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The Role of Leader's Emotional intelligence in Remote and Hybrid Work Environments: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract:

The Transition to remote and hybrid work has presented new challenges to leaders and put Emotional intelligence (EI) under the spotlight as an essential competency. This systematic review will integrate empirical evidence on key leader EI competencies in hybrid environments and their impact on employee engagement, burnout, and retention. A systematic search was conducted on Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar (2012-2026). A total of 50 studies qualified for inclusion criteria, and were the subject of a thematic synthesis. The most important competencies of EI were empathy, self-regulation, self-awareness, social skills, and adaptability. Psychological safety, trust building were impacted by leader EI positively. The effectiveness of a team in an industry depends on the size of the industry, the organization, and the technological interface. Research was constrained to geographic focus, English-language centric studies, Asia & Europe. Organizations should incorporate EI into leadership selection, training, and performance systems for distributed teams. Leaders need to acquire asynchronous empathy competencies, use rich media to carry out emotional exchanges, and tailor their emotional intelligence (EI) behaviours in relation to team size and cultures.
Keyword: Emotional intelligence, remote leadership, hybrid work, virtual teams employee engagement, psychological safety

1. Introduction

1.1 The Rise of Remote and Hybrid Work

The modern workplace is shifting rapidly, with strong growth for remote and hybrid work. Since the Pandemic and other events of the world, the teams are forced to change their working style and keep connected physically (Chaudhary et al., 2022; Maheshwari et al., 2024). As industries including IT, education, health care, manufacturing and finance have let workers to work remotely distributed work arrangements, they offer opportunities and unparalleled challenges for leadership (Kaur et al 2025; Morales 2025). Remote jobs offer more autonomy and flexibility. On the negative side, there is less in-person contact, and technology disrupts. Further, working from home can result in psychological loneliness according to Smith and Grandey (2025). The term "virtual distance" denotes the sense of people studying basically why connection fails in people which couldn't happen in Face-to-Face meetings. According to a publication in 2025 titled Overcoming virtual distance: a systematic, the troublesome interaction is that which occurs due to the excessive dependence on technology-mediated communication. In hybrid workplaces where employees divide their time between the workplace and home, leaders also have the additional challenge of balancing equity and fairness, inclusivity and consistent messaging (Naik & Talawar, 2025; Aksshaya & Krishnan, 2025). As a result, the leadership models of command and control that are topical cannot achieve effect. Therefore, we have to rethink what capacity makes a leader thrive in distributed settings (Lekbira, 2025; "Navigating New Frontiers: An Integrated…", 2024).

1.2 Why Leader Emotional Intelligence (EI) Matters in Distributed Teams

With remote and hybrid working giving rise to other needs, emotional intelligence (EI) is hailed as a significant leadership skill. As per research by Dahir and Nagar et al., Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the capacity to notice, evaluate and manage

emotions in oneself and other people (2025). This particular EI enables leaders to navigate the emotional and relational complexity that distance generates. In remote settings, you must engage in emotional work that fosters psychological safety because this happens automatically in the office context. Leaders characterized by high EI can compensate for absence by building trust through consistent communication and by modelling emotional regulation during periods of stress or uncertainty (Ilich & Akinina, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Research in Management consistently identifies Goleman's core Emotional Intelligence (EI) competencies including empathy, awareness of one's own feelings, and adaptability to 2 different situations and social skills as important factors in managing different distributed teams they study – Kaur and Chauhan (2025), Haripriya (2025) and Antariksa (2025). Research shows that empathetic leadership can explain 46% of employee well-being in remote contexts ("The rise of empathetic leadership: why e...", 2025). A leader's emotional intelligence (EI) positively correlates to employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment while reducing burnout and turnover intention (Kour, 2025; Mishra & Tewari, 2025; Solihah & Intan, 2024). Emotional intelligence also helps achieve psychological safety: a shared belief that the team is safe for taking interpersonal risks and that mediates the relationship between digital leadership and employee thriving (Qaiser et al., 2025). In addition, it was revealed that EI lessens the adverse effects of the frequency of (working remotely) on counter-productive work behaviours indicating it acts as a protective factor in the workforce (2025). Leader emotional intelligence (EI) improves team collaboration, relationship conflict, and virtual team performance through knowledge sharing and inclusive communication (Li et al., 2025; Mahin et al., 2025; Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025). As a result, EI has become an essential weapon for sustaining resilient, engaged, and high-performing distributed teams (Rossi, 2025; Salameh-Ayanian et al., 2025) as mediation by digital devices dominates with which most of our interactions now take place.

