

Article

Social Well-Being Strategies for Academics Working in a Hybrid Work Environment

Rudo Rachel Marozva * and Anna-Marie Pelser

Business School, North-West University, Mahikeng 2790, South Africa; anna.pelser@nwu.ac.za

* Correspondence: marozrr@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The hybrid work environment significantly undermines the social well-being of employees in the workplace. Existing research predominantly addresses academics' well-being challenges without offering practical strategies to counter these issues. This study identifies strategies that higher education institutions must adopt to enhance the social well-being of their academics in hybrid work settings. It employs Demerouti's Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Baumeister and Leary's theory of the need to belong as its theoretical framework. Using a cross-sectional qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were guided by an interview schedule to gather data. The sample comprised 23 academics from three campuses of North-West University, and thematic analysis was utilized to analyse the data. The study revealed that growth strategies, such as training, development, and mentoring, are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging, strengthening work relationships, and helping academics connect in a hybrid work environment. Support strategies like providing peer support, management support, physical resources, effective communication, and improvements in job quality enhance academics' social well-being in this setting. Relationship strategies, which entail organizing social events and promoting a positive organizational culture, are key to encouraging social well-being in the hybrid work environment. Additionally, reward strategies, such as recognition and direct compensation, are essential for reinforcing a sense of belonging, improving work relationships, and enhancing social connections in a hybrid work environment. Intentional, coach-oriented, sensible, and inclusive leadership is vital. The findings offer valuable insights for higher education institutions to adopt a more comprehensive approach to managing the well-being of academic employees. This highlights the need to focus not only on mental and psychological health but also on social well-being.



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1. Introduction

Social employee well-being (SEW) is essential for overall employee well-being (Hennicks et al., 2022). D. E. Guest (2017) highlights that social employee well-being is one of the three main facets of employee well-being. Colenberg et al. (2020) conceptualize SEW as comprising three key dimensions: a sense of belonging, work relationships, and social connections or interactions. The social environment in the workplace enhances SEW (Daniels et al., 2017). Similarly, Hennicks et al. (2022) argue that the organization's social context, which includes feedback, rewards, and communication, impacts SEW. This argu-

ment shows the link between SEW and the stages of the employee life cycle of academics and the need to embed SEW in all the employee life cycle stages of academics.

The [Cattermole \(2019\)](#) model of employee life cycle comprises six stages: Attraction, recruitment, onboarding, development, retention, and separation. Important to note is that the first three stages of the model dovetail with [Smither's \(2003\)](#) first stage of the employee life cycle, called the introduction phase. [Cattermole \(2019\)](#) notes that employees tend to be attracted to organisations that have a good employee value proposition. Similarly, [Attipoe et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight that emphasis on employee well-being enhances employer brand. Top talent tends to be attracted and recruited by organisations that value employee well-being. [Nosratabadi et al. \(2022\)](#) note that the onboarding stage helps employees integrate into the organisational culture while providing them with the necessary tools that employees need. Similarly, [Rani et al. \(2024\)](#) note that onboarding is critical in building work relationships and enhancing a sense of belonging among new employees. This shows that onboarding as a stage of the employee life cycle is critical in enhancing a sense of belonging and fostering work relationships, which are critical in SEW.

The development phase is synonymous with the growth stage of [Smither's \(2003\)](#) model—employees in this stage value training and development opportunities. [Watson et al. \(2018\)](#) contend that training and development are closely linked to employee well-being. The employee life cycle's retention stage allows organizations to retain top talent. [Ismail and Warrak \(2019\)](#) assert that organisations that emphasise employee well-being tend to reduce turnover intentions among employees. Lastly, the life cycle's separation stage can be voluntary or involuntary. [Tulpule and Pandya \(2020\)](#) contend that separation should be planned, transparent, and not cause distress. This indicates its impact on well-being for those leaving and those remaining in the organisation. Therefore, SEW is important regardless of the stage of the employee life cycle that employees may be in.

SEW provides numerous benefits to both the employer and employees. According to [Redelinghuys and Rothmann \(2020\)](#), workplace flourishing results from enhanced SEW within the workplace. SEW is positively associated with increased organizational profitability through enhanced employee productivity and effectiveness ([Clifton & Harter, 2021](#)). The authors also note that SEW antecedents such as loneliness and social isolation are detrimental to the mental and physical health of employees. Therefore, SEW enhances the mental and physical health of employees. [Nel and Van Niekerk \(2023\)](#) contend that SEW assists employees in navigating organizational changes. Employees have faced various organizational transformations, particularly in work arrangements, leading to the emergence of the hybrid work environment (HWE).

The HWE has presented employees with various challenges that affect their well-being. [Choudhury et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that the HWE has led to social and professional isolation, which impacts employee well-being. [Wang et al. \(2021\)](#) further indicate that social isolation creates feelings of disconnectedness among employees. Additionally, HWE has adversely affected work relationships. According to [Babapour Chafi et al. \(2021\)](#), weakened social ties can lead to loneliness and disengagement, particularly for employees who are working remotely. This disengagement and loneliness negatively affect work relationships. [Davis Platt \(2023\)](#) emphasizes the importance of regular and meaningful contact with supervisors and peers, as these contacts are closely associated with SEW. Consequently, HWE has compromised the social well-being of employees due to reduced contact among colleagues, highlighting the need for organizations to implement strategies that enhance SEW.

According to [Hopkins and Bardoel \(2023\)](#), employee well-being studies highlight the challenges employees face but often fail to provide solutions. In contrast, [Jayman et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that organizations have comprehensive programs to address employee well-being. However, it is crucial to have specific strategies tailored to the well-being challenges

experienced during particular periods. The HWE represents such a distinct period that requires targeted strategies. In the context of this study, [Wray and Kinman \(2021\)](#) note a lack of understanding regarding the current well-being strategies and their effectiveness in higher education institutions (HEIs). Moreover, many studies on employee well-being interventions have focused on psychological and mental well-being ([Simpson et al., 2024](#); [Randall, 2023](#); [Wu et al., 2021](#)). There is a paucity of knowledge on the interventions organisations can adopt to enhance social employee well-being at the workplace, regardless of the salience of social employee well-being in the overall well-being of employees. Therefore, this study seeks to explore strategies or interventions HEIs can use to mitigate social well-being challenges emanating from the HWE among academics.

