

Work-Life Balance Orientations among Digitally Connected Leaders in Health and Social Care: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how health and social care executives in England and Wales construct and manage work–life boundaries in digitally connected leadership roles, and how boundary practices shape the enactment of transformational leadership across public and private contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews (n = 19) with health and social care executives, analysed through Braun and Clarke’s (2022) six-step thematic analysis procedure using NVivo 12.

Findings – Executives enacted WLB through three inductively derived interpretive frames, termed here “WLB orientations”: balance achievers, balance sceptics, and dynamic regulators. These orientations are distinct from existing boundary management typologies in that they capture how executives construct the meaning and achievability of balance rather than their preferences for boundary integration or segmentation. Transformational leadership functioned as boundary work but differed by sector; public sector leaders relied on relational care under constraint, while private sector leaders embedded empowerment and wellbeing practices supported by more integrated digital infrastructure.

Practical implications – The study highlights the need for organisations to formalise digital communication norms, develop executive boundary competence as a measurable leadership capability, and treat technology investment as a well-being intervention, particularly in NHS and publicly funded care settings.

Originality/value— This study contributes a WLB orientation typology by proposing three distinct interpretive frames (balance achievers, balance sceptics, dynamic regulators), and shows how transformational leadership sustainability depends on sectoral conditions and digital infrastructures.

Keywords: transformational leadership, work-life balance, WLB orientations, digital boundary management, spillover theory, health and social care

Introduction

Contemporary leadership is increasingly enacted in conditions that simultaneously demand responsiveness, emotional engagement, and continuous digital availability (Boccoli et al., 2024; Zia et al., 2025). While these conditions are often framed as enabling flexibility and performance, they also create a deeper, largely unresolved problem for leadership scholarship and practice in that the same organisational and technological arrangements that make leaders more effective can systematically erode their capacity to sustain themselves over time (Busse and Weidner, 2020; Yang et al., 2026). This tension is more visible in the health and social care (H&SC) sector, where leaders are expected to drive transformation, care for their workforce, and remain resilient within systems characterised by chronic pressure and perpetual crisis (Temsah et al., 2020).

In the UK's H&SC sector, executives operate within an environment marked by persistent workforce shortages, high emotional labour, and 24/7 operational demands. Vacancy levels peaked at 217,000 in 2022 before declining to approximately 124,000 in 2023, indicating a system under sustained strain (Sumption and Strain-Fajth, 2023). These structural conditions intensify the leadership challenge, requiring executives to maintain organisational performance and service quality while also protecting their own well-being (Temsah et al., 2020; Elkomy et al., 2023). Yet, dominant leadership models tend to assume that effective leaders are inexhaustible, obscuring the

organisational and technological forces that shape leaders' own work–life boundaries. If executive boundary depletion contributes to leadership attrition, as the evidence on workforce shortages implies, the cost is not only personal but systemic: a sector already facing a 124,000-vacancy crisis cannot afford to normalise leadership practices that render senior roles unsustainable.

Digital technologies further complicate this landscape. Although digital tools promise flexibility and efficiency (Bardoel and Drago, 2016), they also create what Nagy (2020) terms a “digital tether,” extending work into personal life and undermining psychological recovery (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021). For senior leaders, heightened visibility and accountability amplify these pressures, as expectations of constant availability blur the boundary between work and non-work. The internalised compulsion to remain available that Barber and Santuzzi (2015) term ed telepressure is particularly salient for executives whose role identity is inseparable from organisational responsiveness. Existing technology acceptance models (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh and Bala, 2008) explain adoption but say little about how continuous connectivity reshapes leaders' wellbeing, power relations, and capacity to exercise judgment.

Transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994) has been widely promoted in healthcare as a means of driving collaboration and systemic reform (Swanson et al., 2012; Elkomy et al., 2023). However, an emerging paradox is that the very qualities that make transformational leaders effective — emotional engagement, relational attunement, and moral responsibility — may also increase their vulnerability to exhaustion and work–life conflict (Hoch et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2019). This raises a critical organisational question: How can transformational leadership be sustained when digital and institutional conditions systematically intensify leaders' work?

Sectoral context deepens this problem. Public sector executives often face rigid bureaucratic structures that limit discretion, while private sector leaders typically operate with

greater autonomy and technological flexibility (Awashreh and Alghunaimi, 2024; Houtgraaf and Borst, 2025). These differences suggest that leadership sustainability is not merely an individual issue but a product of organisational design and technological infrastructure. Against this backdrop, this article addresses two central research questions:

1. How do health and social care executives make sense of and manage work–life boundaries in digitally connected leadership roles?
2. How do these boundary practices shape, and are shaped by, the enactment of transformational leadership across public and private contexts?

By examining these questions through qualitative evidence from executives in England and Wales, this study advances understanding of leadership as a contextually embedded, technology-mediated practice. It contributes to leadership and organisational development research by showing that sustainable leadership depends not only on individual resilience but also on the alignment between leadership expectations, digital norms, and organisational conditions.

Theoretical background

Contextualising work–life balance and transformational leadership

Work–life balance (WLB) has been a central concern in organisational research for decades, with definitions evolving to reflect shifting workplace dynamics. Early perspectives conceptualised WLB as a conflict between work and non-work domains (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Later work reframed WLB as equal engagement and satisfaction across work and family roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003), a definition that continues to shape contemporary debate. Frone (2003) simplified the concept to the absence of conflict between domains, while Felstead et al. (2002) advanced a cultural-institutional view emphasising the interplay of time and space within income-generating societies. These definitional developments are particularly relevant to H&SC contexts,

where professional and personal commitments are entangled with structural expectations, public accountability, and care responsibilities (Hujóvá et al., 2025). In such settings, WLB is less a stable outcome than a negotiated condition that reflects how work is organised, how roles are moralised, and how time and attention are distributed across competing demands.

Executives' experiences of WLB are shaped by role-specific pressures that amplify the difficulty of maintaining boundaries. Senior leaders occupy positions characterised by high responsibility, visibility, and accountability, which intensify expectations of constant availability (Kane et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2024). This expectation is reinforced through anticipatory conformity, in which leaders proactively make themselves available to satisfy perceived stakeholder needs (Mazmanian et al., 2013). These dynamics also highlight blurred boundaries between professional and personal identities. Studies have demonstrated that individuals in certain roles, including senior leaders, often merge their personal self-concept with their professional roles, complicating psychological detachment and making it difficult to disengage even when they are physically away from work (Zhou et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2024).

For executive work, WLB therefore cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of conflict. It is shaped by identity-based expectations of devotion, the emotional demands of leading others, and the implicit norms through which organisations define responsibility and commitment (Carden and Callahan, 2007; Damaske et al., 2014). Organisational identification theory (Dutton et al., 2010) and professional identity research (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003) further illuminate why some leaders choose not to disconnect even when structural conditions permit it. When leaders derive their core sense of self from their organisational role, boundary protection can feel psychologically threatening rather than restorative: to switch off is to temporarily lose a fundamental source of meaning and identity. This is particularly relevant for the WLB

achievability orientation, where participants described voluntary monitoring of work out of personal anxiety and professional responsibility rather than external compulsion, suggesting that identity fusion with role may be as important as structural conditions in explaining boundary permeability.