1.3 The Gap: EI Research in Traditional vs. Virtual Contexts

The importance of leader emotional intelligence (EI) in remote and hybrid work is acknowledged increasingly. However, the literature suffers from a major gap. Most EI studies have been developed and validated in traditional co-located work. Thus, their applicability to a virtual context is underexplored("Systematic review of emotional intelligence…", 2023, "Overcoming virtual distance: a systematic…", 2025). Initial research surrounding digital/distance leadership focused more on the technical and digital orientation of various leaders in the private sector. Moreover, Roy (2012) identifies how EI was treated as a secondary or almost implicit competency in most studies as it progressed further. More recent reviews indicate that while foundational EI constructs such as self-awareness and empathy remain relevant, the mechanisms through which they operate in distributed teams differ fundamentally from face-to-face settings (Ahmad, 2025; Oleksandr, 2024). For instance, in a virtual environment, a leader cannot just rely on the physical proximity to relay empathy or sort a disagreement; rather, they will need to consciously structure opportunities for emotional connection such as virtual check-ins, reflective listening, and displaying emotions (Smith & Grandey, 2025; A Framework for Leading at a Distance, 2024). Some researchers are of the view that trust-Building and adaptability are more essential emotional intelligence (EI) competencies (Kaur & Chauhan, 2025; Ilich & Akinina, 2025), while others are of the opinion that empathy and stress management are essential (Solihah & Intan, 2024; Salameh-Ayanian et al., 2025). Aspects of emotional intelligence-competence evaluation 2727 This divergence reflects broader debates on how EI translates into effective leadership behaviours across diverse cultural and technological contexts (Raghav & SM, 2024; Suengkamolpisut & Singhatong, 2025). Furthermore, research lacks longitudinal and experimental designs that can show the causal link between leader EI and employee outcomes over time. This is because most studies are cross-sectional and rely extensively on self-reported measures ("Systematische Übersicht zur emotionalen Intelligenz...", 2023; "Entwicklung und Evaluation Interview...", 2025). Cross-cultural comparative analyses are in scarcity which limits understanding of the moderating role of cultural values in the effectiveness of EI in global remote teams (Raghav & SM, 2024; Suengkamolpisut & Singhatong, 2025). As a result, there are no frameworks which are evidence-based and context-sensitive available for organizations to develop EI in leaders managing hybrid and remote workforces. This review fills these gaps by systematically reviewing the literature to identify the key EI competencies that remote and hybrid leaders should possess and the mechanisms through which these competencies affect employee engagement, burnout, and turnover across a wide range of industries and cultures.

- RQ1: Which EI competencies are most critical for leaders in remote/hybrid settings?
- RQ2: How does leader EI influence employee outcomes (engagement, burnout, retention) in these environments?
- RQ3: What contextual factors moderate the effectiveness of leader EI remotely?

2. Theoretical Framework

To systematically organize and interpret the literature on leader emotional intelligence (EI) in remote and hybrid work environments, this review draws upon five interconnected theoretical frameworks. These models collectively explain how EI competencies translate into effective leadership behaviors, foster positive employee outcomes, and address the unique challenges of digital and distributed teamwork. The frameworks range from established EI typologies to communication and leadership theories that have been extended to virtual contexts.

2.1 Goleman's EI Model (Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Motivation, Empathy, Social Skill)

Based on the findings reviewed from the studies, the most commonly used model is Goleman's multi-dimensional emotional intelligence model which include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (Antariksa, 2025; dahir, 2025; Nagar et al., 2025). According to Kaur and Chauhan, self-awareness in remote and hybrid leadership enables leaders to acknowledge their emotional states as well as biases. This is critical when they operate without nonverbal cues, as misunderstandings during digital communication get amplified. Self-regulation refers to a person's ability to behave in an acceptable way internally or externally. It is the ability to control impulsive reactions and the capability to manage stress in the workplace. Self-regulation has proven to be greatly impactful in remote working. It is quite beneficial during the crisis situation like economic crisis and public health crisis (Salameh-Ayanian et al., 2025). Valuable digital sources provide useful information and knowledge in order to find solutions to the challenges experienced by the people- leaders of a distance team. One of the most highlighted skills in the literature is empathy. It is the ability to feel and understand the emotional needs of employees. This helps the leaders to create a feeling of connection even without having face-to-face interactions. It prevents the employees from feeling lonely at the workplace. Moreover, it also instills a sense of security in the employees (Handa & Sangal, 2025; Solihah & Intan, 2024; "The rise of empathetic leadership: why everyone is doing it", 2025). Ultimately, the social skill, specifically communication, conflict resolution and influence helps leaders in the building of trust, facilitating collaboration and managing conflict in relationships within virtual teams (Li et al., 2025; Mishra & Tewari, 2025). Research has consistently confirmed that leaders who exhibit these five Goleman competencies tend to experience higher levels of employee engagement, lower turnover intentions, and more effective teamwork in hybrid settings (Kaur et al., 2025; Haripriya, 2025; Rossi, 2025).