The study was conducted at a public higher education institution in the North-West Province of South Africa. In direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the institution decisively adopted a hybrid work model. To ensure a seamless transition to this hybrid environment, the university established a comprehensive protocol to guide hybrid work practices. This protocol clearly defines which employees are exempt from working remotely, which forms part of the hybrid work environment. Academics who are participants of the study are permitted to operate within this hybrid work setting. The university views hybrid work arrangements as providing greater flexibility and promoting a better work–life balance. Furthermore, the protocol specifies the robust support the university will provide to employees navigating the hybrid environment. This support includes dependable network access, reliable connectivity, and critical resources such as laptops to assist employees in adapting to the hybrid work setting. The following section will discuss the literature on SEW, the HWE, and the theories underpinning this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hybrid Work Environment

[Vidhyaa and Ravichandran \(2022\)](#) define hybrid working as “a flexible work model that supports a blend of in-office, remote, and on-the-go workers.” It combines physical and remote work arrangements and takes various forms depending on the organization ([Rudnicka et al., 2020](#); [CIPD, 2021](#)). [Economist Impact \(2022\)](#) emphasizes that the HWE goes beyond just the location of work; it also involves flexibility regarding when employees choose to work. The potential risk of HWE among employees is the loss of human connection; this can lead to social and professional isolation, contributing to stress and anxiety and adversely affecting employees’ well-being ([Economist Impact, 2022](#); [Babapour Chafi et al., 2021](#)). Hybrid work also significantly influences employees’ work–life balance and workload, leading to anxiety and burnout, ultimately impacting employee well-being ([Budiman et al., 2022](#)). This, in turn, affects both psychological and mental health, further affecting social well-being among employees ([Angeline, 2022](#)). While hybrid working presents challenges for employees, it significantly benefits employers and workers. According to [Wörtler et al. \(2021\)](#), hybrid working arrangements enhance the employability of older employees. Hybrid work allows organizations to harness the advantages of remote work while benefiting from the traditional work environment. [Van Yperen and Wörtler \(2017\)](#) emphasize that the HWE increases employee job autonomy. Additionally, it helps reduce negative work-related behaviours such as absenteeism, turnover, and tardiness.

2.2. Social Employee Well-Being (SEW)

SEW is a crucial aspect of overall well-being in the workplace ([Hennicks et al., 2022](#)). It pertains to the quality of relationships and interactions at all organizational levels ([Pagán-Castaño et al., 2020](#)). SEW involves how individuals thrive in their social lives and work relationships and their ability to collaborate effectively with colleagues ([Hennicks et al.,](#)

2022). Strong relationships and effective internal communication significantly enhance SEW and depend on meaningful employee interactions (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Social well-being at work is a feeling of embeddedness in meaningful communities and having short-term interactions or connections and long-term relationships with others (Fisher, 2014, in Chen & Cooper, 2014). The feeling of embeddedness relates to the need to belong, whereas social connections include noticing other people's presence and the deliberate exchange of information; it entails seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching other people. Long-term relationships involve having both vertically and horizontally positive work relationships at the workplace (Pipera & Fragouli, 2021).

2.3. Social Employee Well-Being Strategies

Employee well-being strategies or interventions relate to the planned actions that an organization takes to improve employee well-being (Roodbari et al., 2022). Simpson et al. (2024) argue that employee well-being interventions or strategies are placed into two categories: primary and secondary. The authors argue that primary-level strategies provide employees with work-based resources, such as social support and job autonomy, and secondary-level strategies build employee personal resources, such as resilience, to cope with job demands. Tabor-Błażewicz (2023) categorized strategies that enhance social well-being in the workplace into processes, projects or programs, and attitudes. Processes are long-term initiatives, while projects or programs are typically short-term. Attitudes refer to initiatives that cultivate employee attitudes on supporting well-being. The following section explores various initiatives and strategies organizations implement to foster a sense of belonging, social connectedness, and positive workplace relationships.

2.3.1. Regular Check-Ins

Rule (2023) emphasizes that regular check-ins, where employees discuss their workload and other topics, improve the employee-manager relationship. The author also notes that these check-ins provide opportunities for one-on-one conversations, which foster a sense of belonging. Employees are more likely to feel a sense of belonging when they perceive that their employer cares for them, positively impacting SEW. Hopkins and Bar-doel (2023) stress the significance of check-ins as part of an organizational culture that enhances SEW.

2.3.2. Group-Based Activities

United Healthcare (2023) emphasizes that group-based activities play a crucial role in enhancing SEW by improving social connectedness. Tabor-Błażewicz (2023) suggests that organizations can implement group-based activities, such as social events, to boost employees' social well-being. According to Rule (2023), these social events provide opportunities for employees to bond on both personal and professional levels, fostering connections and relationships that contribute to a greater sense of belonging.

2.3.3. Effective Communication Strategy

Malinen et al. (2020) emphasize that timely and transparent communication and utilizing various modes of communication enhance employee well-being. Rule (2023) states that frequent organizational meetings significantly improve SEW by fostering inclusivity and making employees feel valued, enhancing their sense of belonging. Additionally, Ndagire et al. (2023) note that communication influences work relationships. Therefore, a well-developed communication strategy can strengthen positive work relationships and enhance employees' social well-being. An effective communication strategy boosts employees' sense of belonging and improves their work relationships.

2.3.4. Recognising and Rewarding Employees

According to [Rule \(2023\)](#), peer-to-peer recognition is an initiative that improves social well-being in the workplace. The author argues that it makes employees feel valued and strengthens their work relationships. [Alhmoud and Rjoub \(2020\)](#) assert that social rewards enhance employees' sense of belonging and connection. Additionally, [Junianto et al. \(2024\)](#) state that rewards and recognition strengthen affective commitment. [Raza et al. \(2020\)](#) highlight a strong, significant relationship between affective commitment and a sense of belonging in the workplace. Therefore, it can be concluded that rewards and recognition enhance SEW through improved work relationships, a sense of belonging, and social connections.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by two theories: the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model ([Demerouti et al., 2001](#)) and the Need-to-Belong Theory ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)). The JD-R model was developed by Demerouti and his colleagues in 2001. This model explains how the work environment affects employees' performance and well-being ([Tummers & Bakker, 2021](#)). It categorizes job characteristics into job demands and resources ([Demerouti et al., 2001](#)). Job demands are aspects of work that require significant effort from employees and can have psychological and physiological effects. On the other hand, job resources are features of a job that help employees achieve desired outcomes and mitigate the impact of job demands ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2017](#)). Examples of job resources include social support, opportunities for promotion, and the flexibility to choose when and where to work ([Tummers & Bakker, 2021](#)).