Sectoral context is a further determinant of WLB outcomes. Public sector executives often face bureaucratic constraints, limited flexibility in resource use, and heightened accountability demands, all of which restrict leaders' discretion in managing balance (Houtgraaf and Borst, 2025). While public organisations may offer more formal WLB policies, their rigid application can reduce autonomy, in contrast to private-sector contexts, where fewer formal policies may coexist with greater informal adaptability (Lyness and Judiesch, 2008; Awashreh and Alghunaimi, 2024). In H&SC, these constraints are intensified by persistent staff shortages, the emotional intensity of caregiving, and heightened operational demands. Leaders may perceive that disconnecting risks service disruption or compromised care quality (Temsah et al., 2020). These sectoral realities are not simply contextual details; they shape what counts as “good leadership,” what kinds of boundaries are possible, and whether recovery practices are treated as legitimate or as signs of insufficient commitment.

The COVID-19 pandemic further reshaped the WLB landscape, intensifying uncertainty and accelerating remote and hybrid working practices across health organisations. Studies report heightened stress and increasingly blurred role boundaries as work moved into domestic spaces and digital systems became central to daily coordination (Gomes et al., 2024; Ahmad, 2025). At the same time, pandemic-related disruption created opportunities for flexibility and experimentation. Some organisations expanded digital solutions and embraced more flexible practices, creating space for leaders to redesign certain arrangements and improve integration of

professional and personal responsibilities (Dogra and Parrey, 2024; Zapata et al., 2024). This duality underscores an important point for theory development. Digitalisation and flexibility are not uniformly positive or negative for WLB; their effects depend on how technologies interact with work design, organisational norms, and leadership expectations.

Within this context, transformational leadership provides a useful lens for examining how leadership style shapes, and is shaped by, WLB pressures. Transformational leadership was first conceptualised by Burns (1978) and operationalised by Bass and Avolio (1994). It is characterised by four dimensions: inspirational motivation (articulating a compelling vision to energise followers), idealised influence (modelling admired values and ethical conduct), individualised consideration (attending to each follower's development needs), and intellectual stimulation (encouraging creativity and critical thinking). This values-based, relationally focused approach has been linked to positive follower outcomes, including well-being, engagement, and performance (Holten et al., 2018; Gomes et al., 2024). In the H&SC context, transformational leadership is frequently positioned as essential for mobilising people through complexity and sustaining motivation under strain. It may also provide personal resources for leaders (Curado and Santos, 2022; Karimi et al., 2023). Specifically, the individualised consideration dimension, through its emphasis on personalised support and developmental relationships, may support leaders' own ability to integrate work and personal roles, while idealised influence can orient leaders toward modelling sustainable practices rather than short-term intensity (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Ghasabeh, 2020).

However, the relationship between transformational leadership and leader sustainability is not uniformly positive. Hoch et al. (2018) highlight a potential dark side, arguing that transformational leaders may face a higher risk of burnout from internalising followers' needs and

emotions, which can lead to empathic strain and emotional exhaustion. In health settings, Karimi et al. (2023) show that leaders adopting transformational leadership can deliver positive team outcomes while privately struggling with stress, ambiguity, and self-neglect. Lin et al. (2019) provide quantitative evidence for this drain from a Conservation of Resources (COR) perspective, demonstrating that transformational leader behaviours deplete the very personal resources needed for sustained boundary protection. This suggests a leadership sustainability problem, where the very behaviours that make leaders effective for others may simultaneously erode their own recovery and well-being. The emotional labour required to sustain inspirational motivation and idealised influence may be particularly demanding in crisis-prone environments, where leaders must remain optimistic and present while absorbing uncertainty and distress.

Context further shapes these outcomes. Dinh et al. (2014) suggest that the psychological benefits of transformational leadership are strengthened when combined with autonomy-supportive practices. In constrained environments, leaders may have limited capacity to redesign work, redistribute pressure, or protect recovery time, potentially turning relational leadership into a reactive and draining form of constant support. In this sense, transformational leadership should be treated as an organisationally embedded practice rather than a purely individual capability. Its sustainability depends on structural conditions such as staffing capacity, decision authority, and supportive infrastructure, all of which vary sharply across public and private health systems. Research has increasingly examined how transformational leadership supports followers' WLB. Wayne et al. (2017) introduce work–family supportive supervision as a framework for understanding how leaders facilitate employee integration of work and life through emotional support, instrumental assistance, role modelling, and creative role management. Yet much of this literature emphasises follower outcomes, leaving underdeveloped how leaders themselves manage

WLB while enacting transformational leadership, especially in high-stakes H&SC contexts. This gap matters because leaders are expected to model commitment and resilience, even when organisational conditions normalise overload.

Digital technology further intensifies this leadership and WLB intersection. Digital tools can support flexible work locations and schedules, reduce commuting, and improve efficiency (Bardoel and Drago, 2016). For executives, technology can enable coordination across sites and enhance responsiveness and decision-making speed (Phelps, 2014). Yet the same technologies can normalise perpetual availability. Mazmanian et al. (2013) describe an autonomy paradox in which mobile devices create perceived control while intensifying expectations for constant responsiveness. Nagy's (2020) concept of the digital tether similarly shows how technology can give an illusion of flexibility while tightening work's pull into personal spaces. The literature on technostress and techno-invasion highlights how digital connectivity intrudes into private time, reducing recovery and undermining well-being (Harris et al., 2022; Kamboj, 2026; Bottaro et al., 2024). For senior leaders, these effects are amplified by the symbolic and practical expectation that "being reachable" signals accountability and competence. Barber and Santuzzi's (2015) concept of telepressure, relating to the internalised compulsion to respond to digital messages promptly, even in the absence of explicit organisational demands is directly relevant here. For H&SC executives, telepressure is not simply driven by external demands but by internalised norms of conscientious leadership, making it resistant to structural boundary-setting alone. Rademaker et al. (2025) confirmed that leadership behaviours centred on high availability expectations and close control increase follower technostress, while empowering and autonomy-supportive leadership reduces it.