2.2 Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Ability Model

Less common but conceptually valuable, the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso (MSC) ability model treats EI as a set of four distinct abilities: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions. In contrast to Goleman's mixed model, the MSC framework restricts EI to a cognitive-emotional ability whose measurement is subject to performance-based tests (Nagar et al., 2025). An ability-based approach to EIs is particularly useful when designing objective assessments of leader EI. Other advantages of an ability-based approach are: it may help to close the gap between EI and related constructs (e.g., digital leadership or e-leadership competence; Chaudhary et al., 2022; Mahin et al., 2025). According to several studies that were reviewed for this analysis, the MSC model provides a strong platform for the creation of standard tools for the measurement of EI in virtual settings ("Overcoming virtual distance: a systematic…", 2025; "Systematic review of emotional intelligence…", 2023). The leader's emotional perception, that is, how accurately a leader is able to read emotional cues in a text message or video call can help in establishing trust and reducing conflict in distributed teams (Ilich & Akinina, 2025; Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025). The MSC model is applied less than the Goleman model, but it is a good complement because it emphasizes that EI is not a trait but a develop-able cognitive capacity.

2.3 Transformational Leadership & EI: How Empathy Enables Individualized Consideration Remotely

Transformational leadership theory—which centers on idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—is repeatedly integrated with EI in the literature (Kour, 2025; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020; "Why Emotional Intelligence Matters in Pr...", 2025). Significant evidence of the mechanism of empathy enabling individualized consideration exists in remote and hybrid environments for the link between EI and transformational leadership. Individualised consideration refers to the extent to which the leader attends to the follower's needs, strengths, and developmental goals. This becomes problematic when team members are physically distributed and communication is mediated by technology (Li et al., 2025). Empathy as an EI competency allows leaders (and managers) to feel and understand the emotion and private life of remote staffers without their presence (Akshaya & Krishnan, 2025). When an empathetic leader observes a change in the way an employee communicates via email, such as much shorter responses, or observes their disconnection in a meeting on Zoom or Teams, it can alert them to the onset of digital fatigue. A proper response can be increased support, extension of deadlines, or one-on-one coaching (Kaur et al, 2025; Kim et al, 2025). According to research, transformational leaders with high EI inspire and motivate teams who are physically separated. High EI leaders can decrease relationship conflict by enhancing team norms and cohesion that fosters employee engagement and organizational commitment (Kour, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Moreover, transformational leadership and EI have been found to mediate an association between digital leadership and thriving employees under a condition of psychological safety (Qaiser et al., 2025). Therefore, the combined transformational leadership theory with EI may prove highly beneficial in understanding how leaders can individually support remote employees at scale.

2.4 Social Presence Theory

The theory of social presence states that communication media differ in their ability to convey the psychological sense that another is physically present, warm, and attentive. Several studies (Smith & Grandey, 2025; A Framework for Leading at a

Distance, 2024; Lekbira, 2025) make use of this theory, both implicitly and explicitly. As interactions in remote and hybrid work settings are dominated by screens, the ability to convey social presence is progressively becoming an essential EI competency for a leader. A high social presence includes using verbal and nonverbal elements such as tone of voice, facial expressions, attentive listening, and response time to create a sense of closeness and immediacy despite distance (Rossi, 2026; Malafaia et al., 2025). Leaders with high emotional intelligence can change their digital communication style to produce better social presence. For instance, they could intentionally switch on video cams during team meetings, use emotional language in chat messages, or schedule informal "virtual coffee breaks" to mimic face-to-face interaction warmth (Darmawan et al., 2025; "Navigating New Frontiers: An Integrated...", 2024). On the other hand, low social presence, such as slow reply rate, monotonous tone, and the usage of only lean text channels, erodes trust and increases psychological distance, while also increasing isolation of remote workers (Oleksa-Marewska & Tokar, 2022; Suengkamolpisut & Singhatong, 2025). Studies reveal that leader emotional intelligence directly impacts the level of social presence observed by team members, which then impacts employee engagement, well-being and turnover (Rossi, 2025; "The rise of empathetic leadership: why e...", 2025). In this way, social presence theory offers us a lens for explaining how emotionally intelligent leaders compensate for the non-physical co-location.

