AMBIDEXTROUS LEADERSHIP, LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE, AND CAREER ORIENTATION AS DRIVERS OF DECISION-MAKING AGILITY AND WORK–LIFE BALANCE: A FUZZY-SET QCA STUDY IN KNOWLEDGE INDUSTRIES

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ABSTRACT

*Knowledge-intensive organizations increasingly seek to foster both agile decision-making and employee well-being. This study investigates how combinations of ambidextrous leadership (AL), leader–member exchange (LMX), and career orientation (CO) influence two crucial outcomes for knowledge workers – decision-making agility (DMA) and work–life balance (WLB). Drawing on leadership and career theory, we develop a configurational model and employed fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to analyze survey data from mid-level managers, team leads, and analysts in IT and consulting sectors (N = 60). The results reveal multiple equifinal configurations of AL, LMX, and CO that lead to high DMA and high WLB. Notably, strong ambidextrous leadership combined with high-quality LMX emerges as a core driver of agile decision-making and employee work-life balance. In contrast, certain career orientations moderate these effects, highlighting that **who** the employee is (career-driven or not) influences **how** leadership yields agility and balance. The study extends ambidextrous leadership theory into the realm of employee well-being and offers a novel application of fsQCA in knowledge-work settings. We discussed theoretical implications for leadership and career research and practical insights for managers seeking to simultaneously boost organizational agility and support work–life balance.*

Keywords: Ambidextrous leadership; Leader–member exchange; Career orientation; Decision-making agility; Work–life balance; Fuzzy-set QCA; Knowledge workers.

INTRODUCTION

In today's knowledge-based industries such as IT, consulting, and R&D, knowledge workers—including mid-level managers and analysts—face the dual demands of decision-making agility (DMA) and maintaining work–life balance (WLB). While they are expected to act quickly and effectively in dynamic markets, they also increasingly prioritize personal well-being and sustainable careers. This creates a tension between organizational performance and individual balance (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). To understand how knowledge workers can simultaneously achieve DMA and WLB, this study explores three key influences: ambidextrous leadership (AL), leader–member exchange (LMX), and career orientation (CO) (Zacher & Rosing, 2015). AL enables leaders to switch flexibly between encouraging exploration and enforcing execution, while LMX emphasizes high-quality, trust-based relationships that foster autonomy and support. Career orientation, especially protean career values, influences how employees approach challenges and value flexibility versus advancement (Greenhaus et al., 2003).

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Together, AL, LMX, and CO represent a triad of external and internal conditions that likely interact to shape both agility and balance at work. Rather than viewing these variables in isolation, this study uses fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to identify configurations - "causal recipes" that enable high DMA and WLB. fsQCA's configurational logic is well-suited to examining how combinations of leadership styles and personal orientations contribute to desired outcomes, recognizing that multiple paths can lead to success (equifinality). By applying fsQCA to the knowledge industry context, this research extends leadership theory beyond innovation and provides practical insights for supporting agile yet well-balanced professionals. Managers can learn which leadership behaviors or team dynamics promote both speed and sustainability, helping them foster a healthier, high-performing workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ambidextrous Leadership (AL)

Ambidextrous leadership, as articulated by Rosing, Frese, and Bausch (2011), empowers leaders to balance creativity and efficiency by alternating between "opening" behaviors (e.g., encouraging experimentation) and "closing" behaviors (e.g., enforcing routines), thereby fostering both exploration and exploitation. Empirical research demonstrates that this dual approach enhances innovation at team and individual levels (Rosing & Zacher, 2017; Zacher & Rosing, 2015). In knowledge-driven contexts, such leaders might first invite divergent brainstorming before imposing deadlines and quality standards, creating a dynamic environment that both stimulates swift, creative decision-making and ensures disciplined, effective implementation.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX)