Theoretical perspective: spillover theory and boundary theory

This study adopts spillover theory and boundary theory as a combined framework to explain why digitally connected leadership roles in H&SC can be both effective and personally unsustainable. Spillover theory explains how affective, cognitive, and behavioural states generated at work transfer into non-work domains (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000). Spillover can be positive when work provides resources such as autonomy, meaning, or accomplishment. However, executive work is often characterised by chronic time pressure, high visibility, and persistent accountability, conditions associated with negative spillover and reduced recovery (Stock et al., 2014; Haar et al., 2018). In technologically mediated leadership environments, the expectation of constant responsiveness amplifies this transfer by extending work demands into evenings, weekends, and family time, increasing the likelihood that work strain is carried into personal life and undermining psychological detachment (Mordi et al., 2024; Rademaker et al., 2025). Transformational leadership's relational and inspirational demands can intensify role salience and emotional labour, increasing spillover risk when boundaries are highly permeable (Rabiul et al., 2023).

Boundary theory complements this lens by clarifying how leaders attempt to regulate spillover by constructing and managing temporal, spatial, and psychological boundaries between roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). Boundary permeability and flexibility, and the degree of control individuals have over role transitions, are central to WLB outcomes (Bulger et al., 2007; Allen et al., 2021). These mechanisms are especially salient for executives because digital work practices reduce traditional boundary markers such as fixed office hours and physical separation, making boundaries more negotiable and more vulnerable to intrusion (Kossek, 2016; Adisa et al., 2022). Clark's (2000) work family border theory further emphasises border-crossing negotiation, highlighting that leaders must continually decide when and how to transition between roles, often

without clear cues or organisational support. Importantly, the present study does not seek to develop an alternative boundary management typology. Existing typologies explain how individuals behaviourally manage work and non-work boundaries (e.g. through segmentation or integration). By contrast, this study is concerned with executives' interpretive orientations towards work-life balance, that is, how they understand its meaning, possibility and sustainability before particular boundary strategies are enacted.

Importantly, executives not only manage their own boundaries but also shape the boundary norms that become embedded in organisational routines. Practices such as out-of-hours emailing and implied response expectations can signal what level of availability is valued, thereby influencing how others manage work and nonwork boundaries (Clark, 2000). When leaders model ambiguous or boundaryless digital practices, they may inadvertently normalise unsustainable availability, with implications for well-being and performance across teams (Poma et al., 2025). Spillover and boundary theories enable analysis of both the transmission of strain across domains and the leadership practices through which boundaries are protected, negotiated, or eroded in H&SC contexts.

Methodology

Research context and design

This study was situated within the UK's H&SC sector, a domain profoundly impacted by systemic pressures, including workforce shortages, increased service demands, and accelerated digital transformation, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Temsah et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021). Executives operating in this sector face a uniquely complex environment, marked by high-stakes decision-making, emotional labour, and institutional constraints, making it

an especially relevant context for exploring the interplay between WLB, transformational leadership, and technology.

To investigate these dynamics, the study adopted a qualitative research design guided by an interpretivist paradigm and an inductive analytical approach. This perspective recognises that knowledge is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective meanings individuals attach to their lived experiences (Saunders et al., 2019). Accordingly, the research prioritised the contextualised accounts of participants regarding how they perceived and navigated WLB challenges, and how these were shaped by leadership strategies and digital environments. This approach allowed rich, detailed narratives to guide the discovery of themes. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the analysis focused on letting patterns and insights emerge naturally from the data, ensuring that findings were rooted in the realities of executive life within the H&SC sector (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Sampling strategy

Non-probability sampling was employed, specifically combining convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Convenience sampling involved selecting participants based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher, whilst snowball sampling utilised existing participants to refer others who met the study criteria (Saunders et al., 2019). To address potential limitations, the study ensured transparency in reporting sampling methods and encouraged participants to refer individuals with different perspectives and experiences, including those from both public and private sector contexts and varying role types. We acknowledge that executives willing to discuss their experiences of WLB may represent a non-random subgroup such as those experiencing acute imbalance, those motivated by reflection, or those with greater access to

flexible working may have been more likely to participate. This access bias may limit the representativeness of the sample and should be borne in mind when interpreting findings.

Data saturation was determined through a systematic review of code generation across the interview sequence. From interview 15 onward, no new first-order codes emerged from the data; later interviews instead confirmed and reinforced patterns already identified in the coding structure, indicating that the dataset had reached theoretical sufficiency. Four additional confirmatory interviews were conducted, resulting in a final sample of nineteen participants (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participants' Information

Pseudonym	Job Title	Industry/Field	Sector	Years in Role	Work Schedule	Work Arrangement
Tina	Senior Biomedical Scientist	Healthcare, Adults (NHS)	Public	9 years	Tue-Fri, 9AM-6PM	On-site
Anita	Head of Department, Social Worker	Social Work	Public	1.5 years	5 days/week	Hybrid
John	Executive Lead	Healthcare (NHS)	Public	6 months	Mon-Thu	Hybrid
Ella	Lead Fostering Independent Reviewing Officers	Social Work	Private	5 years	8AM-5PM	Hybrid
Sarah	Senior Social Worker	Social Work	Public	<1 year	Variable	Hybrid
Sally	Business Executive	Law/Legal Services	Public	8 years	5 days/week	On-site
Israel	Senior Member Services Specialist	Social Care, Adults	Private	6.5 years	Mon-Fri, 9AM-5PM	Hybrid
Peace	Lead Occupational Health Advisor	Healthcare (NHS)	Public	7 years	9:30AM-4:30PM	Hybrid
Grace	Head of Nursery	Social Care, Children's Services	Private	1 yr 3 mnths	Full-time	On-site
Lydia	CEO	Social Care	Private	18 years	Variable	Flexible
Naomi	CEO & Registered Manager	Social Care/Foster Care	Private	2+ years	8:30AM-6:30PM	Hybrid
Ruby	CEO	Social Care, Children's Services	Private	6-7 months	Part-time	Hybrid
Clara	Founder & Director	Social Care, Education	Private	22 years	Full-time	Hybrid
Hazel	Senior Marketing Manager	Social Care/Tech	Private	1+ year	Flexible hours	Hybrid
Megan	Executive Manager	Social Work, Children's	Private	3 years	9AM-5PM	Hybrid

Sophie	Social Work Manager	Social Work	Public	N/A	Hybrid	Hybrid
Jasmine	Head of Department & Lecturer	Social Care, Education	Public	2.5 years	Variable	Hybrid
Olivia	Marketing Director	Healthcare/Social Care	Private	7 years	9AM-5PM (Flexible)	Hybrid
Emma	Senior Programme Lead	Public Health	Public	<1 year	Past 5 PM	Hybrid

The health and social care (H&SC) sector is structurally gendered, with women disproportionately represented across many care professions and leadership pathways (Anderson et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2004). This demographic pattern is relevant because care work is frequently associated with expectations of relational labour, emotional attentiveness, and professional availability that may shape how work–life boundaries are experienced and negotiated (Fletcher, 2004; Williams et al., 2013). Leadership and work–family scholarship further suggests that women executives can face distinct expectations surrounding accessibility, care, and role performance, often alongside unequal domestic responsibilities, although the extent and form of these pressures vary across organisational and personal contexts (Lyness and Judiesch, 2008; Williams et al., 2013). Given that most participants in this study were women, the findings should be interpreted with sensitivity to the possibility that executives’ experiences of digital connectivity, transformational leadership, and boundary management may be shaped in part by gendered expectations. At the same time, the present study was not designed to examine gender differences directly; therefore, gender is treated here as an important contextual condition rather than an explanatory variable.

