Module 3: Raising Awareness on Gender Divide in Caregiving and its Effects on Work-Life Balance

Module 3 Introduction

This module is designed to raise awareness of the gender divide in caregiving and its impact on employees, employers, and society at large. It encourages reflection on how gender stereotypes, cultural norms, unconscious bias, and intersectional disadvantage contribute to the invisibility of caregiving labour—particularly unpaid care—and how these factors limit opportunities for women in the workforce. By unpacking these issues, participants are guided toward meaningful inclusion strategies that recognize caregiving as a shared social responsibility. The module also highlights how digital literacy can empower caregivers by improving access to resources, communication, and support systems within the workplace.

Structured into three interconnected units, the module blends theory with practical application. Unit 3.1 examines the cultural and psychological foundations of caregiving expectations, highlighting how conscious and unconscious biases shape workplace dynamics. Unit 3.2 focuses on developing soft skills—such as empathy, communication, and resilience—that are essential for creating inclusive workplaces and supporting employees with caregiving responsibilities. Unit 3.3 introduces digital skills and applications that support flexible work arrangements, enhance productivity, and promote equity through technology.

Ultimately, this module aims to shift the narrative around caregiving from a private burden to a collective responsibility. By valuing care work and addressing systemic barriers faced by caregivers, organizations can foster more equitable, resilient, and human-centred workplaces where all employees are empowered to thrive.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives of this module are:

- *To understand the gender divide in caregiving and its implications for work-life balance across different European contexts*
- *To identify how cultural norms, stereotypes, and bias shape caregiving expectations and workplace dynamics*
- *To develop soft skills—such as empathy, communication, and resilience—that foster inclusive and supportive work environments*
- *To explore digital tools and hard skills that enable flexible work arrangements and improve task management for employees with caregiving responsibilities*
- *To apply theoretical knowledge through interactive activities that simulate real-world challenges and promote inclusive practices*

Unit 3.1 - Gender Stereotypes, Cultural Norms Conscious and Unconscious Biases in Caregiving

This unit explores the gendered dimensions of long-term care (LTC) and the underlying social mechanisms that sustain inequalities. It examines how unpaid and paid care responsibilities are disproportionately carried by women across Europe, highlighting both the structural and cultural factors that shape caregiving patterns. The content delves into the intersection of gender with socio-

economic status, age, migration and ethnicity, emphasising how these combined factors influence the distribution of care, access to formal support and labour market outcomes.
The unit also addresses the role of gender stereotypes, conscious and unconscious bias as well as stigma in reinforcing the gender care gap. Overall, it is observed how deeply embedded gender norms, biases and structural inequalities continue to shape who provides care and under what conditions, revealing the persistent challenges women face in balancing paid work and caregiving responsibilities

Theoretical Content

Gender divide in long-term care

The gender divide in long-term care (LTC) is a persistent and measurable feature across Europe, particularly in the partner countries of this project. Across the EU, women continue to assume primary responsibility for unpaid care significantly more often than men. In 2022, 34% of women reported providing daily care for children, elderly people, or people with disabilities compared with 25% of men. Studies show that women spend substantially more hours per day on household and care activities than men (EIGE, 2024; Eurostat, 2022; OECD, 2020). This imbalance demonstrates two interconnected phenomena: the disproportionate share of informal caregiving within families provided by women and the feminisation of paid LTC work, where women constitute the overwhelming majority of care workers. Both aspects highlight gendered labour market outcomes, including interrupted careers, reduced pay, lower pensions and limited opportunities for career progression (OECD, 2020). These outcomes are compounded by systemic undervaluation of care work and limited policy support for care workers (Razavi, 2007).

Informal LTC remains dominant in Europe, with women providing the majority of this care. Between 2021-20222 within the EU, approximately 52 million adults aged 18–74 provide informal care weekly, accounting for nearly 80% of all LTC measured in full-time equivalents (European Commission, 2021; EUR-Lex, 2022). Across 25 OECD countries, around 60% of informal carers are women, with Southern and Southeastern European nations, such as Greece and Spain, showing even higher shares (OECD, 2023). Similarly, women dominate the formal LTC workforce, representing more than 90% of workers in the sector, which remains highly feminised and traditionally associated with ‘women’s work’ (OECD, 2020). LTC jobs are also among the lowest-paid in the health sector, reinforcing economic vulnerability among female carers (OECD, 2020).

Countries specific patterns

In the partner countries, these patterns are particularly evident. In Italy, approximately 18% of adults aged 50+ provide informal care, with women aged 45–64 far more likely to be carers (27%) than men (18%) (Santini, 2025). Women deliver more care hours on average - 17 hours per week compared to 12 hours for men - and account for 74–75% of the total hours of unpaid care. This caregiving responsibility contributes to part-time work or workforce exit, producing long-term financial consequences, including lower pensions and increased risk of poverty in old age (ISTAT, 2019). Italy's 2024 Gender Equality Index (GEI) score of 69.2 reflects these persistent inequalities (EIGE, 2024). Recent research shows that prolonged caregiving among Italian women is strongly associated with psychological distress, fatigue and increased risk of depression, especially in the absence of formal support services (Gagliardi et al., 2022).

In Cyprus, although formal data on informal care are limited, evidence indicates that women- especially those caring for household members with disabilities or elderly relatives- face significant employment setbacks due to caregiving duties (Eurocarers, 2023a). Women account for 71% of informal carers and among those providing care several days per week or daily, 15% are women compared with 7% men (Eurocarers, 2023a). Within the 50-64 age group, 17% of women and 11% of men provide informal care, and in the 20-49 age group, 17% of women provide care compared to only 4% of men. Cyprus's GEI score in 2024 was 60.9, placing it 9.1 points below the EU average (EIGE, 2024).

Romania demonstrates a particularly heavy reliance on informal care due to a severely underdeveloped formal LTC system, with less than 1% of social assistance spending directed to home or community services (EIGE, 2022). Consequently, 31.2% of women and 25.7% of men provide informal care, well above the EU27 average (EIGE, 2022). The shortage of formal care in rural areas, coupled with a cultural perception that institutional care constitutes abandonment, forces families - primarily women - to shoulder the caregiving burden (Eurofound, 2020; World Bank, 2023). In 2024 Romania GEI score was 57.5, 13.5 points below the EU average, underscoring continuing disparities in work, income, knowledge, time, power and health (EIGE, 2024).

In Greece, informal LTC is primarily provided by women, with mothers undertaking 69% of childcare responsibilities compared to 47% for fathers. Despite a gradual increase in men's caregiving over the years, women still bear the majority of care responsibilities (EIGE, 2022). Greece's 2024 GEI score of 60.9 reflects these persistent inequalities (EIGE, 2024).

In Spain, women account for 82.4% of those inactive due to caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the disproportionate burden on women (INE, 2024). Spain's GEI score in 2024 is 76.7, slightly above the EU average, but these figures mask the socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by women in caregiving roles (EIGE, 2024). According to CIUDAR-SE study the informal caregiving (mainly performed by women) continues to produce significant gender inequalities in health and quality of life across Spanish regions such as Andalucia and the Basque Country (García-Calvente et al., 2024).

Intersection dimensions of care

More specifically, intersectionality challenges the notion that human lives can be understood through separate, isolated categories. Instead, it highlights the lived realities that emerge at the intersections of different axes of oppression (Hankivsky, 2014). In this sense, intersectionality also exposes how power relations (re)produce social inequalities. These relations are understood as shaped by:

- (1) intersecting systems of power that structure society, such as laws and long-term care policies and
- (2) intersecting social groups that experience privilege and/or oppression as a result of these structures (Lapalme et al., 2020).

Categories such as gender, migration or socio-economic status are therefore used only as a starting point; intersectionality draws attention to how these categories intersect and interact with others, bringing to light additional dynamics that might otherwise be overlooked (Hankivsky, 2014).

