, etc. It is usually more efficient if they are face-to-face because issues such as tone or body language help to interpret the messages. Likewise, the more or less continuous contact between the workers of a team makes the flow of information better if they share the same space in person, even if it is intermittent (break for coffee or lunch, informal meetings)'

These moments of interaction and sociability among co-workers are highly valued. Everything related to, 'beyond the purely work', is not only seen as an essential part of

satisfaction and performance, but also as an element of group cohesion, and, likewise, as a moment of ‘cross-fertilization’, in the form of new ideas, tips, and synergies.

Extract 7

‘Face-to-face is preferable because many more nuances are discussed, people are more present, there is better communication also beyond the purely work-related, which improves the functioning of the team’

Extract 8

‘Online work allows interesting forms of organization, but limits cross-fertilization between team members’

Extract 9

‘Social relationships go beyond seeing each other’s faces and chatting. It is sharing spaces, other elements that are important for work. I think you have to find a balance in this’

In this regard, it seems interesting to continue exploring the specificities of each scientific branch to assess what types of actions can be carried out remotely and which cannot. For example, the article writing phase would fit very well with remote working, while it would not be possible for scientists working in laboratories. Similarly, and on the issue of writing the results, it also seems advisable to promote meeting spaces that give rise to ‘informal exchanges’ in this last phase of the work.

Extract 10

‘I think that working in person encourages and improves interpersonal relationships, since when working remotely everything was more impersonal and could lead to misunderstandings, there were no relaxed chats and everything was reduced to the strictly professional and productive. I believe, in this sense, that in teamwork there should also be space for informal exchanges that improve communication and relationship between team members, and this is undoubtedly easier with face-to-face work’

Rather than trying to choose between working exclusively online or face-to-face, the search for a balance seems more appropriate, above all, taking into account the specific needs of each person, both in their personal and professional lives, that is, in what phase of work they are in or what tasks they have to perform.

In this way, the conciliation that remote work opens up is very clear in terms of ‘time savings’, mainly avoiding displacement, and in its usefulness to combine it with other household or personal activities:

Extract 11

(Speaking about online work): ‘It does affect, in both ways: positively, since it allows you to combine work and other household chores, or other obligations (eg, I am waiting for a new washing machine right now, as I write). Negatively, too, since sometimes understanding is more difficult (a blackboard, some markers, 15 min and two coffees make other people better understand the concepts that they want to convey about the work to be done)’

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the first part of this work, it was seen that aspects such as age, the feeling of freedom and control at work, the feeling of being able to achieve something in work, and feeling in harmony with the rest of the team are aspects that help to explain a greater sense of well-being in Spanish-based researchers. The results of the quantitative analysis were subsequently complemented by qualitative findings. In this way, it was believed that the context of the present time was especially conducive for an investigation on this topic.

In this sense, in qualitative discourses, there is a tendency to link ‘leader’ with ‘boss’, when they do not necessarily have to go hand in hand (Turk 2007). Additionally, scientists based in Spain greatly value aspects related to status, progress in their professional career, or the development of skills in terms of their well-being. Likewise, a freedom to act and initiative, which are manifested in the form of being asked for their opinions, proposals,

etc., is also highly valued. Closely related to this, great weight is given to leaders showing interest in their proposals, and, in short, to communicating with the rest of the team, and for the latter to feel listened to by the former. These results align with others, which highlight the vital role of the leader in building healthy organizational environments (Bingham and Bubb 2021).

The role of a leader is not straightforward, as they must balance the demands assumed by the team around their figure of the leader, and the two do not necessarily coincide. There is a need for certain rules, agreements, and divisions for the leader to function effectively, but excessive rigidity can negatively impact the team's performance and the well-being of its members. These findings agree with similar studies, where it is shown that leadership driven by emotional intelligence is positive and decisive in job satisfaction and the well-being of workers (Brunetto et al. 2012).

Once again, the leader's ability to understand the specific needs of their members, as well as the phase of the work they are in, comes into play here, and they should try to contribute as much as possible for a greater conciliation that results in a collective benefit, both in terms of team goals as well as on a personal level. For example, it seems that hybrid work modalities and understanding the personal circumstances of each individual and the tasks and phase of the project they are in could be a great window of opportunity to exploit. However, if the activities are not clear, or there are 'new signings' that have just joined, this could be counterproductive. The cohesion of the group, the relationships between colleagues, or the very synergies that arise from these more or less informal meetings would also be affected, because of the lack of a shared space, which could in some cases affect people in terms of performance (the cross-fertility of informal events that has been seen) and well-being (problems with work disconnection, feelings of loneliness, fatigue, and the lack of human contact itself, among others).

When we collected our data, March and April 2022, the context of the Spanish labour market was marked by a progressive tendency to return to face-to-face work after the COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, the modifications of the 10/21 Law on Remote Work were launched. Unlike the 2021 text version, modifications were made to include new aspects for regulating the Spanish Public Administration situation. Now, the worker is considered to be telecommuting when at least 30% of his working day is carried out remotely. Other novelties were also established: telecommuting cannot imply a salary or working-hours modification to those previously existing, and its voluntary nature is always remarked. Finally, companies are responsible for providing the equipment required to perform the tasks. With all this, it seems that in the new post-pandemic scenario, the figure of a good digital leader is more necessary than ever, not only because the situation is different, but because they have to face certain tensions that, although they have always been able to exist in the framework of the science and innovation system, with the current situation, have changed or are being redefined. Thus, it seems that the figure of the current tightrope walker leader involves balancing the issues raised, as observed by López Carrasco and Belli (2023), with the aim of proposing what will result in greater performance for the group, but, above all, in the better well-being of the team members, since, without the second, the first will be more complicated.

For future research, it will be useful to test possible differences while using SEWBI of eight items (as we do) or ten items, as Bericat (2014) does. Furthermore, separating 'freedom' and 'control' from the unique items used could help to clarify which of the two aspects contributes the most to well-being. On the other hand, questions about power and self-perceived status seem to be interesting, especially if we take into account the theory of Collins (2004), so it is suggested to try to ask questions about these, but without considering it in comparative terms with the rest of the coworkers. Perhaps, having formulated it in these terms, some type of bias related to the age or position of the person responding has arisen. In addition, it could be very favorable to continue with the work based on the findings of this research, and complementing it with in-depth interviews or discussion groups, which would allow an even deeper exploration into the figure of the leader. Lastly,

studying the question according to knowledge branches could be useful, to explore their specific condition and look for differences about what they ask and what they assume about the figure of a leader.

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Note

- ¹ For further information, we recommend visiting the web (also available in English): <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodeestadisticaycartografia/encsocial/2020/> (accessed on 1 January 2023).

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