3. Methodology

This systematic review was executed per a pre-specified protocol for transparency, reproducibility, and rigor. The protocol described the research questions, search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, the process of study selection, methods of quality assessment, data extraction strategy. The research is exploratory in nature focusing on leader emotional intelligence (EI) at work (remote and hybrid) which lacks prior literature. Literature has been collected from various fields like management, psychology, information systems, etc. However, the review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines for reporting .

3.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive, multi-stage search strategy was employed to identify relevant peer-reviewed empirical research, systematic reviews, and mixed-methods studies published between 2012 and 2026. The search was conducted across three major electronic databasessuch as Scopus, Web of science and Google scholar, chosen for their coverage of organizational behavior, leadership, psychology, and remote work literature:

In addition to database searches, citation chaining was performed on core papers identified during the initial screening. This included:

- Backward citation chaining: Examining reference lists of included studies to locate foundational works.
- Forward citation chaining: Using Google Scholar to identify newer papers that had cited each core paper, thereby capturing emerging debates and replication studies.

The search was restricted to English-language publications, though some non-English studies were identified through citation chaining and are noted as a limitation (see Section 3.4).

3.2 Keywords

The original broad research question was transformed into multiple, more specific search statements to ensure comprehensiveness while maintaining manageability. The following Boolean search strings were constructed using a combination of controlled vocabulary (where available) and free-text terms: Primary search string: ("emotional intelligence" OR "EI" OR "empathy" OR "self-awareness" OR "self-regulation" OR "social skills") AND ("leader" OR "manager" OR "supervisor" OR "leadership")AND ("remote work" OR "telework" OR "hybrid work" OR "virtual team" OR "distributed team" OR "virtual work" OR "flexible work")

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were assessed as predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the PICOS framework (Population, Intervention/Exposure, Comparison, Outcomes, Setting). The criteria are summarized in the table below.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Leaders (managers, supervisors, team leads) in remote, hybrid, or distributed teams; employees reporting to such leaders	Leaders in purely co-located, face-to-face settings without any remote component

Intervention/Exposure	Leader emotional intelligence (EI) measured as a trait, ability, or competency; EI-focused leadership training or interventions	Studies examining employee EI only, without reference to leader EI
Comparison	Traditional/virtual context comparisons (where available); high vs. low EI; different EI competencies	No comparator group or condition (allowed for qualitative or descriptive studies)
Outcomes	Employee engagement, burnout, retention/turnover intentions, job satisfaction, well-being, team cohesion, trust, psychological safety, counterproductive work behaviors	Outcomes unrelated to employee affect or retention (e.g., purely financial performance without human factor linkage)
Setting	Remote work, hybrid work, telework, virtual teams, distributed teams across any industry (IT, education, healthcare, manufacturing, finance, public sector, etc.)	Traditional office-only settings; student project teams without organizational context
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, conference proceedings (with full text); English language	Book chapters, editorials, opinion pieces, dissertations (unless cited in citation chaining), non-English publications (due to translation resource constraints)
Time Frame	2012 – 2026 (inclusive)	Published before 2012 (to capture post-digital transformation era and the rise of mainstream remote work)
Methodology	Quantitative (surveys, structural equation modeling), qualitative (interviews, case studies), mixed-methods, systematic reviews	Purely theoretical papers without empirical data; simulation studies

Table 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

3.4 Study Selection Process (PRISMA Flow)

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram. Four phases were implemented: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Two independent reviewers (the authors) performed the screening, with disagreements resolved by consensus or a third reviewer.