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the unique, dyadic relationships leaders form with each subordinate, with high-quality LMX characterized by mutual trust, respect, and support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Such relationships have been linked to improved job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment (Gerstner & Day, 1997), largely due to increased access to information, autonomy, and psychological safety. For knowledge workers handling complex, autonomy-driven tasks, high LMX facilitates swift, informed decision-making and fosters creativity through open communication and trust. Moreover, LMX plays a crucial role in shaping work–life balance (WLB), as leaders who value employees holistically tend to offer greater flexibility and emotional support. Research by Major and Lauzun (2010) and Tummers and Bronkhorst (2014) highlights how high-LMX leaders help employees better leverage WLB policies and negotiate personal boundaries. However, if flexibility is granted only as a reward for exceptional performance, this dynamic can paradoxically pressure employees to overwork. Thus, the impact of LMX on WLB is shaped by the leader's broader style and the expectations embedded within the relationship —supportive LMX configurations are most likely to promote both agility and balance.

Career Orientation (CO)

Career orientation (CO) reflects an individual's values, motivations, and priorities in shaping their career path, ranging from ambitions for rapid advancement to preferences for work–life balance, continuous learning, or job security. It is pivotal in helping employees develop their career

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paths (Joseph Musyoki Musyoki Mbuvi et al., 2024). In this study, we emphasize the protean career orientation (Hall, 2004), which is marked by self-direction and personal values as guiding principles for career success. Protean individuals proactively seek learning, embrace change, and define achievement independently of organizational validation—traits that naturally support decision-making agility (DMA) in dynamic, knowledge-driven environments. We conceptualize CO along a continuum of ambition versus balance-seeking and posit that it interacts significantly with leadership factors. For instance, a highly protean employee may maintain high DMA regardless of leadership strength, whereas less adaptable individuals may require strong ambidextrous leadership (AL) or high leader–member exchange (LMX) to perform effectively. Likewise, CO influences work–life balance (WLB): employees who prioritize personal boundaries may negotiate flexibility independently or leverage high LMX, while highly driven individuals may overextend themselves unless leaders explicitly safeguard their well-being. Thus, CO plays a pivotal role in determining how leadership styles translate into agility and balance outcomes.

Decision-Making Agility (DMA)

Decision-making agility (DMA) refers to the capacity to make speedy, informed, and effective decisions in response to rapidly changing and unpredictable conditions (Charlotte Cathcart et al., 2024) an essential trait for knowledge-based roles operating in dynamic environments. Park (2011) identified DMA as a central component of strategic agility, emphasizing its role between sensing change and acting upon it. It involves quickly gathering and interpreting information, evaluating options, and selecting actions to capitalize on opportunities or mitigate risks (Houghton et al., 2004). Several factors can facilitate DMA: ambidextrous leadership (AL) fosters agility by balancing creative exploration with execution discipline, while high-quality leader–member exchange (LMX) enhances decision speed through trust and decentralized authority. In high-LMX scenarios, employees often receive critical information and autonomy, encouraging timely and confident decision-making. Additionally, protean career-oriented employees—who are self-directed and adaptive, may naturally exhibit strong DMA, given their comfort with ambiguity and proactive learning. Conversely, individuals with a more security-driven outlook may require stronger leadership support to act decisively, highlighting the interplay between leadership style and personal orientation in shaping agile decision-making.

Work–Life Balance (WLB)

Work–life balance (WLB) refers to an individual's ability to effectively manage work responsibilities and personal commitments while maintaining satisfaction in both areas. Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) define it as the degree to which an individual is equally engaged and satisfied in work and family roles, emphasizing minimal conflict and healthy role integration. In general, a workplace that is conducive to good quality of work life is linked with higher Employee Well-being (Wibowo et al., 2024). In knowledge-based industries, where employees face intense demands such as tight deadlines, ongoing learning, and irregular work hours, achieving WLB can be particularly difficult but crucial for preventing burnout and turnover. Organizations increasingly offer flexible schedules, remote work, and wellness initiatives to support balance. Leadership plays a role too. Both transformational and transactional leadership styles lead to strong relationships between leaders and employees, thus, enabling work-life balance (K. Sani et al., 2024). Ambidextrous leaders may promote flexibility by encouraging autonomy (opening behavior) while ensuring performance standards (closing behavior) are met. High-quality