Research consistently shows that caregiving is highly gendered, both as a consequence and a cause of structural inequalities between men and women. Women are more often socialized into caregiving roles, over-represented in both formal and informal care and more likely to assume intensive caregiving responsibilities. As a result, they are also more vulnerable to negative outcomes, including poorer well-being compared to men (Sagbakken et al., 2018; Tronto, 2013). These gendered patterns, however, are not uniform: they may differ across migration backgrounds, socio-economic status, and other social categories (Cohen et al., 2019).

Care is also socially and culturally constructed. Cultural norms strongly influence expectations and behaviours around caregiving and these norms can vary considerably both within and across groups

(Zarzycki et al., 2022). In the Netherlands, for instance, cultural differences in care often emerge in relation to whether someone has a migration background. Policies and services frequently target 'carers with a migration background,' who may face structural disadvantages, such as more barriers to accessing formal care. This often leaves one female family member to assume most caregiving duties. Evidence also suggests that strong cultural attitudes around family care among migrant groups can increase isolation, as carers may be less likely to receive outside support. These challenges are compounded by the generally more vulnerable socio-economic position of individuals with a migration background compared to those of Dutch origin (De Regt et al., 2022).

Socio-economic status and care burden

Socio-economic status plays a critical role in shaping caregiving responsibilities. Individuals with fewer resources in terms of education, income, or wealth are more likely to provide informal care, often at greater intensity (Abbing et al., 2021; Quashie et al., 2022). This reinforces gender inequalities, since women in lower socio-economic groups are more likely to reduce paid working hours or leave the labor market altogether to meet caregiving demands (Quashie et al., 2022). Moreover, those with fewer resources may be further disadvantaged by the growing complexity of LTC regulations and the emphasis on personal responsibility within care systems (Marangos et al., 2018, as cited in Abbing et al., 2021).

In summary, the gender divide in long-term care across partner countries results from the interaction of cultural norms, time-use patterns and structural inequalities in labor and care markets. Women disproportionately provide both unpaid family care and paid LTC work, while socio-economic status, migration, ethnicity and age shape caregiving experiences and outcomes. These patterns reinforce gendered disparities in employment, income, health and social participation, highlighting the urgent need for gender-sensitive policies and formal care support to reduce the unequal burden on women and promote equitable caregiving systems.

Gender stereotypes fuelling the gender care gap

Bias can be broadly defined as an inclination, prejudice or tendency for or against a person, group, or concept, often in a manner considered to be unfair (Gaddes et al., 2018). Bias can be both explicit, where individuals are aware of their prejudiced attitudes and act intentionally upon them or implicit, where attitudes and stereotypes unconsciously shape decisions and behaviors. In social and workplace contexts, bias distorts judgment, perpetuates inequalities and limits opportunities for individuals who (may) belong to marginalized groups (Gaddes et al., 2018).

Gender bias

Gender bias is a specific type of bias that refers to the unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender. It often manifests through assumptions about men's and women's capabilities, preferences or 'natural roles.' For example, women may be presumed to be more nurturing and therefore more suitable for caregiving positions, while men may be perceived as more competent leaders. Gender bias does not always take overt forms; instead, it often operates subtly, shaping expectations and behaviors in ways that reinforce gender inequality in workplaces, education and family life (Gaddes et al., 2018). These assumptions shape decisions about recruitment, job

assignments, promotion, pay and allocation of care responsibilities inside and outside the workplace (Gaddes et al., 2018).

Conscious bias

Conscious bias, also referred to as explicit bias, occurs when individuals are aware of their prejudiced beliefs and deliberately act upon them. This can include evident discrimination, such as refusing to hire women for senior roles under the belief that men are 'better leaders' (Gaddes et al., 2018). Conscious gender bias is particularly harmful because it reflects deliberate intent to treat people differently on the basis of gender, perpetuating systemic inequalities across organizations and societies (Gaddes et al., 2018). For instance, some employers may openly justify paying women less by citing assumptions about women's 'secondary income' status in households, thereby reinforcing structural wage gaps.

Conscious or explicit bias occurs when an individual is aware of their prejudice and acts on it intentionally. Examples relevant to care work include an employer who places women into lower-paying support roles because they believe women prefer 'flexible' work, or managers who overtly reserve leadership tracks for men (Gaddes et al., 2018). Explicit bias is easier to observe and to challenge legally or procedurally, but it persists where stereotypes are socially accepted or institutionalized (Gaddes et al., 2018).

Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias, often called implicit bias, refers to stereotypes or prejudices that individuals hold without conscious awareness (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). Unlike conscious bias, unconscious bias operates automatically and can influence judgments, decisions and interactions even among individuals who consciously believe in equality. For example, HR managers may unknowingly favor male candidates for promotion by associating leadership qualities-such as assertiveness or decisiveness-more strongly with men than women (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). Similarly, when evaluating applications, unconscious gender bias can lead to undervaluing women's qualifications or overestimating men's potential (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012).

Unconscious or implicit bias operates automatically outside conscious awareness making it particularly insidious in professional environments where decision-makers often believe they are acting objectively while unintentionally perpetuating inequities (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006). These bias manifest through implicit associations (e.g., 'men = leader,' 'women = caregiver') which can distort hiring practices, performance evaluations, task assignments and promotion decisions Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). In care sectors, implicit bias can explain why women dominate frontline caregiving roles while men are overrepresented in better-paid administrative or managerial positions despite similar qualifications (WHO, 2024). Research indicates that bias awareness training can be an effective intervention, as simply recognizing the existence of unconscious bias can help organizations mitigate its influence in leadership opportunities and career advancement (Carnes et al., 2015).

Table 1. Type of bias

Type of Bias	Definition	Examples in Practice	Key References
Bias (general)	An inclination or prejudice, explicit or	Distorts judgment, perpetuates inequalities, and	Gaddes et al., 2018

	implicit, often leading to unfair treatment of individuals or groups.	limits opportunities for marginalized groups.	
Gender bias	Unequal treatment based on gender, often through assumptions about men's and women's 'natural roles.'	Women seen as better caregivers; men as more competent leaders. Shapes hiring, promotion, pay, and care responsibilities.	Gaddes et al., 2018
Conscious (Explicit) bias	Prejudice individuals are aware of and act upon deliberately.	Employers refusing to hire women for senior roles or openly paying women less.	Gaddes et al., 2018
Unconscious (Implicit) bias	Automatic stereotypes or prejudices outside conscious awareness.	HR managers favoring male candidates; undervaluing women's qualifications; women clustered in lower-paid caregiving roles.	Greenwald and Krieger, 2006; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Gaddes et al., 2018

Understanding the definitions of conscious and unconscious bias is fundamental to addressing the gender care gap because stereotypes about gender and caregiving are deeply embedded in both forms of bias (ILO, 2018). Conscious bias can lead policymakers to frame care work primarily as a 'female responsibility,' while unconscious bias may cause employers to assume that women are less carrier focused due to caregiving obligations (ILO, 2018).

These biases reinforce the notion that care is inherently women's work, channelling them into both aid and unpaid caregiving roles, legitimizes lower pay and limited career advancement in care related occupations, discouraging men's participation in care by stigmatizing caregiving as incompatible with masculinity (ILO, 2018).

Gender stereotypes and care work

Cultural norms and traditional gender roles play a decisive role in shaping how care responsibilities are distributed across societies. For centuries, caregiving has been socially constructed as 'women's work,' rooted in the perception that women are inherently more nurturing and thus naturally suited to caring for children, the elderly, or family members in need (Budig et al., 2016). These expectations are deeply embedded in social institutions, family structures and workplace dynamics, meaning that women's identities are often tied to their caregiving capacities, while men are more closely associated with breadwinning and leadership roles (Budig et al., 2016).

In many European countries, particularly in southern and eastern contexts, caregiving remains viewed as a private, family-based responsibility rather than a collective, societal one. This outlook is reinforced by strong family ties and cultural norms that place the weight of long-term care on relatives, most often women, instead of state-supported services (Eurocarers, 2023b). As a result, care is frequently undervalued both socially and economically, leading to a cycle where women's caregiving contributions are taken for granted and rarely compensated (EIGE, 2022).