Validity was assessed through face and content validity measures, with expert reviews sought to establish the appropriateness of interview questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Member checking was conducted by sharing draft theme summaries and representative interpretations with a subset of participants after the initial analysis. Participants were invited to

assess whether the themes and interpretations resonated with their experiences, and their feedback was incorporated into the final analytical iteration. For example, participant feedback during this process led to a clearer articulation of the distinction between structural and voluntary dimensions of the WLB achievability orientation, as several participants emphasised that their monitoring of work during personal time was self-imposed rather than organisationally required.

Peer debriefing enhanced credibility, whilst data saturation indicated the depth and comprehensiveness of collected data (Saunders et al., 2019). Reliability was addressed through pilot testing and transparency in design and methods to reinforce rigour. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the authors' institutional ethics committee. All data were stored securely in compliance with institutional data management policies, with participants assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity, and raw recordings and transcripts retained for the duration required under applicable research governance guidelines.

Data collection

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, which lasted 40–60 minutes. This interaction mode mirrored the digitally hybrid working spaces under investigation. The interview schedule was developed from extant literature on WLB, digital, and leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Clark, 2000) and pilot tested for resonance and clarity. Participants were asked to explain their digital overload, boundary management, and leadership responses to WLB issues. Examples include “Can you describe your typical workday and weekday?” “How have you incorporated technology to enhance WLB?” “How have you supported your employees in achieving WLB?” “Can you share any challenges or benefits of using technology in your WLB?”

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step framework. Step 1 involved familiarisation: all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, verified for accuracy, and read repeatedly to develop initial familiarity. Step 2 involved initial coding using NVivo 12: line-by-line coding was applied inductively to capture both explicit meanings and underlying patterns. Codes were generated without reference to theoretical categories at this stage to preserve inductive integrity, including codes such as "switching off," "constant checking," "crisis-driven availability," "seasonal adjustment" and "using flexibility strategically." Step 3 involved constructing candidate themes through visual mapping, grouping codes by conceptual similarity and relational patterns. At this stage, the three WLB orientations began to emerge as distinct interpretive patterns based on how participants understood the meaning and achievability of WLB, rather than only the boundary tactics they used. Step 4 involved reviewing themes against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and external distinction, with candidate themes tested against disconfirming cases, including accounts where participants had structural flexibility but continued voluntary monitoring. Step 5 involved defining and naming themes, with clear scope descriptions and sub-themes where appropriate. Peer debriefing within the author team and member checking with five highly engaged participants helped refine the final interpretation of the orientations. Step 6 involved writing up the analysis and connecting the inductively generated themes to spillover theory, boundary theory and transformational leadership literature. The data structure is presented in the appendices.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The lead researcher is an executive within the H&SC sector in England, bringing an insider perspective to this study. This facilitated rapport with participants, enabled credible probing of

their experiences, and supported recognition of sector-specific pressures that might have been overlooked by an outsider. Participants were therefore able to discuss their experiences without extensive contextual explanation, resulting in richer accounts. However, this insider position also created the possibility of over-identification with participants and the risk that the researcher's own experiences of WLB could influence data interpretation.

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, these influences were treated as part of the research process rather than as sources of bias to be eliminated. To minimise their impact, coding was undertaken inductively without reference to predefined theoretical categories, allowing patterns to emerge from participants' accounts before being interpreted through spillover theory, boundary theory, and transformational leadership. Throughout the analysis, the lead researcher maintained reflexive memos to examine how professional experience and theoretical familiarity shaped emerging interpretations. Interpretations were also subjected to regular peer debriefing with the co-authors, who were external to the H&SC sector and challenged alternative explanations, questioned coding decisions, and required analytic claims to remain grounded in the data rather than professional assumptions. Member checking with a subset of participants further confirmed that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

The three WLB orientations emerged inductively through iterative comparison of participants' accounts rather than from existing WLB or boundary management frameworks. Although familiarity with the literature informed the later interpretation of the findings, the typology itself was developed through repeated refinement of the data, including attention to disconfirming cases. This combination of insider familiarity, systematic reflexive practice, and external analytical challenge strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Results

The analysis examines how executives experience work–life balance in digitally connected leadership roles and how boundary management is shaped by role demands and organisational context. Two main themes were developed from the data. The first theme focuses on how executives made sense of work–life boundaries under digital pressure. The second theme highlights differences in transformational leadership implementation across public and private contexts and differences in how technology enables or constrains WLB.

Executives' WLB orientations under digital pressure

Executives described markedly different ways of understanding and managing work–life boundaries. These differences were not simply personal preferences, as their accounts reflected distinct beliefs about whether balance was achievable, what good leadership required, and how far digital connectivity should reach into non-work time. We use “WLB orientation” to refer to the interpretive frames through which executives made sense of WLB, not to boundary preferences or management styles as described in Kossek (2016) or the border-crossing preferences described by Clark (2000). Three WLB orientations emerged from the data. Some leaders positioned balance as achievable through deliberate boundary work (balance achievers). Others portrayed balance as largely incompatible with high-stakes roles (balance sceptics). A third group treated WLB as dynamic, requiring ongoing recalibration rather than a stable endpoint. These orientations help explain variation in how leaders responded to the digital pull of work, even within the same sector, and reflect how executives subjectively constructed the meaning of balance within their specific role contexts. These orientations should not be interpreted as behavioural boundary management styles. Rather, they represent interpretive frames through which executives make sense of whether work-life balance is possible within the realities of digitally connected leadership.

Balance Achievers. A subset of executives described WLB as achievable and reported intentional steps to protect time, space, and attention. Many linked “balance” to deliberate work design, including hybrid or part-time arrangements and explicit limits on availability. Participant accounts emphasised control over when work could expand and when it had to stop. For example, a CEO described how flexible scheduling enabled family time and reduced work’s encroachment into personal life:

It’s flexible, that makes it very easy... I’m working twice a week... I’ve got a very good WLB. I have a lot of time to spend with my family at the end of the day. (Ruby, CEO, Social care)

Other achievers described firm non-work protections that signalled a clear refusal to normalise weekend labour:

Work is work and life is life. I work three days in the office and two days at home. I don’t work weekends at all... I just don’t want to give my weekends to work. (Olivia, Marketing Director, H&SC)

Olivia’s account captures boundary-setting as an active decision: the language of “not wanting to give” signals an agentic claim over personal time rather than passive compliance with policy. This framing is consistent with Kreiner et al.’s (2009) finding that effective boundary management involves active negotiation of what is voluntarily surrendered to work, not merely what is structurally prevented.