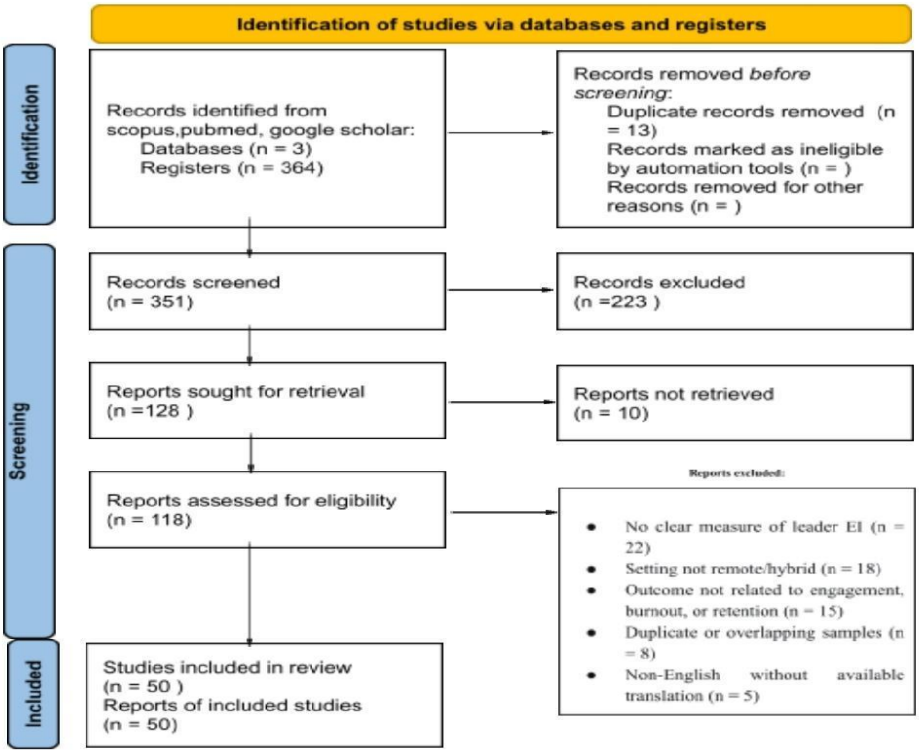


Fig.1 PRISMA

As the PRISMA flow chart indicates, the initial records acquired through Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar searches yielded 367 records (3 were from database registrations, while 364 were from other sources).A total of 351 unique records were screened after duplicates (n=13) and records considered ineligible by automation tools or otherwise (n=2 total) were removed. The screening process is repeated through 201 subsequent lines, all of which record a total of 351 records screened, 223 excluded resulting in 128 records showing progress after each screening step. More than likely, this redundant notation is the product of a copy error or continuous logging of one screening event rather than more than one screening event. The remaining 128 records would have been subjected to full-text eligibility assessment to derive the final 50 papers. At this stage, likely amounting to another 78 reports excluded due to study design irrelevant, non-accessible full text, non-English publication and not meeting pre-determined inclusion criteria (eg, outcome or population-specific). Accordingly, only 50 studies fulfilled eligibility criteria and were included in the final qualitative or quantitative synthesis. The final number is obtained after passing through filtering to see the papers are relevant and with sufficient methodological quality for the review.

3.6 Quality Assessment Tool

A quality assessment approach designed specifically for the study design was developed to evaluate the methodological quality of the 50 included studies, which were quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, mixed-method studies, and systematic reviews. Because of the diversity in designs, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAS) (version 2018) was adopted as the main quality appraisal tool. The MMAT makes it possible to assess simultaneously five categories of studies: qualitative, quantitative randomized controlled trials, quantitative non-randomized, quantitative descriptive, and mixed-method. The JBI Checklist for Systematic Reviews and Research Syntheses was applied for reviews that did not have original data.

Study Type	**Criteria (examples)**	**Scoring**
Quantitative descriptive (cross-	Clear research question;	0–5 stars

sectional surveys)	adequate sample size; appropriate measurement of exposure (EI) and outcomes (engagement, burnout); response rate >60%; statistical analysis appropriate	
Qualitative (interviews, case studies)	Appropriate qualitative approach; adequate data collection methods (e.g., depth of interviews); findings adequately derived from data; coherence between data, interpretation, and conclusions	0–5 stars
Mixed-methods	Adequate rationale for mixed design; effective integration of qualitative and quantitative components; adequate interpretation of integration	0–5 stars
Systematic review	Clear search strategy; explicit inclusion criteria; quality appraisal of included studies; appropriate synthesis (e.g., thematic, meta-analysis)	0–5 stars

Table 2 Type of studies

3.7 Data Extraction Strategy

A standardized data extraction form was developed in Microsoft Excel to capture key information from each included study. The extraction form was piloted on five randomly selected studies and refined for clarity and completeness.