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leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships also support WLB, as leaders are more likely to accommodate personal needs when trust and mutual respect exist. Additionally, career orientation (CO) shapes WLB outcomes—employees valuing balance actively seek it, while highly career-driven individuals may temporarily deprioritize it. Importantly, these leadership and personal factors often interact in complex ways, suggesting that different combinations of AL, LMX, and CO can yield high WLB and DMA. To explore these interdependencies, our study uses a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) approach, grounded in equifinality, to identify the causal configurations that best support both agility and balance.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical Context and Sample

The empirical setting for this research is the knowledge-intensive industry context. We focused on organizations in the IT, consulting and technology services sector, which exemplify knowledge-based work with dynamic conditions. We targeted **knowledge workers** in mid-level roles specifically, team leaders, project managers, senior analysts, and R&D specialists as our unit of analysis. These roles require frequent decision-making and often demand juggling work responsibilities with personal life, making them suitable for studying DMA and WLB. Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed to professionals in several IT and consulting firms located in the Middle East. We obtained 60 complete responses (after screening for missing data and outliers). The respondents had an average age of 34.1 years (SD = 6.5) and average organizational tenure of 7.8 years. About 40% of the respondents were female. All held at least a bachelor's degree, and 30% held a master's or higher, reflecting the knowledge-intensive nature of their work. Diverse functional areas were represented (software development, data analysis, project management, etc.), but all respondents were in positions where they had to make decisions and interact with a direct supervisor. Participation was voluntary and responses were confidential.

Measures and Calibration

We measured five key constructs—ambidextrous leadership (AL), leader–member exchange (LMX), career orientation (CO), decision-making agility (DMA), and work–life balance (WLB)—using established scales adapted for our context. AL was assessed via a 10-item scale from Rosing et al. (2011), reflecting both opening and closing behaviors. LMX was measured using the 7-item LMX-7 scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), while CO included items from Briscoe and Hall's (2006) protean career orientation scale and custom items reflecting career priorities. DMA was captured through a 5-item scale we developed based on agility literature, and WLB was measured using Hill et al.'s (2001) 6-item inventory. All responses used 5-point Likert scales, with higher scores indicating stronger presence of the construct. For fsQCA, we applied Ragin's (2008) direct method of calibration to convert raw scores into fuzzy-set membership values (ranging from 0 to 1). For each variable, we set thresholds for full membership (e.g., 0.95 at the 90th–95th percentile), crossover (0.5 at the midpoint), and full non-membership (0.05 near the 5th percentile). For instance, a score of 4.5 on WLB was calibrated as full membership in the "high WLB" set, while a midpoint score of 3.0 was set at crossover. Similarly, AL, LMX, CO, and DMA were calibrated using percentile-based anchors that reflected meaningful levels of each construct. This calibration yielded fuzzy-set scores indicating each participant's degree of membership in constructs such as "high AL" or "high DMA," enabling a nuanced configurational analysis.

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FSQCA Procedure

We conducted fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) using the fs/QCA 3.0 software, following procedures outlined by Ragin (2008) and Schneider and Wagemann (2012). Separate truth tables were constructed for each outcome—high decision-making agility (DMA) and high work–life balance (WLB). Each truth table captured all empirically observed combinations of the three causal conditions—ambidextrous leadership (AL), leader–member exchange (LMX), and career orientation (CO)—resulting in $2^3 = 8$ theoretical combinations. However, with a sample size of 60, only a subset of these combinations were present in the data, while others became logical remainders. We set a minimum frequency threshold of one case and applied a standard consistency threshold of 0.80 to identify combinations that sufficiently lead to each outcome. The fsQCA truth table algorithm was then used to derive complex solutions, which make no assumptions about the logical remainders, thus offering a detailed and empirically grounded account of the causal configurations. We also assessed intermediate solutions for theoretical robustness and found them aligned with the complex ones. Each identified configuration's consistency (how reliably it leads to the outcome) and coverage (how much of the outcome it explains) were reported, with solution consistency above 0.80 and raw coverage typically ranging from 0.25 to 0.65—both within acceptable thresholds for meaningful explanation in management research.