In 1995, Baumeister and Leary introduced the "need to belong" theory, which posits that the desire to form and maintain significant interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation. According to this theory, the need to belong is satisfied through regular, enjoyable interactions with others, and these interactions are more fulfilling when they involve consistent social connections rather than a constantly changing group of acquaintances. [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#) also argue that having a sense of relatedness without frequent contact is ineffective. A lack of belonging can lead to negative consequences, such as poor health. Conversely, fulfilling the need to belong is associated with positive outcomes, including improved well-being. The theory suggests that this need is inherent in all individuals, although its intensity may vary based on cultural and individual differences.

The study validates the two theories in a hybrid work setting. Several studies that employed these theories employed them in the traditional work setting. The study was conducted among academics in South Africa, whose culture differs from the one where the theories were developed and tested. Therefore, the study validates and tests the theories in the African culture. Moreover, the JD-R model has primarily been tested in the health industry, the study validates and tests the theory in the higher education industry.

Significance of Study

The study addresses the need to investigate social-employee well-being ([Hennicks et al., 2022](#)) and the lack of literature on well-being strategies in HEIs. Most existing literature focuses on the challenges rather than providing solutions to enhance well-being ([Hopkins & Bardoel, 2023](#)). Where interventions have been explored, the focus has been on mental and psychological employee well-being. The objectives of the study were

1. To explore initiatives that HEIs can adopt to strengthen the sense of belonging among academics in the HWE
2. To identify strategies to improve and sustain work relationships among academics in the HWE.

3. To highlight interventions HEIs can implement to enhance social connections among academics in the HWE.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Philosophy

A research philosophy reflects the researcher's perspective through which new, reliable knowledge is acquired about the study; it involves the development of research assumptions, understanding, and the nature of knowledge (Žukauskas et al., 2018). This philosophy is primarily considered from three perspectives: epistemology, ontology, and axiology (Muchanga, 2020). For this study, a relativist ontological position was adopted. The relativist stance recognizes the role of social actors in the research process. According to Okesina (2020), it assumes that the social phenomena under investigation have multiple realities that can be explored. The study also embraced a subjective epistemological stance. This perspective holds that the researcher's experiences and interactions with participants contribute to generating new knowledge (Okesina, 2020). Lastly, a value-laden and balanced axiology stance was adopted. This approach asserts that researchers must consider their values and biases, as well as those of the participants, to provide a comprehensive and balanced report (Okesina, 2020).

4.2. Research Design and Approach

4.2.1. Sampling and Participants

The research participants were selected from a public higher education institution in the North-West Province of South Africa. The study was advertised, and participants were recruited through university communication channels. A purposive sampling method was employed, resulting in 23 semi-structured interviews. Douglas et al. (2025) employed qualitative research methods to explore well-being in the higher education sector in the United Kingdom with a sample size of 21 research participants. Gauche et al. (2017) used the same method in the South African context to explore employee well-being with a sample size of 26. Lastly, a qualitative study by Nel and Van Niekerk (2023) had a sample size of 6 when exploring employee well-being during change. Data saturation for the study was reached at the 19th participant, and researchers continued until the 23rd as participants had already confirmed their participation. However, no new information, codes, or themes emerged.

According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), a phenomenological study can achieve saturation with just 10 participants, while G. Guest et al. (2020) suggest that conducting 6 to 7 interviews can effectively capture key themes in qualitative research. The study sample was homogeneous, and this contributed to saturation being reached with 23 participants. G. Guest et al. (2006) highlight that data saturation in homogeneous participants can be achieved with as few as 12 participants. The sample size of 23 was considered sufficient for the study. Among the 23 participants, 65% were female, and 35% were male. In terms of campus location, 43% worked at the Vanderbijlpark campus, 35% at Potchefstroom, and 24% at Mahikeng. Regarding academic position, 52% were lecturers, 35% were senior lecturers, 4% associate professors, and 9% professors. Regarding work models, 52% followed a flexible hybrid model, 31% had a semi-flexible arrangement, and 17% adhered to a fixed work model. The age distribution indicated that 61% were millennials, 35% belonged to Generation X, and 4% were baby boomers. Table 1 summarises characteristics of the research sample.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample.

Identifier	Gender	Position	Age	Hybrid Model	Years of Experience
RP1	Female	Lecturer	52	Flexible	21
RP2	Female	Lecturer	55	Flexible	17
RP3	Male	Lecturer	29	Flexible	5
RP4	Female	Lecturer	37	Semi-flexible	11
RP5	Female	Lecturer	40	Flexible	13
RP6	Female	Lecturer	33	Flexible	7
RP7	Female	Lecturer	41	Flexible	13
RP8	Male	Lecturer	47	Semi-flexible	10
RP9	Male	Snr Lecturer	36	Flexible	13
RP10	Female	Lecturer	39	Flexible	17
RP11	Male	Asso Prof	58	Fixed	19
RP12	Male	Snr Lecturer	44	Fixed	11
RP13	Female	Snr Lecturer	31	Flexible	8
RP14	Female	Lecturer	34	Flexible	5
RP15	Male	Snr Lecturer	52	Semi-flexible	17
RP16	Female	Snr Lecturer	31	Fixed	7
RP17	Male	Lecturer	32	Fixed	7
RP18	Female	Professor	60	Semi-flexible	32
RP19	Female	Snr Lecturer	48	Flexible	19
RP20	Female	Professor	46	Flexible	21
RP21	Female	Lecturer	34	Flexible	6
RP22	Male	Snr Lecturer	39	Semi-flexible	11
RP23	Female	Snr Lecturer	35	Semi-flexible	9