The consequences of these norms are evident in labour market data across Europe and especially in partner countries such as Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Romania. Women are heavily overrepresented in part-time, low-paid, and informal care work, whether in the home or within professional long-term care systems. For example, in Italy and Spain, women make up more than 70% of the workforce in long-term care facilities, a clear indicator of persistent gendered occupational segregation (Eurostat, 2022). Similarly, in Greece, strong expectations that women shoulder household and family care responsibilities reduce their participation in higher-paying or leadership roles, perpetuating the gender care gap and limiting their economic independence (OECD, 2024).

These systemic stereotypes do more than just confine women to particular roles; they create structural barriers that restrict access to career advancement, equitable compensation and professional recognition. Care work; whether performed unpaid in the home or in underpaid professional contexts, remains undervalued in terms of wages, status and policy support. By framing caregiving as 'natural' female labor rather than skilled work that requires training and fair compensation, societies reinforce patterns of inequality that continue to undermine women's rights, economic security and social inclusion across Europe.

Across the partner countries

Across all five partner countries, certain common patterns emerge that reflect deeply rooted gender stereotypes and structural barriers in long-term care (LTC). Women continue to dominate both unpaid and paid caregiving roles across Europe, in a care economy that is predominantly female, lower-paid and marked with job insecurity (Eurocarers, 2023b). Strong family-care norms reinforce these inequalities, particularly in southern and eastern European contexts where cultural expectations place responsibility for elder and dependent care primarily on families, especially daughters and daughters-

in-law, thereby reducing reliance on formal public services and increasing women's unpaid care burden (Eurocarers, 2023b). In addition, work-care reconciliation pressures remain acute, as women across the EU spend significantly more time than men on unpaid domestic and care work, constraining their ability to pursue full-time employment, leadership roles or higher-paying opportunities. This imbalance is particularly pronounced in the partner countries under review (Eurofound, 2025).

In Cyprus, a strong family-first cultural model combines with rapid population ageing to intensify care pressures. Demographic change and close family ties have historically made family provision central to care arrangements, with women facing the impact of responsibility. EU data indicate that unpaid care is heavily concentrated among women, while the country's relatively limited formal LTC capacity compared to northern Europe reinforces reliance on female family carers (Eurocarers, 2023a).

In Greece, reliance on family care is especially high, where Greek women spend more than three times the hours men devote to domestic tasks. Formal home care provision is limited, leaving many families with unmet needs and reinforcing the expectation that families - mainly women - will provide care. These patterns contribute to lower female employment rates and are compounded by limited childcare availability, which further restricts women's participation in the labour market and intensifies the unequal distribution of care (EIGE, 2024).

In Italy, women dominate both formal and informal care roles, but their overall labour market integration remains weak. The Italian LTC system depends heavily on informal family care as well as on a large migrant care workforce, with ageing demographics further raising demand. Cultural norms continue to assign elder care as a family responsibility, while policy gaps in affordable and accessible LTC services force families - most often women - to fill the care gap. This reliance on unpaid care undermines women's employment prospects and reinforces gender inequalities (Eurofound, 2020).

In Spain, women are disproportionately concentrated in care-intensive, low-paid and precarious sectors such as domestic work and social services. This gendered labour segmentation reflects cultural expectations that tie women to caregiving, while institutional shortcomings - particularly the availability and affordability of formal home care - further push families to shoulder responsibilities. As a result, women are overrepresented in undervalued care roles, perpetuating both economic vulnerability and gender inequality (Eurofound, 2020).

Finally, in Romania, a wide gender employment gap coincides with strong traditions of family caregiving. Women's labour market participation is markedly lower than men's, as care responsibilities often prevent formal employment. The underdevelopment of Romania's formal LTC system further entrenches reliance on informal female caregivers, reinforcing gendered divisions of labor and limiting women's socioeconomic opportunities (EIGE, 2024).

Taken together, these country contexts illustrate how gender stereotypes, cultural expectations and systemic gaps in formal LTC provision collectively perpetuate the gender divide in care. Women remain disproportionately responsible for both unpaid and paid caregiving, often in undervalued and insecure roles, which restricts their labour market participation, reinforces wage and employment gaps and sustains a cycle of gender inequality across partner countries.

Table 2 Gender stereotypes and structural barriers in long-term care (LTC) across partner countries

Level	Key Patterns / Obstacles
Cross-cutting (all partner countries)	- Care is highly gendered: women provide the majority of unpaid and paid care work, dominating informal and professional LTC roles. - Strong family-care norms: cultural expectations place elder/dependent care primarily on families (daughters/daughters-in-law). - Work–care reconciliation: women spend significantly more time on unpaid care and housework, limiting access to full-time, higher-paid jobs and leadership roles.
Cyprus	- Strong family-first cultural model with rising ageing pressure; demographic change amplifies demand for care. - Informal care (mainly women) remains central due to limited formal LTC capacity
Greece	- High reliance on family care; women spend over 3× more time than men on domestic tasks. - Limited formal home care services → unmet needs, reliance on family. - Consequence: lower female employment rates, weak childcare availability, intensified gender divide in care.
Italy	- Women dominate formal and informal care roles; LTC system depends heavily on informal family carers + migrant care workforce. - Ageing population increases demand. - Weak formal LTC services → reliance on women in families. - Policy gaps limit women's integration into the labour market.
Spain	- Women overrepresented in care-intensive, low-paid, precarious sectors (domestic work, social services). - Gendered labour segmentation: care jobs undervalued. - Cultural expectations + insufficient affordable home care reinforce reliance on family carers.
Romania	- Large gender employment gap; strong traditions of family caregiving. - Women's participation in the formal labour market is constrained by care duties. - Underdeveloped LTC system → reliance on informal female caregivers.

Source: EIGE, 2024; Eurocarers, 2023; Eurofound, 2020; Eurofound, 2025

How stereotypes and bias create concrete obstacles

Gender stereotypes and biases directly shape the mechanisms through which women experience disadvantage in the long-term care (LTC) sector. One key obstacle is occupational segregation. Deeply ingrained stereotypes that associate women with caring roles push them disproportionately into lower-paid care occupations, both in unpaid family contexts and in paid employment. This reinforces the undervaluation of care work and restricts women's access to better-paid management and decision-making roles within LTC institutions, thereby lowering their average earnings and limiting career progression opportunities (Eurofound, 2020).

A second mechanism is the underinvestment in formal LTC services. When care is culturally framed as a family duty, societal and political pressure to expand affordable and accessible formal services weakens. This leads to structural underinvestment in public LTC provision, which in turn increases the reliance on informal care. Since women continue to carry the overwhelming burden of unpaid family care, the absence of adequate formal services exacerbates gender inequality and reinforces the stereotype of women as primary caregivers (Eurocarers, 2023b).

Finally, stereotypes contribute to time poverty and labour market penalties. Women's disproportionate involvement in unpaid domestic and care work leaves them with fewer hours available for formal employment. As a result, many women work part-time, accept precarious contracts, or exit the labour force altogether. These patterns diminish women's lifetime earnings, reduce their pension contributions and weaken their economic independence. In effect, the unequal division of care translates into long-term economic penalties for women across partner countries (Eurofound, 2025).

Gendered role expectations in employment

Gendered role expectations significantly shape workplace practices, influencing decisions around recruitment, promotion, and compensation. Women are often implicitly or explicitly associated with caregiving and support roles, while men are aligned with leadership and decision-making positions (Gaddes et al., 2018). These expectations reinforce occupational segregation, directing women toward lower-paid, care-related positions and limiting access to senior or managerial roles (OECD, 2020). Implicit biases may operate unconsciously, affecting evaluations of competence, commitment and leadership potential, while explicit biases consciously justify unequal treatment based on gendered assumptions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). In sectors closely linked to care work, these dynamics perpetuate the undervaluation of women's contributions, sustaining systemic inequalities in pay, career progression, and professional recognition (Budig et al., 2016).