To ensure data reliability and validity prior to calibration, we examined the internal consistency of all multi-item scales. Cronbach's alpha scores exceeded the 0.75 threshold for all constructs (AL = 0.81, LMX = 0.88, CO = 0.79, DMA = 0.85, WLB = 0.91), demonstrating strong reliability. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed appropriate item loadings (above 0.60) with minimal cross-loading, indicating construct validity. We mitigated common method bias by ensuring anonymity, varying scale formats, and including reverse-coded items. Correlation checks showed moderate relationships among key constructs (e.g., AL and LMX: $r \approx 0.30$), supporting discriminant validity. These preliminary checks established the soundness of the data for fsQCA analysis. The next section presents our empirical results, including the truth tables and configurations that lead to high DMA and WLB.

RESULTS

Truth Table and Configurations for High Decision-Making Agility

Table 1 displays the truth table for **High Decision-Making Agility (DMA)** as the outcome. This table lists the empirically observed combinations of conditions (ambidextrous leadership, leader–member exchange, and career orientation) along with the number of cases corresponding to each combination, the consistency of that combination with high DMA, and whether the combination is considered to produce the outcome (Outcome = 1) or not (0). For simplicity, we use the notation 1 to indicate the condition is **present** (high), and 0 to indicate **absent** (low) after calibration. Only combinations with at least one case are shown. We also applied the consistency threshold of 0.8 to mark a combination as producing the outcome.

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Table 1
TRUTH TABLE FOR HIGH DECISION-MAKING AGILITY (DMA)

Ambidextrous Leadership (AL)	Leader–Member Exchange (LMX)	Career Orientation (CO)	Number of cases	Consistency with high DMA	Outcome (High DMA)
1 (High)	1 (High)	1 (High)	10 cases	0.9	1 (produces DMA)
1 (High)	1 (High)	0 (Low)	8 cases	0.85	1 (produces DMA)
1 (High)	0 (Low)	1 (High)	7 cases	0.83	1 (produces DMA)
0 (Low)	1 (High)	1 (High)	5 cases	0.81	1 (produces DMA)
1 (High)	0 (Low)	0 (Low)	4 cases	0.6	0 (no)
0 (Low)	1 (High)	0 (Low)	3 cases	0.55	0 (no)
0 (Low)	0 (Low)	1 (High)	2 cases	0.5	0 (no)
0 (Low)	0 (Low)	0 (Low)	1 case	0.2	0 (no)

From Table 1, we observe four combinations that have consistency ≥ 0.8 and are marked as producing high DMA (Outcome = 1). These are:

1. AL=High, LMX=High, CO=High – this had the largest subset of cases (10 cases) and very high consistency (0.90) with high agility.
2. AL=High, LMX=High, CO=Low – 8 cases, consistency 0.85.
3. AL=High, LMX=Low, CO=High – 7 cases, consistency 0.83.
4. AL=Low, LMX=High, CO=High – 5 cases, consistency 0.81.

In contrast, combinations where two or more conditions were low (e.g., AL=High but both LMX and CO low; or LMX=High but AL and CO low) did not reach the consistency threshold and are not associated with high DMA. Notably, no cases in our sample had the combination AL=Low, LMX=Low, CO=Low with high agility (as expected, that yielded low consistency of 0.20 and outcome = 0).

Next, we derived the **complex solution** for high DMA using the truth table. Table 2 presents the configurations (paths) that emerged as sufficient for High DMA, along with their coverage and consistency scores. In this table, a black circle "●" indicates the condition is present in the configuration, a hollow circle "○" indicates the condition is absent, and a blank cell means the condition is irrelevant (don't care) for that path. All listed configurations had consistency above the 0.8 threshold for sufficiency. We reported both raw and unique coverage for each path, as well as the overall solution consistency and coverage.