4.2.2. Data Collection

To explore strategies for enhancing SWE in a HWE, online semi-structured interviews were conducted using a prepared interview schedule. This approach facilitated in-depth responses through probing questions to gain further insights (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021). To mitigate interviewer bias, the researchers conducted a pilot study to test the interview guide. The pilot study consisted of 6 participants, two from each campus. Regardless of the position, teaching academics were included in the pilot study sample, and academics seconded to administrative positions, including those focusing on research only, were excluded from the sample. Thabane et al. (2010) highlights that the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the pilot study should be the same as those of the main study. Chenail (2011) notes that pilot testing of the interview guide helps eliminate interviewer biases in semi-structured interviews. Conducting the pilot study helped the researchers to evaluate and revise the interview guide, which allowed the rewording of questions to eliminate leading, suggestive, and complex questions. Sources of bias found in interview questions and delivery of questions were also eliminated by the pilot study, as it exposed researchers to the salience of neutrality in tone and body language when conducting semi-structured interviews. To eliminate interviewer bias, the interviewer also attended training on conducting semi-structured interviews for qualitative research. Some of the questions posed included: What strategies is the University using to ensure a sense of belonging is not compromised among academics in the HWE? What is the University doing to improve and sustain positive work relationships among academics in the HWE? What strategies is the University employing to create spaces of social connections in the HWE? What do you recommend the University can do to improve work relationships in the HWE? What else can the University do to enhance academics' sense of belonging in the HWE? What should the University do to strengthen social connections among academics in the HWE?

4.2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to understand the strategies for SEW in the HWE. Kiger and Varpio (2020) state that thematic analysis is a flexible approach intended to explore experiences, thoughts, or behaviours in depth, providing interpretation rather than mere description. Given the study's objectives, thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate method for examining the participants' lived experiences. Following the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the research proceeded through specific steps. The first phase involved becoming familiar with the data and identifying points of interest. In the second phase, initial codes were generated. The third phase focused on identifying patterns to develop themes (Neuendorf, 2018). The fourth phase assessed whether the emerging themes effectively addressed the research questions. Finally, the last two phases involved analysing each theme and compiling the narrative and relevant data segments.

Data were analysed using manual coding, which involves identifying meaningful information segments and assigning codes to these segments (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). An inductive approach was employed, where codes were developed directly from the participants' responses. Inductive coding is well-suited for exploratory research (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Short phrases were extracted from the data while maintaining their integrity. Similar codes were grouped into categories and refined into sub-themes and overarching themes.

4.2.4. Strategies Employed to Ensure Rigor and Quality of the Data

To ensure credibility, respondent validation was used, and participants were allowed to review their interview transcriptions to verify the accuracy of the recorded data (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). An audit trail was also provided, detailing the data collection process, the derivation of themes, and the decision-making procedures throughout the study to enhance dependability and confirmability (Carcary, 2020). Furthermore, thick descriptions were used to ensure transferability, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Thick descriptions provide sufficient detail for readers to draw conclusions from the data. To address reflexivity, the researchers made notes during interviews and engaged in memoing shortly after each interview.

4.2.5. Ethics and Authorisation

This study was conducted ethically, adhering to the North-West University (NWU) code of academic and research ethics. The researcher complied with the University's guidelines for qualitative research by distributing a letter requesting informed consent from participants. This consent form ensured the confidentiality of their results and identities. It also made clear to the interviewees that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Furthermore, the researcher fully disclosed the nature and purpose of the research to the participants. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from NWU and granted under clearance number NWU-10925-23-4A.

5. Findings

Four themes emerged from the data: growth strategies, support strategies, relationship strategies, and reward strategies. Table 2 summarises the themes and sub-themes of the study.

Table 2. Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Frequency Per Sub-Theme
Growth Strategies	1.1 Training and development	17
	1.2 Mentorship	13
Total:		30
Support Strategies	2.1 Communication	11
	2.2 Peer Support	9
	2.3 Management Support	13
	2.3 Physical resources	19
	2.4 Job Quality	3
Total		55
Relationship Strategies	3.1 Social events	16
	3.2 Organisational culture	11
Total:		27
Reward Strategies	4.1 Recognition	6
	4.2 Direct Compensation	3
Total:		9

5.1. Theme 1: Growth Strategies

The growth strategies theme entails initiatives adopted to enhance the learning and development of employees and opportunities for career growth. Two sub-themes emerged: Training and development and mentorship.

5.1.1. Sub-Theme: Training and Development

Seventeen participants highlighted the importance of training in enhancing SEW. Participants noted that the University offers various training opportunities at the HWE. However, the training provided should offer opportunities for growth in the University, enhancing a sense of belonging. Another participant noted the need to train academics on soft skills to help them navigate and manage some challenges the HWE presents.

“The University should provide academics with training that will enhance their career growth, as it is important to academics and makes one feel the University cares for me”. (RP6, Female, Aged 33, Lecturer, 7 years of work experience)

“Academics need soft skills to navigate this environment. . . things like conflict negotiation, they can help to manage work relationships”. (RP20, Female, Aged 46, 21 years of work experience)

While training is happening on various platforms in the organisation. Participants felt that to enhance social connections and build relationships in the HWE, some training programs must be provided only in the physical environment to promote physical attendance at these workshops and create spaces where academics meet regularly with colleagues. Another participant highlighted the importance of concurrently training colleagues in the same department to enhance chances of connections and relationship building.

“The University should offer some training which we can only attend physically and not virtually. . . we need more physical training”. (RP3, Male, Aged 29, Lecturer, 5 years of work experience)

“Training team members at the same time can help academics connect and build relationships”. (RP8, Male, Aged 47, Lecturer, 10 years of work experience)

Waller (2020) contends that development programmes at the workplace are key to developing a sense of belonging among employees. Similarly, Rupčić (2024) indicates that organisations should strive to provide informal learning opportunities and knowledge-sharing activities in the HWE. The findings of the study are in line with the JD-R model. Watson et al. (2018) contend that the model assumes that learning opportunities enhance self-efficacy through learning new skills, thereby providing employees with personal resources to buffer job demands.

5.1.2. Sub-Theme: Mentorship

Mentorship was mentioned thirteen times as a means of enhancing SEW. Participants noted that the mentor–mentee relationship is crucial in building work relationships and enhancing new employees' sense of belonging. Emphasis was on the role of mentors in helping with work-related issues and being the go-to person for any other issues that mentees may need help with.