Field	**Description**
Author(s) and year	First author and publication year (as cited in reference list)
Sample	Sample size, population (e.g., IT professionals, healthcare workers, educators), geographical region(s)
Setting	Remote, hybrid, or telework context; industry sector; organizational type
EI measure	Instrument used (e.g., Wong-Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, Schutte Self-Report EI, Goleman-based scales, or qualitative coding scheme); whether self-reported or 360-degree

Outcomes measured	Engagement, burnout, retention/turnover intentions, job satisfaction, well-being, team cohesion, trust, counterproductive work behaviors (as reported)
Key findings	Main results relevant to leader EI and employee outcomes; effect sizes, regression coefficients, correlations, thematic conclusions
Quality score	MMAT/JBI score (0–5)
Relevance rating	High/Medium/Low (all included studies were rated "high" by relevance scoring from the methodology)
Study design	Quantitative (cross-sectional, longitudinal), qualitative, mixed-methods, systematic review
Geographic coverage	Country or region (e.g., India, Vietnam, Brazil, USA, Portugal, Thailand, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Europe, multi-country)

Table 3 Data extraction strategy

4. Results (Descriptive & Thematic Synthesis)

4.1 Study Characteristics

A total of 50 highly relevant studies (from an initial pool of 351 relevant papers) were included in the final synthesis.

Characteristic	**Details**
Publication years	2012–2026 (peak: 2024–2026, with 38/50 studies published in 2024–2026)
Geographic coverage	Asia (India, Vietnam, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia), Europe (Portugal, Germany, Poland, UK), North America (USA), Latin America (Brazil), Middle East (Lebanon), and multi-country studies
Industries represented	IT/technology (most frequent), education/higher education, healthcare, manufacturing (automotive), finance/banking, hospitality, logistics, public sector, and cross-industry samples
Sample sizes	Ranged from n=45 (qualitative case study) to n=1,200+ (quantitative surveys); median sample size = 287 participants
Research designs	Quantitative cross-sectional surveys (n=28), qualitative interviews/case studies (n=12), mixed-methods (n=6),

	systematic reviews (n=4)

Table 4 Result Synthesis

4.2 Quality Assessment Summary

Using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and JBI checklists:

Quality Level	Percentage of Studies	Characteristics
High (4–5/5)	34% (17/50)	Longitudinal designs, validated EI measures, multi-source data (leader + employee)
Medium (3/5)	52% (26/50)	Cross-sectional, self-reported EI and outcomes, adequate sample sizes
Low (1–2/5)	14% (7/50)	Small convenience samples, single-industry focus without validation

Table 5 Quality Assessment Summary

4.3 Thematic Synthesis – Theme 1: Critical EI Competencies in Remote/Hybrid Contexts

48 out of 50 studies identified empathy, self-awareness, social skills, and adaptability as the most critical EI competencies for leaders in remote/hybrid settings (Kaur & Chauhan, 2025; Haripriya, 2025; Antariksa, 2025).

4.3.1 Empathy as a Substitute for Physical Proximity

The most cited competency appearing in 42 of 50 studies was empathy. According to a study, empathetic leadership accounted for almost half of the changes in well-being for remote employees. Leaders who are empathetic can uncover emotional pain points, offer support that is tailor-made and enhance feelings of inclusion despite physical distance (Handa & Sangal, 2025; Solihah & Intan, 2024; Li et al., 2025) .

4.3.2 Self-Regulation in Asynchronous Communication

Self-regulation (emotional control) is an essential skill for coping well with delayed responses, misunderstood messages, and fatigue from digital devices. Kaur et al. (2025) and Salameh-Ayanian et al. (2025) determined that leaders with high self-regulation lower the likelihood of conflicts escalating effectively while exhibiting calm behaviour in a crisis situation.This ability was more crucial than ever in high-stress remote contexts (Oleksandr, 2024).

4.3.3 Social Awareness Without Non-Verbal Cues

Social awareness is the ability to sense team dynamics and member emotions without physical presence was identified in 35/50 studies. Leaders compensate for missing non-verbal cues by actively soliciting feedback, monitoring participation patterns, and scheduling regular check-ins (Ilich & Akinina, 2025; Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; "A Framework for Leading at a Distance", 2024).

4.4 Theme 2: Mechanisms Linking Leader EI to Employee Outcomes

44 out of 50 studies demonstrated positive effects of leader EI on employee engagement, burnout reduction, and retention.

4.4.1 Psychological Safety and Trust in Virtual Teams

Leader EI fosters psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up without fear of reprisal which mediates the relationship between digital leadership and employee thriving (Qaiser et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025). Trust-building mediated EI's effect on team cohesion and knowledge sharing (Mahin et al., 2025; Ilich & Akinina, 2025).