At the same time, achievers did not always describe full psychological detachment. Even when structural flexibility existed, some executives described an ongoing need to monitor work, driven by anxiety and responsibility rather than policy:

If I really want to switch off, I can, but I choose not to. I'm just a worrier; I need to know that there's nothing going wrong. (Grace, Head of Nursery, Children's services)

Grace's account reveals a dynamic that structural flexibility alone cannot address. In this case, boundary management is also an identity project. Her "worrier" self-identification reflects an internalised professional obligation that persists even when organisational conditions support separation. Theoretically, this illustrates how professional identity centrality (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Dutton et al., 2010) generates self-imposed telepressure (Barber and Santuzzi, 2015). Where role identity and organisational membership are tightly fused, boundary protection can feel like abandonment rather than self-care. Although some balance achievers described voluntarily monitoring work outside formal hours, they generally interpreted this behaviour as a deliberate and controllable choice that coexisted with an overall belief that work-life balance remained attainable. Monitoring therefore reflected selective permeability rather than an inability to disengage.

Overall, balance achievers framed WLB as possible but effortful. The data suggest that achieving balance depended on both enabling conditions such as flexibility and supportive organisational norms, and personal discipline in resisting digital encroachment, with moral obligation to the role sustaining permeability even among those who considered themselves balanced (Blair-Loy, 2003).

Balance Sceptics. In contrast, some executives described WLB as unrealistic in practice. Scepticism was frequently grounded in the unpredictability and urgency of safeguarding, crisis management, and frontline leadership, where work demands shifted rapidly and could not be scheduled away. One participant linked the absence of balance to the daily crisis nature of safeguarding roles:

There's really no WLB, especially in safeguarding roles where you manage crises daily.
(Sarah, Senior Social Worker, Social work)

Another participant expanded this point by emphasising uncertainty, after-hours work, and the resulting impact on family time:

In my role, I think it's difficult to do it. It can be difficult to have a work-life balance because you're also managing crisis on a daily basis. You don't know what's going to happen, and sometimes you end up working after hours or before hours. It leaves very little time for family. (Anita, Head of Department, Social work)

For some sceptics, the issue was not only role intensity but the fit of the “balance” concept itself:

The thing that popped into my head was like, doesn't exist. WLB just doesn't exist. The goal is mindfulness, not balance. (Emma, Senior Programme Lead, Public health)

Emma's rejection of the balance metaphor is analytically significant. It suggests that for some executives, WLB scepticism is not simply about workload but about the conceptual adequacy of “balance” as a framework for high-stakes, crisis-driven professional life. This resonates with Storm and Muhr's (2023) critique that WLB discourse can function as a form of institutional gaslighting, implying individual achievability in structurally impossible conditions.

A notable feature of the sceptic orientation was self-awareness about complicity. Several participants did not attribute imbalance solely to external expectations:

It's not somebody else insisting there's no balance; it's all my own doing. (Lydia, CEO, Social care)

Lydia's attribution of imbalance to “my own doing” illustrates a critical dynamic in how structural conditions become psychologically internalised. Rather than identifying the chronic

demands of a CEO role in a resource-constrained sector as the proximate cause of imbalance, Lydia frames the problem as a matter of personal agency and self-discipline. This internalisation is not simply an individual cognitive error; it reflects how care leadership norms, professional identity, and the moral weight of responsibility systematically redirect structural critique toward self-blame. From a COR perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), this attribution is doubly costly because it both masks the structural drivers of resource depletion and reduces leaders' likelihood of seeking systemic remedies or collective support.

These accounts show that scepticism did not equal ignorance. Many participants understood what balance would require but experienced either structural incompatibility, personal over-responsibility, or both. Consistent with spillover theory (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000), work demands carried emotional and cognitive residue extending well beyond formal working hours, a pattern Grandey and Cropanzano (1999) link to the depletion of emotional resources over sustained periods. From a COR perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), resource depletion generated by chronic crisis demand erodes the very capacity needed to contest or reframe those demands, trapping leaders in a loss spiral that individual effort alone is unlikely to interrupt. It is important to note that balance sceptics interpreted similar behaviours very differently. For example, rather than viewing after-hours monitoring as an occasional choice, they regarded it as an inevitable consequence of responsible leadership within crisis-driven environments. Thus, the defining characteristic of this orientation was not greater boundary permeability itself, but the belief that sustained work-life balance was fundamentally unattainable.

WLB as a Dynamic and Contextual Process. A third orientation framed WLB as fluid rather than fixed. Participants described “balance” as something to regulate across cycles, seasons, and life stages. Instead of aiming for a stable equilibrium, these executives emphasised adaptation,

recovery after intense periods, and intentional recalibration. This orientation was represented across both sectors and role levels, suggesting it reflects a meaning-making stance rather than a sector-specific structural condition. Compared to the other two orientations, dynamic regulation is the most resource-intensive: it requires metacognitive awareness of one's own depletion state, organisational conditions that permit fluctuating availability, and sufficient recovery time for recalibration to actually occur.

One participant described a pattern of stretching during peak seasons and then pulling back:

There are periods when I have to be fully hands-on, sometimes working evenings and weekends, because that's the nature of our busiest season. But once that's over, I pull right back and take extra time for myself and my family. (Israel, Senior Member Services Specialist, Social care)

Another executive acknowledged bursts of extreme work without treating those bursts as permanent:

I think, as I said... those moments where I am working crazy hours... it's not all the time. (Lydia, CEO, Social care)

Life stage also shaped dynamic regulation, with one participant explaining how work intensity changed as family responsibilities shifted:

When my children were very young, I took on less at work and built in shorter days. Now they're older, I've been able to take on bigger projects again. It's never one formula forever. (Hazel, Senior Marketing Manager, Social care/tech)

Hazel's account is notable for its temporal framing. WLB here is not a daily or weekly achievement but a lifespan-calibrated negotiation, in which the balance point shifts with changing

personal and professional responsibilities. This aligns with Casper et al.'s (2018) argument that WLB is better understood as a temporal and situational judgement than a stable equilibrium. Several participants cited COVID-19 as a structural pivot point that fundamentally changed what was acceptable in terms of flexibility and weekly planning:

Pre-COVID life was very different. We were all in the office, long hours, commuting. Post-COVID, I can plan my week around school runs or even just a walk at lunchtime. The culture has shifted, and I think that's here to stay. (Peace, Lead Occupational Health Advisor, Healthcare)

Peace's account highlights both the structural conditions that enabled recalibration (remote working, hybrid schedules) and the normative shift in what "good" availability looks like. Importantly, dynamic regulators did not simply return to pre-pandemic patterns when organisational demands resumed; they actively maintained renegotiated boundaries. This suggests that the pandemic function was less as a temporary disruption and more as a legitimising event that made boundary recalibration publicly acceptable for the first time. Consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the deliberate resource-recovery phases described by dynamic regulators can be understood as active resource replenishment strategies that interrupt potential loss spirals before depletion becomes chronic.