Recruitment and hiring practices

One of the most visible manifestations of bias is found in recruitment and hiring decisions. Employers and HR professionals may consciously or unconsciously associate leadership, technical competence, or rationality with men, while linking women more closely to care, support and emotional labour (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). These gendered perceptions often result in discriminatory recruiting strategies that favor male candidates for higher-paying, decision-making, or leadership positions, while women are disproportionately directed toward caregiving-related or administrative roles (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

Studies demonstrate that women applicants are less likely to be invited for interviews in male-dominated fields, even when their qualifications are equivalent to men's (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Similarly, gendered job advertisements that emphasize traits such as 'competitive,' 'decisive,' or 'assertive' can deter women from applying, reinforcing occupational segregation and the persistence of the gender pay gap (Gaucher et al., 2011). These practices reflect bias in perception and further perpetuate a cycle in which men dominate higher-paying sectors, while women are clustered in undervalued caregiving roles.

Promotion, pay and career progression

Beyond recruitment, gender bias influences promotion and pay structures. Conscious bias may manifest in the undervaluation of women's performance or the assumption that women are less committed to their careers due to caregiving responsibilities (Williams et al., 2013). Unconscious bias plays an equally powerful role in shaping the decisions of the managers, as implicit stereotypes lead evaluators to overrate men's leadership potential while underrating women's accomplishments (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012).

This bias contributes to the so-called 'glass ceiling,' where women encounter invisible but pervasive barriers to advancement into senior or leadership roles (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Even when women succeed in securing higher-level positions, they are often paid less than their male counterparts, reflecting structural inequities rooted in gender stereotypes and employer biases (OECD, 2024). Such disparities are further exacerbated in sectors where caregiving and flexible working arrangements are stigmatized, reinforcing the perception that employees - primarily women - who request such accommodations are less ambitious or capable (Budig et al., 2016).

Workplace culture and organisational dynamics

Bias also shapes workplace culture, influencing individual outcomes and organizational norms and practices. HR specialists and managers may unconsciously design policies that align with traditional male career trajectories, such as valuing continuous full-time employment without career breaks. This indirectly penalizes women, who are more likely to experience interruptions in their careers due to caregiving responsibilities (Budig et al., 2016).

Unconscious bias can also manifest in performance evaluations, mentoring opportunities, and networking practices (Carnes et al., 2015). Women may receive less constructive feedback compared to men, or they may be excluded from informal networks where advancement opportunities are discussed (Ibarra et al., 2013). These subtle but cumulative forms of bias reinforce a workplace culture that privileges men, particularly in higher-paying and leadership roles, while limiting women's mobility and economic independence (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Implications for the gender care gap

The influence of conscious and unconscious biases on employment decisions directly sustains the gender care gap. By disproportionately directing women into caregiving roles and undervaluing their professional contributions, employers perpetuate stereotypes that women's primary role is that of caregiver. This affects women's access to higher-paying jobs and also reinforces the societal expectation that women must shoulder unpaid family caregiving. Consequently, the labour market reproduces and legitimizes inequalities that limit women's participation in decision-making roles, widen the gender pay gap and exacerbate the undervaluation of care work across partner countries (Gaddes et al., 2018).

Challenging these biases requires deliberate interventions, such as bias-awareness training for HR professionals, gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion practices and policy frameworks that value care work and support work–life balance for all employees regardless of gender (EIGE, 2022). Without addressing these structural and cultural dynamics, the cycle of bias will continue to

undermine progress toward gender equality in both the workplace and the distribution of care responsibilities (EIGE, 2022).

The interplay between gender stereotypes and bias contributes to systemic inequalities in long-term care (Budig et al., 2016). Women's overrepresentation in caregiving roles, combined with societal undervaluation of care work, exacerbates pay gaps and limits professional mobility (Budig et al., 2016). Furthermore, cultural expectations of female caregiving influence labour market participation and perpetuate economic dependence, while men's underrepresentation in care roles sustains gendered perceptions of competence and leadership (EIGE, 2022). These intersecting dynamics create a cycle in which women are disproportionately burdened by unpaid and underpaid care, while men are shielded from such responsibilities, reinforcing gender hierarchies across both public and private spheres (EIGE, 2022).

Addressing the gender care gap requires interventions that acknowledge both structural inequalities and individual-level biases (Budig et al., 2016). Policies that promote gender-neutral recruitment, encourage men's participation in caregiving and dismantle traditional stereotypes can reduce the impact of conscious and unconscious biases (ILO, 2018). Equally important are workplace-level initiatives - such as gender-sensitive training for HR professionals, equitable promotion criteria and awareness campaigns-that target everyday practices shaping hiring and promotion decisions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). In addition, integrated care related competencies into performance evaluation and leadership development frameworks can help elevate the status of care work and challenge its gendered devaluation (Hahn and Lapetra, 2019; IHF, 2023). Research shows that such interventions can reduce bias in employment outcomes and open opportunities for a more balanced distribution of care responsibilities (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012).

Ultimately, closing the gender care gap could be a matter of fairness and of social and economic sustainability. Societies that undervalue care and limit it to women risk deepening gender inequalities, exacerbating labour shortages in care professions and undermining broader goals of inclusion and equality (ILO, 2018).

The role of stigma

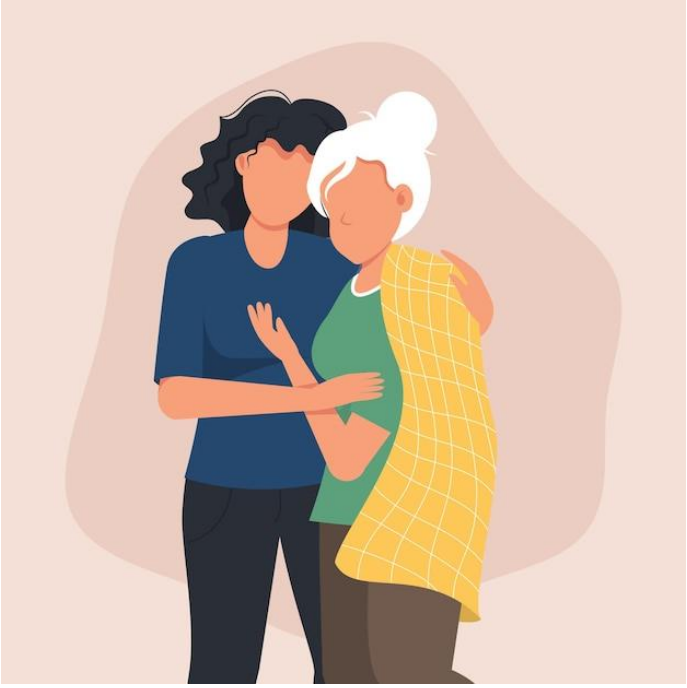
Stigma plays a central role in shaping the experiences of unpaid carers, influencing how care is perceived, delivered and valued across societies. Broadly defined, stigma refers to negative attitudes, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviors directed toward individuals or groups based on characteristics that deviate from social norms (Goffman, 1963; Link and Phelan, 2001). In the context of caregiving, stigma often targets both the care recipient - due to illness, disability, or dependency - and the unpaid carer, whose labour is devalued or rendered invisible as a result (Farrugia, 2019).

Stigmatization can manifest at multiple levels, including individual, family, community and institutional spheres. It affects access to support, social recognition and resources, thereby intensifying the challenges faced by carers (Corrigan, 2004). For instance, illnesses that are culturally associated with shame, such as mental health conditions, dementia, or infectious diseases, may lead families to conceal the care situation, framing it as a 'family secret' (Farrugia, 2019). This secrecy isolates carers and care recipients alike, perpetuating the undervaluation of unpaid care work and

reinforcing societal hierarchies that link caregiving to lower status, particularly for women (Corrigan, 2004).

Stigma and the 'family secret' of care

Stigma surrounding illness, disability and dependency often reinforce the perception that caregiving should remain within the private sphere of the family. Across many cultures, chronic illness, mental health conditions or disabilities are regarded as issues that bring shame or dishonour, leading families to treat care needs as a 'family secret' rather than a social concern (Corrigan, 2004). This tendency reflects broader cultural scripts of normality and productivity, where deviation from the 'healthy body' is perceived as socially undesirable (Link and Phelan, 2001).