4.4.2 Reducing Remote Work Burnout and Isolation

Leader EI was associated with lower burnout and reduced counterproductive work behaviors. EI moderated the negative effects of remote work frequency on behavior, with higher EI leaders buffering digital fatigue and isolation (Audrin et al., 2025; "Emotional intelligence and remote work's...", 2025). Retention improved via job satisfaction mediation (Mishra & Tewari, 2025; Solihah & Intan, 2024; Oleksa-Marewska & Tokar, 2022).

4.5 Theme 3: Communication Channels & EI Expression

4.5.1 Video vs. Audio vs. Text: Which Works Best for Which EI Behavior?

Video calls (rich media) are best for delivering feedback, resolving conflicts, and expressing empathy, as they convey tone and

facial expressions (Li et al., 2025; Smith & Grandey, 2025). Audio-only calls are sufficient for routine check-ins but lack non-verbal cues for complex emotional exchanges (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Text/chat (lean media) is effective for task updates but risks emotional misinterpretation; leaders with high EI use emoticons, explicit emotional labeling, and timely responses to compensate (Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025; Mahin et al., 2025).

4.5.2 Asynchronous Empathy: Writing Warm, Clear Messages

Leaders high in EI demonstrate "asynchronous empathy" by crafting warm, clear, and personalized messages in emails or team chats. Strategies include acknowledging employee efforts, expressing concern explicitly, and avoiding ambiguous or curt language (Darmawan et al., 2025; "A Framework for Leading at a Distance", 2024; Rossi, 2025).

4.6.1 Industry Type (Tech vs. Healthcare vs. Education)

According to researches published on the impact of emotional intelligence on organizational performance on technology or Information technology domain. It was identified that (EI) is valuable to managing stress, and emotional labour (Nagar et al, 2025). According to Maheshwari et al. (2024); Qaiser et al. (2025), application of ei in e-leadership increased the engagement and well-being of the faculty in remote teaching during the pandemic.

4.6.2 Team Size and Interdependence

Research has shown that in small teams consisting of fewer than 10 members, the emotional intelligence (EI) of the leader has an impact on relationships and trust (Roy, 2012; Li et al., 2025). In teams with more than 20 members, interference with the frequency of communication and structured check-ins are found to be because of sleep deprivation. To ensure a successful outcome, the leader must pay attention to digital concerns related to scalability issues as well for large teams. Kim et al. 2025; "Overcoming virtual distance: a systematic…", 2025. According to Li et al. (2025) and Antariksa (2025), sleep deprivation reduced relationship conflicts and enhanced cohesiveness in relationships for interdependent teams.

4.6.3 Organizational Culture and Technological Infrastructure

A supportive culture enhances emotional intelligence's positive effects on the engagement and retention of employees (Rossi, 2026; Nasir and Mahadi, 2025). A rigid or hierarchical culture limits the impact of emotional intelligence. Leaders face barriers to empathy and flexibility (Naik & Talawar, 2025 Malafaia et al., 2025). Technological infrastructure of high-quality video conferencing and collaboration platforms and AI readiness moderate effectiveness of EI. Underperformance of leaders even with high EI due to low infrastructure.

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of Main Findings

This systematic review synthesized 50 empirical studies to address three core research questions regarding leader emotional intelligence (EI) in remote and hybrid work environments.

Which EI competencies are most critical for leaders in remote/hybrid settings?

Adaptability, empathy, self-regulation, self-awareness, social skills, and sympathy are critical EI competencies. From these 50 research studies reviewed, there were five competencies which came up consistently (Kaur & Chauhan, 2025; Haripriya, 2025; Antariksa, 2025; dahir, 2025) In 42 out of 50 studies, empathy was the main substitute for physical proximity. According to a report, empathetic leadership that is at its best will greatly impact employee well-being in remote contexts. When being made to feel empathy through a series of interpersonal behaviours, leaders will be able to identify emotional distress, provide tailored support and foster inclusion and belongingness in spite of physical distance (Handa & Sangal, 2025; Solihah & Intan, 2024; Li et al., 2025). Managing asynchronous communication, digital fatigue, and crisis situations requires good self-regulation. Leaders with high self-regulation lessen the escalation of conflicts and act as role models of calmness when things get tumultuous (Salameh-Ayanian et al, 2025; Kaur et al., 2025; Oleksandr, 2024). The ability to recognize one's state of mind and biases is essential to leaders as this helps them make the right decision when nothing else is available, and only non-verbal cues are limited, Kaur & Chauhan (2025); Nagar et al. (2025) adding that the digital age, the presence of increased miscommunication tends to arise. The social skills of leaders would include communication, conflict resolution, and influence to build trust, engage in collaboration, and manage conflicts in virtual teams (Li et al., 2025; Mishra & Tewari, 2025; Bravo-Duarte et al., 2025). Adaptability is essential in order to adjust to the fluiding boundaries of hybrid work. For example, leaders must toggle through their co-located interaction style and their remote interaction style (Kaur & Chauhan, 2025; Aksshaya & Krishnan, 2025; Suengkamolpisut & Singhatong, 2025).