Overall, this orientation positioned WLB as a capacity to recalibrate boundaries without losing control of workload or well-being, particularly under fluctuating demands and persistent digital connectivity. This aligns with Casper et al.'s (2018) argument that WLB is better understood as a temporal and situational judgement than a stable equilibrium, and with Kreiner et al.'s (2009) finding that effective boundary management involves active, iterative tactics rather than fixed rules. Leaders in this group drew on both temporal and relational boundary strategies, adjusting

availability patterns across seasons, life stages, and organisational cycles (Clark, 2000; Kossek, 2016). This reflects a dynamic rather than static relationship with boundaries, in which permeability is accepted as situational rather than experienced as failure.

Contextualised transformational leadership as boundary work

Participants described transformational leadership as inseparable from boundary management in digitally connected H&SC work. Across sectors, leaders framed WLB as a leadership concern because team well-being affected retention, morale, and service delivery. Leaders also described a reciprocal dynamic: when they protected staff well-being, reduced avoidable escalation, and clarified availability expectations, leaders experienced fewer after-hours crises and greater personal recovery. However, the form this boundary work took differed markedly by sector. Public sector leaders relied more on relational care and visibility to stabilise teams in constrained conditions. Private sector leaders more often embedded empowerment, delegation, and well-being into routines and systems, supported by more reliable technology. These sectoral differences should be read with awareness that role-level variation also exists within the sample (see Table 1): several public sector participants are frontline managers rather than senior executives, while several private sector participants are CEOs. Role discretion, as much as sector alone, may contribute to the differences described below.

Relational care as compensatory boundary work in the public sector. Public sector executives frequently described transformational leadership as grounded in daily relational care. They emphasised visibility, emotional attentiveness, and individualised awareness as tools for maintaining team stability in under-resourced environments:

In the morning, I say hello to everyone... check in on how they're doing before the day gets away from us. And when that member of staff is not performing, I know why... it's usually something personal, not laziness. (Tina, Senior Biomedical Scientist, Healthcare)

Tina's practice reflects the individualised consideration dimension of transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994), enacted through brief but personalised daily contact. This functions as boundary work because it enables early problem identification, reducing the likelihood that staff difficulties escalate into after-hours crises for the leader. Supporting staff was repeatedly framed as a strategy for reducing boundary-threatening escalation rather than simply as an ethical commitment:

You want to be supportive through training, mentoring, just being there, but there's always the reality that the job has to get done, often with fewer people than we need. Still, if I can keep my team steady, it means fewer crises land back on my desk at night. (Ella, Independent Reviewing Lead, Social work)

However, some executives described boundary protection as fragile because operational volatility could override well-being plans:

If a crisis hits, all our well-being plans go out the window. We rally around each other, but it's survival mode until the pressure eases, and that includes me. If they're stretched, I'm stretched more. (Sarah, Senior Social Worker, Social work)

Sarah's account reveals a structural feature of public sector H&SC leadership: the relational care that functions as proactive boundary work is precisely the capacity that crisis conditions erode. This creates a paradox in which the leadership strategy for protecting boundaries requires the same personal resources that boundary erosion depletes. From a COR perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), this is a loss spiral: caring for staff under crisis conditions draws on the same

resources needed for personal recovery, accelerating depletion rather than preventing it. Technology use often intensified these constraints. Public sector leaders commonly framed technology use as an administrative burden rather than a boundary support:

Our systems feel like they were designed ten years ago. You spend half your time finding workarounds, and by the time you do, the evening's gone, and so is your energy. (Peace, Lead Occupational Health Advisor, Healthcare)

Outdated infrastructure was described as consuming time, increasing cognitive load, and pushing work into evenings. Ella's account extends this point by linking technology failure to unpredictability that followed leaders home:

We don't have a shared electronic calendar... and the database is down at least a few days every month. You can't plan properly when the tools are unreliable, and that chaos follows you home. (Ella, Independent Reviewing Lead, Social work)

The cumulative picture from public sector accounts is that technology in these settings functions as a source of avoidable spillover rather than a boundary enabler. Unlike the digital tether described by Nagy (2020), which operates through connectivity, the problem here is fragmentation and unreliability: work is extended not because leaders are over-connected but because tasks cannot be completed efficiently within designated hours. Overall, public sector leaders often enacted boundary work through relational buffering and crisis prevention, but weak technological infrastructure and limited discretion constrained the durability of these practices.

System-embedded empowerment as proactive boundary work in the private sector. Private sector executives described a more strategic, developmental approach to transformational leadership. While they faced their own challenges, their accounts emphasised empowerment, delegation, and long-term growth, often supported by organisational flexibility and more reliable

technology. For instance, Lydia framed leadership as combining empathy with vision and responsibility-sharing:

You need to be visionary... have empathy, yes, but also show people the bigger picture. Give them responsibility, trust them, and then step back so they can grow. (Lydia, CEO, Social care)

Israel extended this point by framing leadership success in terms of enabling progression beyond the immediate team:

I want people to progress and move on, even if it means leaving my team eventually. That's success to me...show them the way, support them, and then watch them fly. (Israel, Senior Member Services Specialist, Social care)

These leadership practices functioned as boundary work because delegation and team development reduced pressure concentration at the top. Executives described proactive well-being practices as preventing small issues from becoming large crises:

We replaced 'action plans' with 'support plans'. If someone's struggling, we focus on what's going on in their life as much as the work, and build from there. That sometimes stops small problems becoming big ones. (Naomi, CEO and Registered Manager, Foster care)

Technology use was central to how private sector leaders translated leadership intent into boundary protection. Executives described integrated platforms and collaboration tools as reducing duplication, limiting email chains, and enabling clearer workflow control:

We run our entire project board on Monday.com, meetings on Teams, and daily quick chats on Slack. It keeps everything moving without endless emails, which means I can actually log off at a decent hour. (Hazel, Senior Marketing Manager, Social care/tech)

We've invested in software that fits our processes exactly. Everyone can access it remotely, so I'm not wasting time chasing documents or duplicating work...and I get my evenings back. (Sally, Business Executive, Legal services)

Hazel's and Sally's accounts position technology as boundary infrastructure rather than a source of intrusion, which is the inverse of the public sector experience. Technology investment here enables predictable stopping points, asynchronous coordination, and delegation to happen efficiently, functioning as a structural enabler of the empowerment-based leadership model. Across these accounts, private sector leaders portrayed technology as reinforcing boundaries rather than eroding them, though it is important to note that the relative organisational autonomy and decision-making power of CEO-level participants in the private sector sample may itself be a confounding factor in explaining the difference from public sector accounts.