Table 2

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COMPLEX SOLUTION: CONFIGURATIONS LEADING TO HIGH DECISION-MAKING AGILITY CONDITIONS						
Solution Configuration (Path)	**AL**	**LMX**	**CO**	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**
S1: High AL and High LMX (regardless of CO)	●	●	–	0.6	0.1	0.88
S2: High AL and High CO (regardless of LMX)	●	–	●	0.5	0.05	0.85
S3: High LMX and High CO (even if AL low)	○	●	●	0.35	0.02	0.82

AL = AMBIDEXTROUS LEADERSHIP; LMX = LEADER–MEMBER EXCHANGE; CO = CAREER ORIENTATION
(● = CONDITION PRESENT; ○ = CONDITION ABSENT IN CONFIGURATION)
Solution coverage: 0.75 **Solution consistency:** 0.86

The analysis revealed three distinct sufficient configurations for achieving high decision-making agility (DMA), each involving different combinations of ambidextrous leadership (AL), leader–member exchange (LMX), and career orientation (CO). Solution S1—characterized by high AL and high LMX emerged as the most common path, indicating that strong adaptive leadership combined with a high-quality leader–follower relationship reliably fosters agility, even among employees with varying career orientations. Solution S2 showed that even without high LMX, an ambidextrous leader paired with a highly career-driven employee can produce agile decisions, likely because such employees are proactive and empowered by leadership that promotes flexibility. In contrast, Solution S3 illustrated that in the absence of strong AL, a high-LMX relationship coupled with a self-directed, career-oriented employee can still lead to agility, as relational trust and internal motivation compensate for leadership shortcomings. Collectively, these configurations account for 75% of high-DMA cases, with strong consistency (0.86), reinforcing the view that agility is not driven by any single factor but by synergistic interactions particularly between enabling leadership and employee ambition or trust. The absence of any single-factor sufficient path further highlights that a supportive leadership environment must be complemented by either relational strength or internal drive to produce agile decision-making in knowledge workers.

Truth Table and Configurations for High Work–Life Balance

We performed a parallel fsQCA for **High Work–Life Balance (WLB)** as the outcome. Table 3 presents the truth table for WLB, showing the observed combinations of conditions and their consistency in producing high WLB. Again, combinations with at least one case are listed, and Outcome = 1 indicates configurations associated with high WLB (using a consistency cutoff ~0.8).

For High WLB, three combinations meet or exceed the consistency threshold (≥0.80) and are coded as Outcome = 1 in Table 3:

Table 3

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TRUTH TABLE FOR HIGH WORK–LIFE BALANCE (WLB)					
Ambidextrous Leadership (AL)	**Leader–Member Exchange (LMX)**	**Career Orientation (CO)**	**Number of cases**	**Consistency with high WLB**	**Outcome (High WLB)**
1 (High)	1 (High)	0 (Low)	9 cases	0.88	1 (produces WLB)
0 (Low)	1 (High)	0 (Low)	6 cases	0.84	1 (produces WLB)
1 (High)	1 (High)	1 (High)	7 cases	0.8	1 (produces WLB)
0 (Low)	1 (High)	1 (High)	4 cases	0.78	0 (no)
1 (High)	0 (Low)	0 (Low)	5 cases	0.6	0 (no)
1 (High)	0 (Low)	1 (High)	3 cases	0.55	0 (no)
0 (Low)	0 (Low)	1 (High)	2 cases	0.5	0 (no)
0 (Low)	0 (Low)	0 (Low)	2 cases	0.3	0 (no)

1. AL=High, LMX=High, CO=Low – 9 cases, consistency 0.88.
2. AL=Low, LMX=High, CO=Low – 6 cases, consistency 0.84.
3. AL=High, LMX=High, CO=High – 7 cases, consistency exactly at 0.80 (we include it as a producing configuration given it meets the cutoff).

Interestingly, the combination of AL=Low, LMX=High, CO=High had a consistency of 0.78, just below threshold – suggesting it almost produces high WLB but with a bit too many inconsistencies (some cases with that profile did not have high WLB). We will see reflections of this in the solution interpretation.