“Academic mentorships go beyond work; my mentor is my go-to person in the immediate environment...it helps create even work relationships”. (RP18, Female, Aged 60, Professor, 32 years of work experience)

“Mentorship creates a sense of I am important, and I belong, I add value and am seen... it needs to be intentional”. (RP23, Female, Aged 35, Senior Lecturer, 9 years of work experience)

Du et al. (2023) state that mentors form affinity groups in academic settings, an essential source of creating a sense of belonging among mentees. Mentorship programs increase work colleagues' trust and support, enhancing a feeling of being valued by other colleagues (Jeanmougin et al., 2024). Jeanmougin et al. (2024) highlight that mentoring programs that magnify a sense of belonging in employees are programs that incorporate personal social connection strategies over and above the connection activities offered by the employer. The study's results align with the study by Jeanmougin et al. (2024), which found that peer mentoring enhanced a sense of belonging among nurses.

5.2. Theme 2: Support Strategies

Support strategies relate to initiatives adopted to offer social, emotional, and any other support employees require in the work environment. Four sub-themes emerged: communication, social resources, physical resources, and job quality.

5.2.1. Sub-Theme: Communication

Eleven participants noted the importance of communication in strengthening SEW in the HWE. Participants felt that communication was critical in ensuring the uncompromised social well-being of academics in the HWE. Participants noted that knowing what is happening around them enhances a sense of belonging to the organisation. Participants also highlighted that using various platforms to communicate with employees ensures that the recipients receive the intended message.

“Communication is key in this type of environment; you need to know what is happening around you all the time”. (RP12, Male, Aged 44, Senior Lecturer, 11 years of work experience)

“We have daily communication from the University every day, the same message is also sent on our SMSs, and our supervisor will sometimes share the same message on WhatsApp”. (RP10, Female, Aged 39, Senior Lecturer, 17 years of work experience)

Another participant noted that having an open-door policy enhances organisational communication, which plays a significant role in strengthening a feeling of belonging and building relationships and connections.

“Our director has an open-door policy; we can see him anytime... it makes me feel important and has built our work relationship over the years”. (RP13, Female, Aged 31, Lecturer, 8 years of work experience)

Transparent and regular communication enhances a sense of belonging. [Abrahams and Cohen \(2023\)](#) contend that authentic conversations enhance inclusivity and a feeling of being valued among employees, which is critical for the well-being of employees. The study’s findings align with [Qin and Men’s \(2023\)](#) study, which explored internal communication to enhance the well-being of employees. The results indicated that corporate communication played a significant role in improving the well-being of employees as it cultivated a sense of trust between the employer and employees and among employees.

5.2.2. Sub Theme: Peer Support

Peer support and managerial support are essential elements of social resources. Nine participants noted that peer support was critical in enhancing belonging and building work relationships. One participant stated that it was important for the University to have peer support groups, which can help academics tackle problems outside their work. These can help employees connect and build relationships while showing that the employer is not only concerned about productivity but also cares about the well-being of employees.

“Having someone to talk to even when it is not about work. Those peer support groups are important. at least you may think the employer also cares about you”. (RP8, Male, Aged 47, Lecturer, 10 years of work experience)

“It is important to have a go-to person where you can discuss even your issues that do not have anything to do with work”. (RP18, Female, Aged 60, Professor, 32 years of work experience)

Peer support is considered as an important employee well-being human resources practice salient in enhancing employee well-being ([Bhoir & Sinha, 2024](#)). It increases social support and positively impacts employee well-being through increasing positive coping strategies and decreasing negative coping strategies of ill health at the workplace ([Agarwal et al., 2020](#)). [Liu et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that social support in the form of informational, emotional, esteem, and companionship support is essential in virtual spaces. Companionship support is synonymous with peer support. The study’s findings align with the [Agarwal et al. \(2020\)](#) study, which found a positive relationship between peer support and employee well-being.

5.2.3. Management Support

Thirteen participants also noted that management support was vital in enhancing social well-being in the HWE. The participants highlighted that management support was critical in strengthening social well-being through improved work relationships and creating a sense of belonging among academics.

“Managers play a vital role in creating spaces that allow employees to connect and feel important. they need to listen to their staff”. (RP21, Female, Aged 34, Lecturer, 6 years of work experience)

“I can only speak for my director; he is perfect... He makes us feel important... He is engaging”. (RP17, Male, Aged 32, Lecturer, 7 years of work experience)

“We have much support from our manager at the center of X; it makes you feel part of the team and that we are valued as individuals”. (RP4, female, Aged 37, Lecturer, 11 years of work experience)

Management support as a social resource is a critical job resource that promotes a healthy working environment in the context of the HWE (Niebuhr et al., 2022). Findings align with the JD-R model when management support is conceptualised as a resource. Findings also indicated that providing social support through management support, which seemed lacking in the HWE, can increase a sense of belonging among academics. Liu et al. (2020) argue that providing such social support enhances a feeling of being cared for and recognised. These are critical elements in enhancing a sense of belonging. The findings align with Usman et al.’s (2021) study, which concluded that social support is essential to improving employee well-being, especially in a crisis.

5.2.4. Sub-Theme: Physical Resources

Nineteen research participants discussed the importance of physical resources in enhancing SEW. Academics noted that the HWE required resources to connect with colleagues. Physical resources such as work equipment, especially when working from home, emerged as critical in enhancing a sense of belonging among academics. Getting data to work from home was considered a yardstick to measure whether the employer placed any value on the employees.

“I wish the University could buy us things like printers to use when working from home”. (RP5, Female, Aged 37, Lecturer, 11 years of work experience)

“They say you can work from home but fail to provide the basic resource such as data. that is saying one thing and doing the other”. (RP11, Male, Aged 58, Senior Lecturer, 19 years of work experience)

Ahmad et al. (2023) suppose that providing physical resources is critical in the HWE as it enhances work autonomy, which increases a sense of belonging. Sokolic (2022) asserts that resources are crucial in the HWE because technology connects employees working in two distinct workspaces. Rupčić (2024) posits that infrastructural provision is one of the salient prerequisites of effective hybrid working. It enhances a sense of being valued by the organisation while providing platforms for employees to connect, even though it will be virtual. The findings of the study are in line with the JD-R model. The model considers physical resources paramount in promoting the well-being of employees, as they help employees meet job demands.