The privatisation of care under stigma pressures families, especially women, to manage these responsibilities behind closed doors, creating environments of secrecy and silence. Such dynamics can discourage families from acknowledging the challenges of caregiving or seeking institutional assistance, for fear of exposing what may be perceived as personal or familial failure (Goffman, 1963). In contexts where strong family ties and cultural expectations prevail, such as in Southern and Eastern Europe, this stigma is particularly pronounced (Triantafillou et al., 2006). The reliance on external support systems; such as professional care services or residential facilities, is often equated with neglecting one's duty, further perpetuating the belief that caregiving should remain a private obligation (Farrugia, 2019;)

This cultural framing has significant consequences: 1). It isolates care recipients, who may internalise the shame associated with their condition, leading to social withdrawal and reduced self-esteem (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). 2). unpaid carers; whose labour remains hidden and undervalued due to its association with secrecy and stigma. As a result, caregivers may experience heightened stress, economic insecurity and lack of recognition. Studies also show that families managing stigmatised illnesses, such as dementia, are particularly reluctant to seek outside help due to fears of gossip and judgment (Herek, 2002; Werner et al., 2012).

By framing care as a private matter, stigma hinders the development of equitable and supportive long-term care systems. Instead of recognising caregiving as a shared social responsibility, the 'family secret' model perpetuates the cycle of undervaluation and exclusion (Farrugia, 2019).

Types of stigma affecting unpaid carers:

Unpaid carers face multiple, overlapping forms of stigma that shape both their social status and access to support systems. These stigmas, rooted in cultural beliefs, social norms and institutional practices, further marginalise caregivers and perpetuate the invisibility of their labour. Below, five key types of stigma are explored: condition stigma, age stigma, gender stigma, institutional stigma and welfare stigma (Corrigan, 2004).

1. Condition stigma:

Condition stigma refers to negative attitudes directed at caregivers due to the specific illness or disability of the care recipient. Conditions associated with mental health or infectious diseases, are often highly stigmatised (Corrigan, 2004; Herek, 2002). Caregivers of individuals with these conditions frequently experience 'courtesy stigma,' whereby stigma is extended to them by association (Goffman, 1963). This can result in social exclusion, gossip, and discrimination within their communities. In turn, caregivers may internalise these stigmas, leading to shame, secrecy, and reluctance to access professional support (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). For example, research on dementia caregivers shows that stigma surrounding mental decline often discourages families from seeking early diagnosis or assistance (Werner et al., 2012).

2. Age stigma:

Caregivers also face stigma connected to age, both in terms of young and senior carers. Young carers often deal with parental pressure to remain silent about their responsibilities or face social stigma from peers who do not share similar experiences (Becker & Becker, 2008). This form of stigma can limit young carers' social development, educational opportunities and overall well-being. On the other hand, senior carers; particularly those beyond working age, are frequently disregarded in policy discourses that prioritise working-age populations (Pickard, 2015). Their contributions may be dismissed as less significant, reinforcing stereotypes that elderly adults are passive dependents rather than active contributors to family and community care systems.

3. Gender stigma:

Gender stigma emerges from the feminisation of care. Since caregiving is strongly associated with women, unpaid care is often devalued compared to paid labour in traditionally male-dominated fields (England, 2010). This gendered stigma lowers the perceived status of care work and also reinforces the idea that caregiving is 'natural' for women rather than a skill requiring recognition, training and fair compensation (EIGE, 2022). Men who take on caregiving roles may also face stigma, as they are seen as deviating from normative masculine roles, discouraging broader male participation in caregiving (Migliorini & Rania, 2017). The result is a double bind: women face stigma for fulfilling traditional roles that are devalued, while men face stigma for transgressing gender norms by engaging in care.

4. Institutional stigma:
Institutional stigma arises when families are judged for placing relatives in formal care facilities. In many cultural contexts, such decisions are perceived as abandonment or neglect of familial duty, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe where family-based care is deeply rooted (Triantafillou et al., 2006). This stigma can discourage families from seeking institutional or community-based support, even when such options are necessary for the well-being of both carers and recipients. Caregivers may face criticism from relatives, neighbours or religious communities, reinforcing the expectation that care should remain a private, family responsibility (Farrugia, 2019).

5. Welfare stigma:
Finally, welfare stigma affects unpaid carers who rely on income support or social assistance due to their limited ability to engage in paid employment. Welfare stigma manifests as public narratives that construct benefit recipients as dependent, lazy, or undeserving (Baumberg, 2016). For carers, this is particularly unjust, as their unpaid contributions significantly subsidise public care systems by providing labour that would otherwise need to be funded by the state (Fine, 2012). Nevertheless, many carers experience shame in accessing welfare benefits, often internalising negative stereotypes that delegitimise their role as essential contributors to society (Patrick, 2017).

Stigma significantly shapes the experiences of unpaid carers and care recipients, influencing social perceptions and also access to support, resources and recognition. Across multiple dimensions - condition, age, gender, institutional and welfare - stigma contributes to the invisibility and undervaluation of caregiving work, reinforcing social hierarchies and systemic inequalities (Corrigan, 2004; Baumberg, 2016). By framing caregiving as a private or socially undesirable activity, stigma discourages carers from seeking assistance, accessing formal services, or participating fully in economic and social life. The consequences of stigma are both individual and structural. On a personal level, carers may experience shame, isolation, stress and reduced well-being. (Farrugia, 2019). At a systemic level, stigma perpetuates gendered and age-based inequalities, limits policy responsiveness, and undermines the recognition of caregiving as essential labour for the functioning of families and societies (Triantafillou et al., 2006).

Interactive activities for in-person training

Activity 1: Understanding the Gender Divide in Care

Aim of Activity:
To encourage participants to reflect on how unpaid and paid care responsibilities are distributed across genders and how intersectional factors (age, migration, socio-economic status) shape caregiving experiences.

Steps (Prompt Questions/Scenario):

1. Facilitator asks: *"What is your understanding of the gender divide in care? Do you think everyone is affected the same way by the care divide?"*
2. Participants spend 3–5 minutes writing down their individual thoughts.

3. In small groups (3-4 participants), participants share reflections and discuss differences in experiences based on gender, age, socio-economic background, and migration status.
4. Each group presents 1–2 key insights to the whole group.

Links/ Resources:

- Reflection sheets or notepads for individual notes.
- Optional flipchart or whiteboard to summarise group insights.

Activity 2: Balancing Career and Care: The Interview Scenario

Aim of Activity:

To demonstrate how gender stereotypes, conscious and unconscious bias and societal expectations influence workplace decisions regarding employees with caregiving responsibilities.

Steps (Prompt Questions/Scenario):

1. **Scenario:** A woman in her 30s applies for a job. She has an excellent CV but discloses that she is caring for her chronically ill father. Her brother and partner are unavailable. She expresses commitment to the role but may need flexibility.
2. Divide participants into groups of 3–4 and assign roles: *Employer*, *Candidate*, *Observers*.
3. Conduct a mock interview for 5–7 minutes.
4. Observers note potential conscious or unconscious biases (e.g., questioning reliability, assuming caregiving is incompatible with career).
5. Group discussion using prompts:
    - How do gender stereotypes influence assumptions about caregiving responsibilities?
    - What conscious or unconscious biases might affect hiring decisions?
    - How could the workplace support this candidate while valuing her caregiving role?
    - How might colleagues react, and how could workplace culture be changed to reduce stigma and bias?

Linked Resources:

- Role cards for Employer, Candidate, Observer
- Observation sheets for noting bias instances
- Optional empathy map template
- Reflection sheets / notepads for personal notes
- Optional: Flipchart or whiteboard to summarise group insights

Unit 3.2: Developing Soft Skills to Create and Foster Inclusive Workplaces

This Unit will focus on the development of soft skills that can help support the work-life balance of employees who are also caregivers. Information will be provided on the soft skills that employers, managers and HR specialists can develop to support their employees and ensure that their workplace is inclusive and supportive of women carers.