Discussion and Implications

This study set out to explain how H&SC executives in England and Wales experience WLB in digitally connected leadership roles, and how transformational leadership and technology shape the construction and protection of work-life boundaries. Two core insights emerge. First, executives did not simply experience greater or lesser levels of balance; rather, they interpreted and enacted WLB through distinct orientations that shaped how they understood digital connectivity, responsibility, and leadership demands. Second, transformational leadership functioned not merely as a behavioural style but as a form of boundary work through which leaders sought to manage organisational strain, protect staff wellbeing, and reduce spillover into their own non-work lives. However, the sustainability of this leadership work varied significantly according to sectoral conditions and technological infrastructure.

Theoretical contributions and implications

This study contributes to WLB scholarship by shifting attention away from WLB as a static outcome and towards the interpretive systems through which leaders make sense of boundary permeability in digitally connected work. Traditional WLB scholarship has conceptualised balance primarily as the absence of conflict (Frone, 2003), equal satisfaction across life domains (Greenhaus et al., 2003), or an outcome shaped by institutional arrangements of time and space (Felstead et al., 2002). While these approaches provide valuable explanatory foundations, the present findings suggest that executives' experiences of WLB are shaped not only by demands and resources but also by how leaders interpret what balance is realistically achievable within high-accountability environments.

The paper's central theoretical claim is that WLB orientations represent an interpretive layer that sits between the structural conditions described by boundary theory and the behavioural outcomes described by spillover theory. Existing typologies (e.g., Kossek, 2016) describe what people do with boundaries; WLB orientations describe what people believe about boundaries as a function of their role, sector, and professional identity. Put differently, boundary management typologies classify practices or preferences, such as segmentation, integration, permeability, or flexibility. WLB orientations classify executives' underlying assumptions about whether balance is possible, desirable, or realistic in the first place. This distinction matters because the same structural condition (e.g., the ability to work flexibly) can generate entirely different boundary behaviours depending on the orientation through which a leader interprets it.

Balance achievers activate flexible arrangements as intentional protection; balance sceptics may read the same flexibility as insufficient for the genuine demands of their role; dynamic regulators use it as a mechanism for recalibration rather than consistent separation. Identifying the

orientation-layer helps explain why structural interventions alone frequently fail to produce the expected WLB improvements.

The three WLB orientations indicate that executives approach balance through qualitatively different meaning systems rather than simply occupying different positions on a continuum of success or failure. Balance achievers framed WLB as attainable through intentional boundary work, flexibility, and self-regulation. Yet their accounts simultaneously revealed persistent monitoring impulses and emotional attachment to role responsibilities, suggesting that structural flexibility alone is insufficient for psychological detachment. This finding complicates assumptions that flexible working arrangements necessarily produce healthier WLB outcomes, instead highlighting how leaders may voluntarily reproduce boundary erosion through moral responsibility and role identification.

In contrast, balance sceptics framed WLB as fundamentally incompatible with the realities of crisis-driven executive work. Importantly, scepticism did not reflect ignorance of healthy boundary practices. Rather, participants described environments in which unpredictability, emotional accountability, and safeguarding obligations rendered sustained separation structurally implausible. This suggests that what is often interpreted as poor boundary management may instead represent an adaptive response to institutional conditions.

WLB scepticism appears less an individual failure and more a reflection of how organisational systems normalise chronic availability while shifting responsibility for coping onto leaders. This interpretation extends critiques of WLB discourse that argue “balance” can obscure structural incompatibilities within demanding professions (Storm and Muhr, 2023; Temsah et al., 2020).

The third orientation, dynamic regulation, further challenges static understandings of balance by illustrating how executives treated WLB as an ongoing process of recalibration. Leaders adapted boundaries across life stages, seasonal workload fluctuations, and organisational demands, often normalising periods of temporary imbalance provided recovery remained possible. Accordingly, the findings advance recent arguments that WLB is situational and iterative (Casper et al., 2018; Kreiner et al., 2009), while extending these ideas into digitally tethered leadership contexts.

A second contribution reconceptualises transformational leadership as contextually embedded boundary work. Public-sector executives relied heavily on relational attentiveness and emotional support to stabilise teams, reflecting the individualised consideration dimension of transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994). However, such care frequently became compensatory labour in response to institutional deficiencies rather than a discretionary strategy. The “dark side” of transformational leadership (Hoch et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2019) is therefore reframed here as a structural rather than purely psychological problem: leadership sustainability depends on whether organisational conditions make relational care manageable.

Private-sector executives more frequently embedded empowerment and development into systems and routines, making transformational leadership more sustainable. Rademaker and Süß (2025)’s finding that transformational leadership simultaneously intensifies and provides resources for coping with technostress mirrors the pattern observed here: leaders’ relational investment sustains team resilience while drawing on the personal resources their own recovery requires.

A third contribution concerns technology as boundary infrastructure. Public-sector technology appeared to generate avoidable spillover not through over-connectivity but through

fragmentation and unreliability, preventing work from being completed within hours and extending cognitive residue into personal time. Private-sector technology, by contrast, functioned as a structural enabler of delegation, workflow clarity, and predictable stopping points. This moves beyond technology acceptance frameworks (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh and Bala, 2008) to argue that the WLB consequences of technology depend on infrastructural quality and organisational embeddedness.

Practical implications

The findings carry important implications for leadership development, organisational design, and health system policy in H&SC settings. First, organisations should move beyond generic advice encouraging leaders to “disconnect” and instead formalise digital communication norms that clarify availability expectations. Ambiguous expectations appeared to foster anticipatory conformity, where leaders voluntarily remained accessible in anticipation of stakeholder needs. Clear escalation pathways, defined response windows, and visible modelling of boundary protection by senior leadership may reduce unnecessary permeability while preserving responsiveness for genuine emergencies.

Second, executive development programmes should treat digital boundary competence as a measurable leadership capability rather than a personal wellbeing issue. Boundary competence refers to the capacity to assess one’s own depletion state, calibrate digital availability according to role demands, and communicate boundary expectations in ways that legitimise recovery rather than stigmatise it. Leadership training should equip executives with these skills rather than relying on generic resilience frameworks.

Third, the findings suggest that technology investment should be treated as a wellbeing intervention in NHS and social care commissioning decisions, not only an operational upgrade

(Poma et al., 2025). The finding that public-sector technology infrastructure functions as a well-being threat, rather than an efficiency resource, carries direct implications for NHS digital strategy. Fragmented and unreliable systems extend working hours and erode recovery for a leadership workforce already facing a 124,000-vacancy crisis (Sumption and Strain-Fajth, 2023).

Investment in integrated scheduling systems, reliable databases, and workflow-compatible platforms may therefore be understood as interventions in executive health and leadership sustainability, with implications for social care commissioning frameworks and NHS People Plan commitments around staff well-being (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2022; Bottaro et al., 2024).