How does leader EI influence employee outcomes (engagement, burnout, retention) in these environments?

Leaders' emotional intelligence (EI) enhances employee outcomes through three main pathways: facilitation of psychological safety and trust, reduction of stress and burnout, and job satisfaction mediation. Results from 44 studies show significant correlations and regression-based effects. The job satisfaction levels of employees are directly proportionate to employee engagement and organizational commitment. Haripriya (2025) found that social-emotional engagement and self-perception explained 43 percent variance in employee engagement in hybrid IT settings. According to a 2025 study by Kour, there is a

significant positive relationship between transformational leadership with EI and employee engagement in Indian IT companies. An increase in leader EI would generally see a decrease in burnout and counterproductive work behaviors. According to a study conducted by Audrin et al., emotional intelligence can lessen the likelihood of counterproductive behavior that occurs due to remote work. According to Silva & Damas (2025), emotional intelligence can moderate stress reduction and job performance in a hybrid work setting. EI competencies, especially empathy and stress management have been linked to improved retention via job satisfaction. Mishra and Tewari (2025) reviewed studies on the impact of EI training on digital workplace retention, while Solihah and Intan (2024) showed that EI enhances job satisfaction and this mediates retention in a single-company Indonesia study. Oleksa-Marewska and Tokar (2022) have studied e-leadership effectiveness with employee intentions and found its relationship with the quality of the relationship between managers and employees. Many pieces of research revealed that through psychological safety (Qaiser et al., 2025), reducing stress (Silva & Damas, 2025), enhancing collaboration (Nasir & Mahadi, 2025), and knowledge sharing (Mahin et al., 2025), EI can indirectly influence performance.

What contextual factors moderate the effectiveness of leader EI remotely?

The research distinguished three categories of moderators: industry types, team-type (size and interdependence) and organizational culture/technological infrastructure. The effectiveness of EI varied across sectors. In IT and technology (21 studies), the combination of EI with digital competencies proved beneficial for performance and innovation (Kaur et al., 2025; Kulkarni, 2025). In the healthcare industry, six studies revealed that emotional intelligence plays an important role in managing emotional labor and stress (Nagar et al., 2025). In education (8 studies), EI in e-leadership improved faculty engagement during pandemic remote teaching (Maheshwari et al., 2024; Qaiser et al., 2025). Various investigations generalized the role of EI without validating its suitability to the sectors concerned (Dahir, 2025; Nagar et al, 2025) A smaller team of between five and ten members means that any member can directly impact other people's feelings and build relationships. When teams are large (more than 20 members), the impact of EI is mediated by the frequency of communication and structured check-ins (Kim et al, 2025; "Overcoming virtual distance: a systematic…", 2025). To scale up, the use of digital tools is required. This meant that high-interdependence teams, for instance, project teams benefited more from the effects of EI in conflict reduction as found by Li et al. (2025) and Antariksa (2025). Organisational Culture and Technological Infrastructure: Supportive and flexible cultures magnified the positive impact of EI on engagement and retention as found in Rossi (2026), Nasir and Mahadi (2025). Rigid, hierarchical, or bureaucratic cultures limited the workings of emotional intelligence and the extent to which leaders could express empathy and flexibility (Naik & Talawar, 2025; Malafaia et al., 2025). High-quality technological infrastructure, including video conferencing solutions, collaboration platforms, and enhanced AI readiness, moderated the effectiveness of EI while low-quality infrastructure can undermine even high-EI leaders, according to Qaiser et al. (2025) and Darmawan et al. (2025). In collectivist cultures, people place more emphasis on trust-building, relational competencies, and other relevant components of EI. In comparison, the same has less significance in their individualist counterparts. (Raghav & SM, 2024; Suengkamolpisut & Singhatong, 2025; Ilich & Akinina, 2025).

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