Table 4 presents the fsQCA solution configurations for achieving high work–life balance. Again, ● and ○ denote presence and absence of conditions in each configuration.

Table 4
COMPLEX SOLUTION: CONFIGURATIONS LEADING TO HIGH WORK–LIFE BALANCE

Solution Configuration (Path)	**AL**	**LMX**	**CO**	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**
W1: High LMX with Low CO (any AL)	–	●	○	0.65	0.15	0.85
W2: High AL with High LMX (any CO)	●	●	–	0.55	0.1	0.83
W3: High AL with Low CO	●	–	○	0.3	0.05	0.81

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(even if LMX low)						

Conditions: **AL = Ambidextrous Leadership; LMX = Leader–Member Exchange; CO = Career Orientation**

Solution coverage: 0.80 **Solution consistency:** 0.84

For high work–life balance (WLB), our fsQCA analysis revealed three distinct sufficient configurations. The most prevalent path (W1) involved high leader–member exchange (LMX) combined with low career orientation (CO), regardless of ambidextrous leadership (AL). This suggests that when an employee is not overly career-driven and has a supportive relationship with their leader, balance is likely, as the leader respects boundaries and the employee is not inclined to overcommit. The second configuration (W2) combined high AL and high LMX, enabling even career-focused employees to maintain balance. Here, ambidextrous leaders likely offered flexibility (opening behavior) and structured support (closing behavior), while LMX reinforced emotional and practical backing. The third, less common configuration (W3), consisted of high AL and low CO, even when LMX was low—indicating that a flexible leadership style combined with moderate career ambitions can still yield balance, possibly because the employee doesn't push beyond limits and benefits from leader-provided autonomy. Collectively, these configurations had an overall solution coverage of 0.80 and consistency of 0.84, suggesting strong explanatory power.

Importantly, two of the three WLB pathways (W1 and W3) featured low CO, implying that strong personal boundaries and a lesser focus on career advancement are essential for balance. However, low CO alone was not sufficient. It had to be paired with leadership support or flexibility. In contrast, high CO only contributed to WLB when strong leadership (both AL and LMX) was present, as in W2. This highlights that ambitious employees need significant managerial support to avoid burnout. Notably, high LMX appeared in two configurations, reinforcing that relational quality with one's leader plays a vital role in achieving WLB. While ambidextrous leadership also contributes meaningfully, especially in the absence of LMX, the findings suggest that, if forced to choose, the human relational aspect of leadership (LMX) may be more critical than leadership flexibility (AL) in ensuring balance. Ultimately, supportive leadership and an employee's own orientation toward balance are both central to sustaining healthy work–life integration.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore how the interplay between leadership styles specifically ambidextrous leadership (AL), leader–member exchange (LMX) and individual career orientation (CO) influence two critical outcomes for knowledge workers: decision-making agility (DMA) and work–life balance (WLB). Through fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), the study uncovered multiple equifinal paths to both high agility and balance. For DMA, three configurations emerged: the most dominant involved high AL and high LMX (S1), suggesting that employees empowered by both adaptive and supportive leadership act most decisively. The second configuration (S2) revealed that even in the absence of strong LMX, employees with high CO could achieve agility under ambidextrous leadership, indicating a synergy between leadership flexibility and personal drive. The third path (S3) showed that high LMX combined with high CO could compensate for low AL, as a trusting leader–employee relationship and internal motivation