Theoretical Content

Definitions of soft skills and their application in the workplace

What is soft skills development?

Soft skills are **non-technical competencies that influence how individuals interact, collaborate, and adapt within the workplace**. Unlike hard skills, which are task-specific and measurable, soft skills include **attributes** such as communication, empathy, adaptability, and problem-solving (People Managing People, 2023). They shape organisational culture, influence productivity, and are increasingly recognised as essential for long-term professional success (Hosseinioun, M, 2025).

Soft skills can be described as (Kubátová, J. et al, 2025):

- **Transferable**: applicable across sectors and roles
- **Relational**: dependent on social interaction.
- **Learnable**: developed through intentional training, reflection, and feedback
- **Context-dependent**: shaped by organisational culture and workplace need.

Research emphasises that soft skills are vital in **creating inclusive workplaces** because they enable leaders and staff to build trust, address diverse needs, and support employees' well-being (Forbes, 2023). In the project context, caregivers, often women balancing multiple responsibilities, benefit when managers and colleagues actively apply soft skills to design supportive environments.

Figure 1: Types of soft skills

Source: Unodetres blog publication Link

Why are they important?

Soft skills contribute to workplace inclusivity in several ways, including:

- **Building healthy relationships**: Trust and collaboration emerge when leaders use empathy and effective communication
- **Communicating effectively**: Clear and respectful dialogue reduces misunderstandings and promotes teamwork
- **Solving problems**: Creativity and adaptability allow organisations to manage crises and respond to diverse employee needs (Cimatti, B. et al, 2016).

They play a critical role in promoting inclusivity by ensuring that caregivers (who often face stress and time constraints) feel supported, respected, and able to thrive at work (Cimatti, B. et al, 2016).

Soft skills development involves intentional learning strategies, practice, and reflection. It is not innate but can be cultivated through training, mentoring, and experiential learning. For HR professionals, training programs that integrate role-playing, reflective activities, and multimedia resources are especially effective (Articulate, 2021).

Types of soft skills:

When working with soft skills, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the number of competences involved. To make learning more structured and practical, **these skills have been grouped into 4 main clusters**: intrapersonal, interpersonal, cognitive/strategic, and ethical/value-based competences.

The clustering is aligned with **European Union frameworks** so that your learning connects directly to wider policy priorities:

- **Intrapersonal and interpersonal skills** (such as empathy, communication, resilience, teamwork) are key parts of the *EU Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (EC, 2018).
- **Cognitive and strategic skills** (such as problem-solving, creativity, and strategic vision) are recognised as essential *21st-century competences* in **Erasmus+ capacity-building projects** (21CC project, 2022).
- **Ethical and value-based skills** (such as integrity and fairness) reflect the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, which promotes decent work, gender equality, and work–life balance (EC, 2021).

Table 1: Intrapersonal skills (self-management & awareness)

These are the internal capabilities that people use to understand and regulate their own thoughts, feelings, and motivations - skills that enable employees and managers to understand and regulate their own behaviour, emotions, and motivation.

Soft Skill	Definition	Application for caregivers & employees	Impact
Self-awareness	Recognising one's emotions, strengths, limitations, biases.	Helps managers notice biases in how flexibility is granted; allows caregivers to communicate boundaries.	Improves decision-making, inclusive leadership, and personal growth.
Resilience	Ability to recover from setbacks and adapt positively.	Caregivers cope with stress without disengagement; managers model resilience during crises.	Reduces burnout, enhances well-being, increases retention.
Time management	Planning and allocating time effectively.	Caregivers balance work and care duties; managers support through realistic deadlines.	Reduces stress, prevents burnout, increases productivity.
Motivation	Drive to achieve goals and remain committed.	Encourages proactive support for colleagues with care responsibilities.	Boosts engagement and continuous improvement.
Patient persistence	Remaining calm in the face of delays while persevering toward long-term goals.	Caregivers persist through disruptions, managers sustain projects despite absences.	Supports long-term objectives and resilience.
Positivity	Maintaining optimism and constructive mindset.	Leaders encourage gratitude and recognition of small wins.	Builds morale, supports resilience, creates positive workplace culture.
Emotional intelligence	Ability to understand, manage, and respond to one's and others' emotions.	Managers spot caregiver stress signals and adjust workloads or expectations.	Strengthens empathy, reduces conflict, improves workplace relationships.

Table 2: Interpersonal Skills (relationships & collaboration)

These are the skills used when interacting with others: listening, resolving conflict, building trust, and working productively in a team. Skills that allow effective interaction, teamwork, and support in diverse and inclusive environments.

Soft Skill	Definition	Application for caregivers & employees	Impact
Empathy	Ability to understand and share others' feelings.	Managers acknowledge caregiver pressures and respond with flexibility.	Builds trust, collaboration, loyalty.
Communication skills	Ability to convey ideas clearly and listen actively.	Transparent communication of policies; active listening to caregiver concerns.	Boosts engagement, prevents conflict, fosters collaboration.

Interpersonal skills	Teamwork, negotiation, and conflict resolution.	Balances workloads fairly when some staff face extra care demands.	Strengthens cohesion, reduces workplace tension.
Collaboration	Purposeful teamwork based on trust and shared responsibility.	Teams align on common goals, redistribute tasks inclusively.	Improves problem-solving, teamwork, accountability.
Capacity to inspire	Ability to motivate and energise others.	Leaders inspire shared responsibility for inclusivity.	Builds morale, commitment, shared values.
Loyalty	Commitment to supporting colleagues and the organisation.	Staff demonstrate reliability and openness, especially when colleagues need support.	Strengthens trust, increases retention.
Leadership	Ability to guide and influence others through inclusive approaches.	Leaders integrate care-sensitive practices and model inclusivity.	Develops future leaders, builds commitment, ensures continuity.

Table 3: Cognitive & strategic skills (thinking & innovation)

These competences relate to how a person think, plan, and act; solving complex problems, envisioning the future, and applying creativity and strategy in the workplace. Skills linked to critical thinking, creativity, and long-term planning.

Soft Skill	Definition	Application for caregivers & employees	Impact
Problem-solving	Creative and analytical ability to resolve complex issues.	Managers adapt shifts to balance productivity and care needs.	Improves efficiency, reduces conflict, promotes innovation.
Innovation & creativity	Ability to generate and apply new solutions.	HR creates new benefits (e.g., care leave credits, flexible shifts).	Enhances problem-solving, inclusivity, competitiveness.
Strategic vision	Seeing the bigger picture and planning long-term.	HR integrates caregiver support into workforce strategies.	Aligns inclusivity with sustainability, competitiveness.
Curiosity	Desire to explore and ask new questions.	Managers encourage inclusive brainstorming (e.g., “What if…”).	Drives innovation, engagement, organisational learning.

Table 4: Ethical & value-based skills (principles & fairness)

These are the principles and moral foundations that guide decisions and behaviour, ensuring actions are fair, respectful, and aligned with core values of integrity and justice. Skills that guide ethical decision-making, fairness, and integrity in inclusive workplaces.

Soft Skill	Definition	Application for caregivers & employees	Impact
Integrity	Acting with honesty, fairness, and ethical responsibility.	Care policies applied transparently and fairly across genders.	Strengthens trust and organisational credibility.

Ethics	Commitment to fairness, professionalism, and accountability.	Managers model fairness in decision-making for caregivers.	Builds long-term credibility and ethical culture.

**Source tables 1–4: Adapted synthesis by authors, based on soft skills literature and project context (Articulate, 2021; Forbes Advisor, 2023; Kubátová et al., 2025; MAACCE, 2017; O'Reilly, 2025; People Managing People, 2023; PMC, 2023; Cimatti, 2016; Salto-Youth, 2016).*

Soft skills are much more than "nice-to-have" abilities. They are the foundation of **inclusive and supportive workplaces**, where employees feel valued not only for their technical expertise but also for their humanity (Poláková, M. et al., 2023). By developing empathy, communication, resilience, adaptability, problem-solving, and integrity, managers and employees alike can contribute to environments where **caregiving responsibilities are recognised and supported**, rather than hidden or penalised. These competences are essential for addressing the challenges of modern work, from balancing productivity with well-being to ensuring fairness and gender equality.