5.2.5. Sub-Theme: Job Quality

Two participants felt it was essential to examine academics’ responsibilities to address social well-being challenges in the hybrid work environment. One participant thought that the University may have various strategies to ensure social well-being is enhanced; however, the HWE has seen academics assuming more responsibilities, which is making it difficult to get the time to attend or participate in these strategies.

“I think the first step is to look at the responsibilities of academics. . . , there is no time to attend these workshops. we are now doing more. . . .”. (RP9, Male, Aged 36, Senior Lecturer, 13 years of work experience)

“In my case, time is not available. I teach two modules in two languages. . . literally, it is four modules. Where do I find time to go for events and workshops?”. (RP16 Female, Aged 31, Lecturer, 7 years of work experience)

Work overload negatively impacts employees' mood and mental well-being, which affects work relationships (Angeline, 2022). The quality of work relationships determines the quality of social employee well-being. The study's findings align with Pace et al.'s (2021) study, which found work overload detrimental to the social well-being of academics in the European context. Findings also align with the JD-R theory that views workload as a job demand characteristic, which, if not buffered with job resources like human capital, will result in ill health.

5.3. Theme 3: Relationship Strategies

Relationship strategies entail initiatives that organizations adopt to build and strengthen employee relationships. Two Sub-themes emerged: social events and organisational culture.

5.3.1. Sub-Theme: Social Events

Sixteen participants highlighted the importance of social events in enhancing social interactions and as a platform to build relationships for academics working in the HWE. They recommended that social events like cultural events, integrating training with excursions, team building, and campus get-togethers help academics engage in informal talks, which are crucial in building relationships and connecting.

"Let us have more social events, school get-togethers, even family picnic days for academics to relax and connect... it helps build relationships". (RP15, Male, Aged 52, Senior Lecturer, 17 years of work experience)

"Once in a while, a face-to-face interaction or team building just to touch base with all your colleagues". (RP1, Female, Aged 52, Lecturer, 21 years of work experience)

"... team building sessions should take place frequently, not just to meet work colleagues at year-end functions; this will allow academics to meet more and network more". (RP3, Male, Aged 29, Lecturer, 5 years of work experience)

Another participant alluded to incorporating formal training with retreats or going on excursions.

"The university can do half-day physical training workshops, and the other day we can maybe do a game drive, in that way we interact and build relationships with peers". (RP7, Female, Aged 41, Lecturer, 13 years of work experience)

Li et al. (2019) indicate that team-building activities are a form of organisational support that incorporates collaborative tasks and is critical for employee well-being. The collaborative nature of team building helps employees to connect and build work relationships. Johnson et al. (2020) encourage organisations to consider organising informal social gatherings to help hybrid employees build work relations. This is in line with the need to belong theory. Central to the theory is the need to belong or feel connected, a basic human need that, when fulfilled, intrinsically motivates individuals (Alhmoud & Rjoub, 2020). The need to belong is considered one of the key dimensions of social well-being (Colenberg et al., 2020).

5.3.2. Sub-Theme: Organisational Culture

Eleven participants highlighted the importance of culture through tea breaks and celebrating achievements in building relationships among colleagues in the HWE. One participant noted that managers should ensure that team members get together once a week, even virtually, just to chit-chat, even for 15 min, to help employees feel comfortable with each other and make it easy to establish relationships. Two participants indicated

that communication via daily check-ins with their supervisors is a great way of building relationships and helps them stay connected with their colleagues.

“We can have tea breaks even virtually... just to chat and talk about ourselves and challenges we are facing”. (RP11, Male, Aged 58, Senior Lecturer, 19 years of work experience)

“Our supervisor is phenomenal; he checks up on us... even if it is a WhatsApp message... that creates a bond between us”. (RP2, Female, Aged 55, Lecturer, 17 years of work experience)

“Check-ins are essential; they make you feel part and parcel of the team”. (RP11, Male, Aged 58, Senior Lecturer, 19 years of work experience)

Celebrating academics on personal and professional achievements was cited as an organisational culture initiative that some departments use to ensure that departments are close-knit in the HWE. One participant noted that their manager was instrumental in ensuring strong work relationships were available by celebrating team members.

“My supervisor does not miss anyone’s birthday and sends personalized birthday wishes on our WhatsApp group... we celebrate each other, which keeps us as a family”. (RP13, Female, Aged 31, Lecturer, 8 years of work experience)

Another participant noted that sharing all messages in their WhatsApp group enhances a sense of belonging in their department. In this way, it creates one big family that cares about what happens in individual personal spaces. Sharing such information allows academics to create bonds that facilitate relationship building.

“We share personal messages about death, births, and even marriages... we can celebrate with those celebrating and mourn with those who have lost a loved one”. (RP22, Male, Aged 39, Senior Lecturer, 11 years of work experience)

Hopkins and Bardoel (2023) mention that organisational culture is critical in the HWE and can be used to nurture trust and connection among employees. The authors further contend that virtual coffee breaks and regular check-ins are critical in enhancing employee well-being. Similarly, Gratton (2021) states that organisational culture is important in the HWE, and virtual team check-ins create opportunities to interact and connect while reducing social isolation. With social isolation emerging as one of the challenges of the HWE, organisational culture is essential in reducing social isolation. The study’s findings align with the need-to-belong, emphasizing individuals’ need to connect regularly to enhance their well-being.

5.4. Theme 4: Reward Strategies

Reward strategies relate to compensation strategies used to reward and recognise employee effort. Recognition and direct compensation emerged as sub-themes for this theme.

5.4.1. Sub-Theme: Recognition

Recognition was mentioned six times by the research participants. Participants noted that their sense of belonging to the organisation is enhanced when the University recognizes and appreciates their valuable contribution. Participants noted that being rewarded or recognized makes one feel like the organization cares, which magnifies one’s attachment and embeddedness to the organization, positively impacting social well-being. Other participants noted that being recognized and rewarded at the award functions ensures social interactions are also being enhanced and allows academics to network and build relationships.