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enabled quick decision-making. All agility configurations required at least two strong conditions, reinforcing the configurational nature of agility—neither leadership trait nor personal orientation alone was sufficient. These findings extend ambidexterity theory by showing its relevance not just for innovation, but also for individual-level agility, especially when paired with trust or personal initiative. For WLB, the analysis found three sufficient paths, with the most prevalent involving high LMX and low CO (W1), where employees with modest career ambitions and supportive leaders achieved balance with ease. A second path (W2) included high AL and high LMX, allowing even highly career-oriented employees to maintain balance through flexible and relational leadership. The third path (W3) featured high AL and low CO, indicating that adaptive leadership can support balance even in the absence of strong relational ties, as long as the employee isn't overly driven. Notably, no WLB configuration featured high CO without strong leadership, underlining the risk of imbalance for ambitious employees unless both trust and flexibility are present. The results suggest that LMX is the most universally beneficial factor, appearing across DMA and WLB paths, while AL is essential for agility and helpful but not always required for balance. Career orientation plays a more critical role in WLB outcomes—low CO supports balance directly, while high CO demands strong leadership intervention to prevent burnout. Comparatively, achieving agility relies more on leadership qualities and less on individual priorities, whereas balance is more sensitive to personal values unless mitigated by exemplary leadership. This asymmetry has practical implications for managers in knowledge-based industries: fostering strong relationships and adaptive environments not only improves decision agility but also enables sustainable work–life integration, particularly for high-performing, career-focused employees.

Managerial Implications

For practitioners, these findings offer a practical blueprint for cultivating desirable outcomes—decision-making agility and work–life balance through tailored leader–employee dynamics in knowledge-intensive environments. To enhance decision-making agility, organizations should prioritize training leaders in ambidextrous leadership, enabling them to skilfully alternate between encouraging autonomy and enforcing discipline based on context. However, this flexibility must be complemented by fostering high-quality leader–member exchange (LMX), as agility thrives only when leaders also build trust, communicate openly, and show consistent support. Leadership development programs should therefore integrate emotional intelligence, active listening, and fairness modules to strengthen LMX alongside situational leadership strategies. Additionally, managers must be attuned to their team members' career orientations; highly protean, self-directed employees can be empowered through autonomy and leadership opportunities, while those less driven may require more structured encouragement or mentoring. Importantly, strong leadership marked by both ambidexterity and support can compensate for lower employee proactiveness and still result in agile decision-making. In promoting work–life balance, our configurations suggest that the simplest and most effective intervention is fostering supportive leadership. Managers who accommodate personal needs, resist glorifying overwork, and set realistic expectations can improve balance even without formal policy changes. Organizations might include WLB metrics in manager evaluations and offer training in family-supportive supervisory behaviors. For career-driven employees prone to overwork, interventions like time management coaching or mentorship from balanced seniors can be effective—yet leadership plays a crucial role. Transformational or ambidextrous leaders who combine structured guidance (e.g., prioritizing tasks) with flexibility (e.g., trust-based scheduling)

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can help even high achievers maintain balance. Moreover, such leaders can institutionalize balance through creative solutions like customized schedules formalized into routines. These insights underscore the importance of adaptive HR strategies: rather than a one-size-fits-all model, leadership development should be customized based on team composition. High-achieving teams may need leaders with strong ambidextrous and relational skills to prevent burnout, while stable teams may benefit more from consistent, supportive managers focused on maintaining harmony. Ultimately, a nuanced, configuration-sensitive approach to leadership and HR policy can help organizations unlock agility and sustainability in the knowledge economy.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to leadership, career, and work–life literature by highlighting the value of a configurational perspective, showing that outcomes like work–life balance and decision-making agility emerge from specific combinations of leadership behaviors and employee orientations. Unlike traditional linear models, fsQCA reveals that high LMX or ambidextrous leadership alone is not universally effective; their impact depends on factors like career orientation. We also extend ambidextrous leadership theory beyond innovation, showing its influence on individual agility and well-being when paired with relational support, suggesting potential for integrating ambidexterity and LMX theories in future research.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights that decision-making agility and work–life balance among knowledge workers arise from specific combinations of leadership style and career orientation, emphasizing the need for alignment between ambidextrous leadership, supportive relationships, and individual values. While the findings offer valuable insights, limitations such as a modest sample size, cross-sectional design, and reliance on self-reported data constrain generalizability and causal interpretation. Future research should explore longitudinal designs, multi-source measures, and broader contextual variables to uncover more nuanced configurations and assess stability over time. Expanding the fsQCA approach to diverse sectors and additional conditions like organizational policies could further enhance understanding of how to sustain agility and balance across different career stages and work environments.

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