Fourth, the societal implications of normalised overwork in a sector experiencing chronic vacancies warrant explicit attention. Policymakers and commissioners should consider whether current digital infrastructure and boundary norms in publicly funded H&SC settings represent a systemic risk to leadership retention, and whether executive well-being metrics should be incorporated into regulatory frameworks and workforce strategies alongside those for frontline staff.

Limitations and suggestions for further studies

Several limitations shape interpretation and open avenues for future research. The study is qualitative and context-specific to executives in England and Wales, so transferability should be assessed carefully rather than assumed. The findings are intended to support analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisation. Readers should therefore consider whether the conditions identified in this study, including high accountability, digital availability, crisis exposure, care responsibilities, and limited organisational discretion, are present in other leadership contexts before applying the typology beyond UK H&SC.

The relatively small sample also has implications for the development of the WLB orientation typology. Although the sample generated rich, theoretically relevant accounts and thematic saturation was reached, the three orientations should be treated as an inductively developed interpretive typology rather than a definitive or exhaustive classification of executive WLB experience. The study identifies plausible orientation patterns, but it cannot establish their prevalence, stability, or boundaries across wider populations of leaders.

The design captures leaders' accounts at one point in time; longitudinal work could test how WLB orientations shift across crises, life stages, or digital transformation initiatives, and whether orientation type predicts leadership attrition. Future research should specifically examine the relationship between WLB orientation and measurable boundary behaviours. Studies can, for instance, test whether balance sceptics show higher rates of after-hours messaging or whether dynamic regulators demonstrate lower burnout over time. Quantitative validation of the orientation typology would strengthen the construct's empirical standing and establish whether orientations are stable traits or context-responsive states.

The sampling strategy, which combined convenience and snowball methods, introduces access bias, as executives willing to discuss WLB may systematically differ from those who declined, and the predominantly female, UK-based sample limits demographic generalisability. Gender and intersectionality perspectives require focused examination, as the present study's findings may reflect gendered patterns of care leadership that would not generalise to male-dominated or differently gendered professional contexts. Cross-cultural and cross-system comparisons would be particularly valuable to determine whether the orientations identified are specific to the H&SC context, to the UK's particular institutional regime, or to digitally connected leadership more broadly.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that executive WLB in digitally connected H&SC settings cannot be adequately understood through simplistic distinctions between balance and imbalance. Instead, leaders interpret and negotiate work–life boundaries through distinct orientations shaped by organisational context, professional identity, and digital expectations. The findings further show that transformational leadership is inseparable from boundary management, functioning as a form of relational and organisational work through which leaders attempt to protect both team functioning and their own recovery. However, whether this leadership remains sustainable depends heavily on sectoral conditions and technological infrastructure.

More broadly, the study suggests that leadership sustainability should be treated as an organisational achievement rather than an individual responsibility. Expectations that leaders remain emotionally available, digitally responsive, and transformational under persistent strain risk normalising forms of leadership that are effective in the short term but personally unsustainable over time. Sustainable leadership therefore depends not only on individual resilience but also on organisational systems that make healthy boundary management possible.

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Appendix 1: WLB Orientations

Indicative Quotes	First-Order Codes	Second-Order/Consolidated Codes	Aggregate/Main Themes
"It's flexible, that makes it very easy... I'm working twice a week... I've got a very good WLB. I have a lot of time to spend with my family at the end of the day." (P12)	Flexible work arrangements, time for family, satisfaction with balance	Structural enablers for balance	Balance Achievers
"Work is work and life is life. I work three days in the office and two days at home. I don't work weekends at all—I just don't want to give my weekends to work." (P18)	Clear boundaries, weekend protection, active resistance to spillover	Intentional boundary management	
"If I really want to switch off, I can, but I choose not to. I'm just a worrier; I need to know that there's nothing going wrong." (P9)	Voluntary connection, anxiety about detachment, professional identity integration	Psychological attachment challenges	
"There's really no WLB, especially in safeguarding roles where you manage crises daily." (P5)	Crisis-driven work, unpredictability, structural constraints	Role-based incompatibility	Balance Sceptics
"In my role, I think it's difficult to do it... you're also managing crisis on a daily basis. You don't know what's going to happen, and sometimes you end up working after hours or before hours." (P2)	Daily crisis management, unpredictable hours, family time limitations	Structural barriers to balance	
"The thing that popped into my head was like, doesn't exist. WLB just doesn't exist. The goal is mindfulness, not balance." (P19)	Rejection of balance concept, alternative frameworks, mindfulness over balance	Reconceptualising balance paradigm	
"It's not somebody else insisting there's no balance; it's all my own doing." (P13)	Self-imposed imbalance, personal responsibility, internal work drive	Self-perpetuated imbalance	Dynamic and Contextual Process
"I am a big advocate for, put your mental health first... Honestly, I don't sleep a lot, so if I'm awake until three AM, I will constantly be checking my emails up until 3:00 AM." (P9)	Value-behavior contradiction, awareness without change, compulsive work habits	Internalized tension	
"There are periods when I have to be fully hands-on, sometimes working evenings and weekends... But once that's over, I pull right back and take extra time for myself and my family." (P7)	Seasonal adaptation, compensatory balance, cyclical work patterns	Temporal flexibility and adaptation	
"When my children were very young, I took on less at work... Now they're older, I've been able to take on bigger projects again. It's never one formula forever." (P14)	Life stage responsiveness, family-centered adjustments, evolving strategies	Life-stage responsiveness	
"Pre-COVID life was very different... Post-COVID, I can plan my week around school runs or even just a walk at lunchtime. The culture has shifted, and I think that's here to stay." (P8)	Pandemic catalyst, cultural transformation, long-term changes	External context influence	
"I think as I said... those moments where I am working crazy hours... it's not all the time." (P10)	Episodic intensity, temporary imbalance, contextual variation	Situational calibration	

Appendix 2: Contextualised transformational leadership as boundary work

Indicative Quotes	First-Order Codes	Second-Order/Consolidated Codes	Aggregate/Main Themes
"In the morning, I say hello to everyone... check in on how they're doing before the day gets away from us. And when that member of staff is not performing, I know why—it's usually something personal, not laziness." (P1, NHS)	Daily personal check-ins, emotional awareness, personal understanding of performance	Relational care and empathy	Relational care as compensatory boundary work in the public sector
"You want to be supportive through training, mentoring, just being there but there's always the reality that the job has to get done, often with fewer people than we need." (P4, Social Work)	Supportive intentions, resource constraints, operational reality	Compensatory leadership under constraints	
"You need to be visionary... have empathy, yes, but also show people the bigger picture. Give them responsibility, trust them, and then step back so they can grow." (P10, CEO)	Vision communication, empowerment approach, delegation and growth focus	Strategic-developmental leadership	System-embedded empowerment as proactive boundary work in the private sector
"I want people to progress and move on, even if it means leaving my team eventually. That's success to me—show them the way, support them, and then watch them fly." (P3, Executive Lead)	Long-term development, success redefinition, growth facilitation	Empowerment-focused approach	