“Award ceremonies recognize and celebrate top achievers; at those ceremonies, we connect and interact with others”. (RP12, Male, Aged 44, Senior Lecturer, 11 years of work experience)

“The University recognizes outstanding employees. . . We get emails to celebrate them. . . We can consider having physical ceremonies to celebrate, that way we can meet and interact as well”. (RP11, Male, Aged 58, Senior Lecturer, 19 years of work experience)

Murayama (2022) argues that recognition from peers and supervisors is some form of social reward. A sense of belonging and work relationships among employees are enhanced by peer-to-peer recognition (Rule, 2023). According to Junianto et al. (2024), recognition enhances affective commitment among employees. Affective commitment is an antecedent of a sense of belonging (Raza et al., 2020). The study’s findings align with Yang et al.’s (2022) study among Chinese employees, which indicated that employee recognition increased employee well-being and strengthened their sense of belonging to the organisation. The findings align with the need-to-belong theory that assumes that social interactions are important in building a sense of belonging.

5.4.2. Sub-Theme: Direct Compensation

Three participants mentioned the importance of rewards in enhancing SEW. Two participants noted that being competitively rewarded enhances one’s sense of belonging more than anything. One participant indicated that whether it is hybrid or not, academics are embedded in organisations that value them by paying them a competitive salary. The other participant noted that the University was not paying competitive salaries, which made them feel less valued by the employer. Fringe benefits emerged as critical in enhancing organisational attachment and a sense of belonging.

“Let us be honest, guys, nothing enhances belonging like knowing you are being paid what you are worth. University should benchmark and pay us like other universities”. (RP14, Female, Aged 34, Lecturer, 5 years of work experience)

“Our salaries are not competitive at all. . . my colleagues in other Universities are earning more”. (RP16, Female, Aged 31, Lecturer, 7 years of work experience)

“Allowances are also important in one feeling they are a treasure to the organisation. pay us housing allowances, medical aid. . .”. (RP19, Female, Aged 48, Senior Lecturer, 19 years of work experience)

Kerketta and Chauhan (2023) state that recognition and rewards are critical to job satisfaction and employee well-being by making employees feel valued by their employer. Similarly, Waller (2020) argues that rewards and recognition play an important role in developing a sense of belonging among employees. Koo et al. (2020) note that rewards elicit an affective commitment to the organisation, and employees with affective commitment have a strong sense of belonging. A study among hotel employees in South Korea also found a positive relationship between affective commitment and rewards (Koo et al., 2020). The study’s findings align with the need-to-belong theory. The need-to-belong theory posits that belonging or feeling connected is an intrinsic motivation, and social rewards facilitate this motivation (Alhmoud & Rjoub, 2020).

6. Discussion of Results

Growth strategies prioritizing training, development, and mentoring are crucial for enhancing SEW in the HWE. This theme had the second-highest frequency. Study findings indicate the importance of team training in enhancing SEW in the HWE. Team training directly contributes to building positive work relationships and underscores the significance

of collaborative learning. Carruthers (2023) demonstrates that adopting team or cohort learning is essential for organizations that maintain strong connections and foster a cohesive workforce in a hybrid setting. Additionally, Lock (2021) affirms that learning together as a team strengthens the bonds among team members. While in-person training creates vital opportunities for face-to-face engagement, virtual tools can also significantly enhance communication and connection in the HWE.

The emphasis on growth strategies highlights the critical role of coach leadership in the HWE. Coach leadership prioritizes learning and development, fosters interaction and feedback, and engages in open and motivating conversations to strengthen relationships (Kaur & Parihar, 2022). Hillberg Jarl (2024) highlights that leaders are critical in enhancing workplace learning. By adopting coaching, they improve learning and relationships among team members. Work relationships are an important dimension of social employee well-being; hence, leaders play a critical role in enhancing SEW through training and development. Furthermore, anchored training workshops are indispensable for enhancing social connections. Rupčić (2024) establishes that physical training is vital for fostering face-to-face interactions, which are key to developing affective commitment. Raza et al. (2020) highlight that affective commitment significantly enhances a sense of belonging among team members. The implementation of anchored training workshops indicates the need for intentional leadership in today's HWE.

The study's findings decisively demonstrate that growth strategies are essential for fostering a strong sense of belonging and improving workplace relationships. This shows the importance of caring human resources management practices and a caring organisation in the HWE. Saks (2022) discusses that training and development are considered caring human resources practices. The author explains that caring human resource practices help employees achieve their needs while promoting employee growth and well-being. The same author further suggests that emphasising training and development opportunities signals an organisation's investment in employees while caring for their growth and development. From this perspective, one can denote that HEIs must embrace caring human resources practices in the HWE, as these are crucial in enhancing a sense of belonging, work relationships, and connections. Recommendations to employ growth strategies through training and development and mentoring programs indicate the positive perceived influence of structural employee empowerment through access to opportunities to enhance SEW.

The findings also indicated that relationships in the HWE can be enhanced by having physically anchored team-building sessions and social events. The relationship theme was mentioned 25 times, with more emphasis on social events. Social events ensure that employees stay connected despite the physical distance (Teng-Calleja et al., 2024). The same author contends that engagement activities, such as social events, provide emotional support while creating positive work experiences in the HWE. This highlights the importance of creating positive work experiences in the HWE. Therefore, HEIs must create spaces that afford academics opportunities to connect and build work relationships, as the HWE seems to compromise on these opportunities. Social events occur in informal settings, which also help cement relationships; they also provide opportunities for spontaneous informal communication, which is important in enhancing interactions and creating a sense of community among employees. This indicates that organisational leaders must embrace sensible leadership in the hybrid work environment. da Silva et al. (2022) argue that sensible leaders prioritize relationship building and employee well-being.

Findings also indicated that the social well-being of academics can be enhanced by adopting support strategies that entail effective communication, resource provision, and having good-quality jobs. Support strategies had the highest frequency, which indicates

their importance in enhancing SEW in the HWE. Physical resources had the highest frequency, signifying their importance in enhancing SEW, followed by communication, social resources, and job quality, respectively. Support strategies indicate the positive perceived influence of structural employee empowerment via access to support in enhancing SEW in the HWE. The open-door communication policy emerged as a mechanism that enhanced the SEW of academics. According to [Teng-Calleja et al. \(2024\)](#), open-door policies help employees receive adequate feedback. This shows that feedback is critical in the HWE. Feedback enhances a sense of belonging and cements positive work relationships. An open-door policy also creates psychological safety for employees, which helps cultivate a sense of belonging. This shows the importance of organisational culture in enhancing social well-being. The salience of communication in enhancing SEW in the HWE shows the importance of inclusive leadership in the HWE. [Menzies \(2024\)](#) argues that inclusive leaders emphasize information flow while encouraging employee interaction.