Remember: **soft skills are not fixed traits, but capabilities that can be learned, practiced, and strengthened over time**. By investing in these competences, you are not only building your own professional growth, you are also helping to shape workplaces that are fairer, more inclusive, and more sustainable for everyone.

Creating and fostering inclusive workplaces, avoiding discrimination and unfavourable treatment

How the use of soft skills by employers, managers and HR specialists **can encourage gender equality in the workplace**?

Employers must adapt their organisation to the needs of their teams

Why it's important for a company to understand and accommodate the needs of its employees?
Employee satisfaction is one of the fundamental pillars of an ethical approach to work organization. But it also represents a performance value for the company, which, by filling employees' needs, can improve its results. In fact, creating a comfortable and satisfying work environment for employees is a key to a company's success. However, it involves a corporate organizational approach that encompasses more than just the employer-employee relationship, but a factual cultural setting.
Gallup, an American analysis and consultancy company, addresses the issue of corporate organization, and in particular the question of active employee involvement, focusing on "engaged workplace culture" (Gallup, 2025). This requires the employer to view the employee (and care for him or her) as a person and not simply as a "tool" of the organizational machine (Gallup, 2025).
Employee satisfaction is when workers feel content and fulfilled with their jobs.
Marsh McLennan Agency (MMA), an American agency specializing in insurance and professional services for businesses, believes that a good work experience occurs when employees:

- Appreciate the work atmosphere
- Feel confident in their work
- Have opportunities for professional development
- Maintain a good work-life balance
- Receive competitive compensation

According to Marsh McLennan Agency (MMA), the six components of a satisfied workforce are:

- Pay and benefits
- Job security

- Career development
- Recognition
- Respect
- Engagement

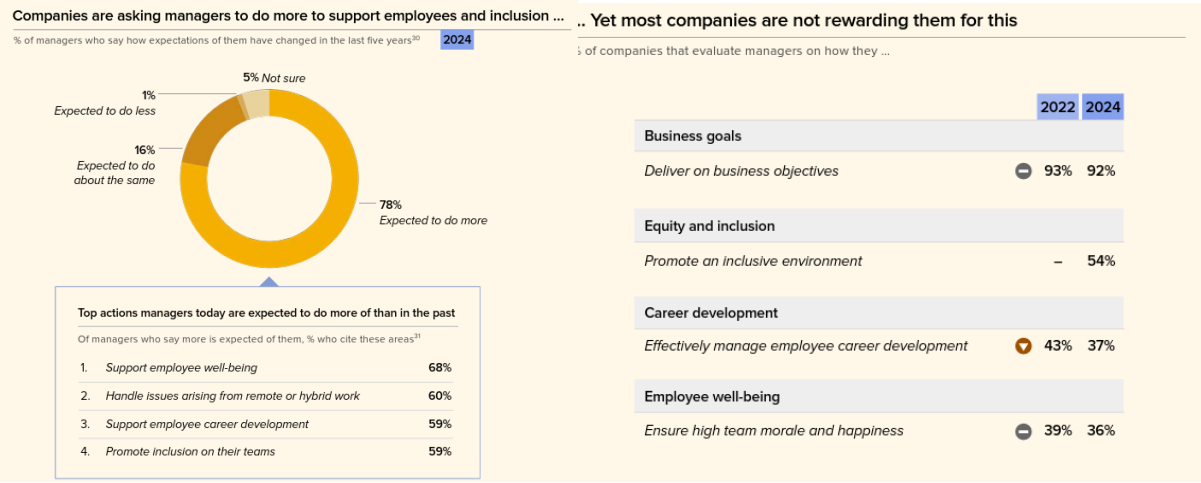
Employee dissatisfaction origins costs for the company and increases turnover, causing the brand to lose competitiveness (Marsh McLennan Agency, 2024).
We believe it's important to emphasize the importance of an employer's empathetic approach to workers and respectful of their needs. This approach can be very simple if employers, managers, and HR specialists effectively utilize the right soft skills.

Inequalities and needs in the workplace

Are the needs of employee caregivers adequately supported by employers?
According to a 2023 survey by the U.S. insurance company Guardian Life, 23% of caregivers do not believe their employer cares about their overall well-being, and only 44% say the benefits offered meet their needs (Guardian, 2023). This data does not match employers' perceptions: according to the survey, 63% of them believe their organization provides support for employees with caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, the survey shows that caregivers experience more frequent career setbacks and have less attractive job prospects. They are twice as likely as non-caregivers to have experienced a layoff (6% versus 3%), and 20% say their caregiving responsibilities have limited their professional growth and job opportunities (Guardian, 2023).
The problem probably stems from the fact that employers do not cultivate a “culture of care”. A Harvard Business School report underlines that many companies have unintentionally created an organizational culture in which employees are reluctant to share their caregiving concerns because most of them don't see enough examples of colleagues advancing their careers as a result of their caregiving responsibilities (Fuller, 2019).

Are there gender inequalities in the workplace that make caregiving difficult?
Although the topic of gender equity in the workplace is widely addressed in various institutional and research settings, the gender gap continues to be a barrier to social development and productivity.
According to research conducted by King's College London in 2020, cited by Deloitte, women spend more time than men on unpaid care work (Deloitte, 2023). On average, women dedicate 4 hours and 25 minutes a day to this work, while men dedicate an average of 1 hour and 23 minutes. This can negatively impact women's working lives in several ways, including less time to attend business networking events, submit job applications, work additional hours, and focus on career development—all factors that can hinder career progression (Deloitte, 2023).
Sometimes companies increasingly demand more from managers, and without more time and resources, it may be difficult for them to meet these growing expectations. Furthermore, many managers are evaluated and rewarded solely for their progress in achieving company goals, rather than for people management objectives such as career development and team morale (McKinsey & Co., 2024). As a result, managers may focus less on these aspects (McKinsey & Co., 2024). Despite the trend toward increasing attention to the quality of the work environment, inclusion, and reducing gender gaps, companies may not support managers and HR specialists in this process.

Figure 2: Results of in-field research on employees' needs



Source: McKinsey & Co, 2024

This weakness can lead to a reduced focus on gender gap issues: managers and HR specialists are often asked to evaluate employees based on raw productivity (which is often linked to time spent on the job) without adequately considering other outcomes. This approach penalizes female workers because many of them have to perform demanding tasks at home, such as caring for relatives in need of care (McKinsey & Co., 2024).

Soft skills for employers, HR specialists and managers

How can employers, managers, and human resources specialists support employees who have social and health responsibilities towards their families?

For employers, HR specialists, and managers, adopting an empathetic and inclusive approach is not only an ethical duty but also a strategic approach to the company's well-being.

Below are some skills and business behaviours that experts and specialised companies consider essential for improving the work environment in situations where workers—especially women—must dedicate part of their time to caring for their families.

According to Thanks BEN, a UK-based company specializing in business solutions, there are seven concrete ways in which employers can support employees with caregiving responsibilities at home (Thanks BEN, n.d.):

1. Implement flexible work arrangements.

2. Provide mental health and stress management support. This can be implemented through:
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
- Counselling and therapy services
- Stress management workshops

3. Offer leave options (not just standard paid time off, but also other types of paid leave such as family and medical leave, caregiver leave, and emergency leave).

4. Provide benefits for childcare and eldercare employees (e.g., company daycare programs and digital resources to help plan care or financial support).

5. Train managers on caregiver support. Training should cover the following topics:
- Recognize caregiver stress signals
- Manage stress at work
- Understand caregiver rights
- Create a supportive company culture

6. Offer flexible benefits.

7. Build a caregiver network.

In an article published in 2024 in Forbes, Julian Hayes addresses the relationship between caregivers and the workplace. The author suggests two options for employers to improve their employee caregiving strategy (Forbes, 2024). They are:

1. Remove Invisible Stigmas and Offer Job Assurance. Harvey emphasizes the importance of building trust through empathy and ensuring employees feel heard without fear of repercussions.
2. Provide Comprehensive Well-Being Support and Resources. In particular, companies can offer relief and support for the mental and emotional well-being of employees:
   - Allowing time away with job security intact.
   - Provide financial resources and well-being relief.
   - Offer up personal health solutions, including top-notch screenings and assessments.
   - Helping with the logistics of finding medical care for their loved ones.
   - Building a community and social support network for employee caregivers.