Academics also cited the need to assess their job quality in HWE. This indicates the importance of doing a job evaluation for academics and redesigning their job as the HWE has increased their workload. Increased workload impacts work–life balance, which can affect the sense of belonging. According to [Rupčić \(2023\)](#), job quality, which encompasses workload and job content, affects training and development. Training and development were cited as positively impacting social well-being. Hence, improving the work environment by assessing the quality of academic work will improve the social well-being of academics in the HWE. It will afford them time to attend social events and training workshops, which have been cited as instrumental in enhancing social connections and building work relationships while enhancing a sense of belonging in the HWE.

Academics recommended that having work tools that meet the demands of the HWE and a financial budget to finance requisitions that academics make to purchase resources needed in HWE will improve academics' well-being. According to [Zajac et al. \(2022\)](#), providing resources like time and financial resources creates opportunities for social connections facilitated in learning and development spaces. Learning and development at the workplace enhances social well-being. According to [Teng-Calleja et al. \(2024\)](#), providing work tools and budgets to reimburse workers in the HWE for expenses like the internet was paramount in the HWE. Digital tools and work platforms are resources that HEIs should provide to enhance the social well-being of academics. According to [Suravi \(2024\)](#), such resources are critical in upskilling, coaching, onboarding, and mentoring, which are all important in enhancing academic social well-being. Provision of resources indicates the salience of perceived organisational support in enhancing SEW in the HWE. It also shows the perceived influence of structural employee empowerment via access to resources in enhancing SEW in the HWE.

Academics also noted that reward strategies can be adopted to improve the social well-being of academics in the HWE, though they had the lowest frequency. Direct rewards and recognition emerged as initiatives that can be used to improve academics' social well-being in the HWE. This highlights the importance of the total rewards approach to enhance SEW. [Raj \(2020\)](#) argue that total rewards entail all kinds of financial and non-financial rewards. Recognition is a non-financial reward. [Waller \(2020\)](#) argues that recognition and rewards provide a sense of unique value among employees. When employees feel valued, they become committed to an organisation. The value employees feel due to rewards is tied to the rewards' link to perceived organisational support. [Sihag \(2021\)](#) argues that rewards enhance perceived organisational support, which is a feeling of being cared for and valued by the employer, enhancing a sense of belonging. The findings also indicated that having events to recognise employees created spaces for academics to connect and build relationships. Hence, when recognition of employees takes place in the physical

space, all three dimensions of employee well-being are fulfilled simultaneously. This also affirms the importance of social rewards in enhancing the social well-being of employees in the HWE.

In summary, the growth, support, relationship, and reward initiatives are complementary in enhancing the social employee well-being of academics in the HWE. Support strategies are central to fostering employee social well-being in hybrid work environments. Physical resources are unequivocally the most critical factor for academics. Furthermore, growth-focused approaches, such as training, development, and mentoring, are also highly valued. Although relationship and reward strategies were less frequently noted among academics, their significance remains evident. HEIs should integrate them to enhance the SEW of academics. Incorporating these as primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions is important, as this will allow HEIs to be proactive and reactive to social well-being challenges.

6.1. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study's participants were exclusively selected from a single public HEI in South Africa. The qualitative nature of the research and the sample size impact the generalisability of the study, although the findings can still be relevant in other research contexts. The use of purposive sampling in the study poses a potential risk for selection bias. The study was cross-sectional, and a longitudinal approach could have provided a deeper understanding of the subject matter. The study focused on academics in a public HEI. Future studies could consider academics in private institutions, as differences may exist between the public and private sectors. Additionally, there is limited research on the well-being of support staff at higher education institutions (HEIs). Further research could explore their social well-being, considering their vital role in the sustainability and competitiveness of these institutions. Future studies could also explore strategies that enhance psychological and physical well-being in the HWE to have a holistic approach to managing employee well-being in the HWE.

6.2. Implications

The research makes important scholarly and practical contributions to employee wellness. Although much effort has been devoted to exploring employee well-being interventions, limited research has focused on SEW, particularly SEW interventions. Organisational leaders play an important role in enhancing the SEW of academics in the HWE. The HWE requires HEI leaders to embrace coach, sensible, intentional, and inclusive leadership to ensure that social connections, sense of belonging, and work relationships are not compromised among academics in the HWE. The leadership approach in the HWE determines the extent to which SEW is enhanced in the HWE. The study suggests the importance of structural employee empowerment in enhancing the social dimension of employee well-being in the HWE. However, its impact is magnified when HEIs intentionally employ structural employee empowerment to enhance social well-being. This indicates the need to train leaders to intentionally benefit from structural employee empowerment in improving the social wellness of academics in the workplace. By adopting support, growth, reward, and relationship strategies, HEIs will enhance all the facets of SEW. An integrated approach that embraces different strategies ensures that the social well-being of academics is enhanced regardless of the employee's life cycle stage. HEIs are embracing the HWE; however, most HR processes may not have been designed for the HWE. It is important to reassess these processes, like training and development, onboarding, and rewards, among others, in the context of the HWE to align with the new demands that the new work environment presents.

7. Conclusions

The study aimed to contribute to the limited empirical literature on the social well-being of academics, particularly in the HWE. Using the JD-R model and the need to belong theory, it explored strategies HEIs can adopt to improve the social well-being of academics in the HWE. Findings indicate the importance of leadership in enhancing the social well-being of academics and adopting growth, relationship, support, and reward strategies to enhance a sense of belonging, sustain work relationships, and enhance social connections. Support strategies are essential for enhancing employee social well-being in a HWE, and they emerged as the most frequently discussed theme. The provision of physical resources is the most critical factor, highlighting its vital role for academics in the HWE to improve social employee well-being. Additionally, academics prioritize growth strategies, including training, development, and mentoring opportunities. While relationship and reward strategies were mentioned less often, their importance among academics cannot be overlooked. Therefore, adopting an integrated approach will ensure that all dimensions of SEW of academics are enhanced.

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