Further practical suggestions on how to balance work organization and attention to the needs of employee caregivers are provided in a scientific article cited in the online Business Journal of the

Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania (Kossek et al., 2021). According to the authors, it is essential to create a culture that prevents caregiver burnout.
This cultural context must be created through some actions (Kossek et al., 2021):

- Embrace hybrid work for the flexibility it offers caregivers but set boundaries so that employees working from home can truly disconnect.
- Create a dedicated Employee Resource Group (ERG) for caregivers to develop solutions to support people at different stages of their lives.
- Implement a concierge service to help employees who provide care find necessary resources, such as nursing care for an elderly parent.
- Allow employees to donate accumulated time off to a colleague in the event of a caregiving crisis or offer paid time off. If this isn't possible, job sharing is another option.
- Integrate work-life balance into the company culture by training managers to better support non-work needs and creating a path to management that allows care managers to distance themselves if necessary.
- Make policies clear and easily accessible online for employees so they understand how to utilize benefits.
- Leaders must actively communicate the importance of employees using available paid family and sick leave policies when necessary and without fear of professional stigma or job loss.

Given what has emerged regarding the weaknesses in managing relationships with employee caregivers in the workplace, we believe we can recommend that employers, HR specialists, and managers implement and apply some simple soft skills. Focusing on these skills, however, should not exempt managers from implementing very concrete and operational policies and interventions.
Consequently, we would like to suggest some soft skills cited by Dennis O'Reilly in a recent article published in Forbes magazine (2025). These are the soft skills: Resilience, Empathy, Collaboration, Problem Solving, Curiosity, Ethics, Positivity, Loyalty, Patient Persistence, Leadership.
Most of these skills, in fact, are particularly relevant to the goal of developing transversal skills to manage and promote inclusive workplaces.

- Empathy: No organisation progresses if there is no relaxed and understanding relationship between manager and employee.
- Collaboration: This relationship cannot be merely hierarchical but must be cooperative and synergistic.
- Ethics: The working relationship must be based on mutual respect and anchored in moral rules that apply to all parties.

In closing, it can be said that employers, HR specialists, and managers have power in carrying out their roles, but this power does not translate into competitive advantage and organizational quality if it is exercised without meeting the needs—including those of caregiving—of their employees.

How to learn and practice them?

By incorporating gamification elements into training programs, learning is turned into an interactive, engaging and motivating experience. **Gamification** is the process of incorporating game elements in non-game contexts, with the objective of motivating, involving and improving learning. Through the application of game mechanics and dynamics, such as competition, challenges, levels, rewards and feedback, the aim is to stimulate the active participation of employees in their training process (UOC blogs, 2023).
The following table presents a set of **practical activities** that employers/employees can use to strengthen each soft skill addressed. These exercises are designed to be simple, engaging, and adaptable to different training contexts. They serve as a bridge between the theoretical content of the module and hands-on practice, making the learning process concrete and action-oriented.

Table 5: **Gamification: Practical activities to train soft skills**

Soft skill	Activity proposed	Brief explanation
Empathy	*Role play: Walking in their shoes*	Participants act out scenarios (e.g., a caregiver requesting flexibility). Others reflect on feelings/needs, building empathy through perspective-taking. See ***Activity 3***
Self-awareness	*Johari window game*	In small groups, participants share how they see themselves vs. how others perceive them, identifying blind spots and strengths.
Communication skills	*Back-to-back drawing*	One person describes an image without showing it, the other draws. Demonstrates the importance of clarity and active listening. See ***Activity 1***
Interpersonal skills	*Human knot*	Team members stand in a circle, join hands randomly, and must untangle themselves through cooperation, testing teamwork and patience.
Adaptability & flexibility	*Shrinking vessel*	Teams stand inside a space (marked by a rope/tape) that keeps shrinking. They must adapt strategies to keep everyone inside, fostering creativity and flexibility.
Innovation & creativity	*Marshmallow tower challenge*	Teams build the tallest freestanding tower with spaghetti, tape, and a marshmallow on top. Encourages creative design under time and resource constraints. See ***Activity 2***
Integrity	*Ethical dilemmas debate*	Groups receive workplace dilemmas (e.g., unfair workload distribution). They must argue and decide the most ethical course of action.
Motivation	*Personal goal mapping*	Each participant sets a short personal or team-related goal, shares it, and reflects later on achievements and barriers. Builds intrinsic motivation.
Strategic vision	*End-in-mind Simulation*	Teams plan a "future workplace" policy for inclusivity by envisioning outcomes first, then working backward to identify steps.
Capacity to inspire / Persuasion	*Pitch for inclusion*	Teams prepare a short "pitch" to persuade leadership to adopt a caregiver-friendly policy, practicing inspiration and influence.
Resilience	*Failure resume exercise*	Participants write down past failures and what they learned. Sharing builds resilience by reframing setbacks as growth opportunities.
Collaboration	*Minefield game*	One blindfolded participant navigates an obstacle course with verbal guidance from teammates. Requires trust and collaboration.
Problem-solving	*Inclusive workplace escape room*	Teams solve logic puzzles and caregiving-related challenges to "unlock" the escape. Encourages teamwork, creativity, and critical thinking.
Time management	*Prioritisation grid (eisenhower box)*	Teams sort a set of tasks (urgent vs. important, work vs. caregiving). Helps visualise priorities and improve time allocation.
Curiosity	*Question storming*	Instead of solutions, teams must generate as many questions as possible about a workplace challenge. Builds curiosity and exploration skills.

Ethics	*Values auction*	Participants are given fake money to "bid" on values (fairness, loyalty, equality). Prompts discussion on what values matter most at work.
Positivity	*Gratitude circle*	Each participant shares one positive thing about a colleague/team. Reinforces positive mindset and recognition practices.
Loyalty	*Trust walk*	In pairs, one participant is blindfolded and guided by the other through obstacles. Builds trust, reliability, and loyalty within teams.
Patient persistence	*Puzzle relay*	Teams must complete a puzzle under time limits, facing deliberate obstacles (missing pieces, interruptions). Builds patience and persistence. See ***Activity 2***
Leadership	*Rotating leaders*	Teams complete a task (e.g., brainstorming), with leadership rotating every 5 minutes. Highlights different leadership styles and inclusivity.
Emotional intelligence	*Emotion recognition role play*	Participants act out emotions silently; peers must identify feelings and discuss how to respond. Builds sensitivity to others' emotional states.

**Source: Adapted from University of Toledo HR Team-Building Activities (utoledo.edu); Thryv blog (thryv.com); Expiration reminder blog (expirationreminder.com); the Creative Soft Skills Training Toolkit (creativesoftskills.eu); and the Moving into Soft Skills Handbook (movingintosoftskills.com).*

Interactive activities

Activity 1: Back-to-back drawing

Participants: Unlimited (pairs)

Time: Varies, 15 – 25 minutes, depends on complexity of images

Aim of Activity: This activity is meant to help people improve and think deeply about their communication skills with their fellow employees. It will also encourage team-building and collaboration

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):

1. **Introduce the game/set-up** (5 minutes): The group must pair up with someone (assigning pairs) and then have them to sit back-to-back with their partners. One person gets a picture of a shape or simple image (see later simple black and white images), and the other gets a piece of paper and pen.
2. **The activity** (10 minutes): Explain to the group that the person who has the black and white line drawing will describe the drawing to their partners without telling them outright what it is. The person with the pen and paper will attempt to draw it as their partner describes it to them. After about ten minutes, have everyone stop and then compare the original to the drawing they made.

Debriefing questions to ask after the task is completed

- Why was the activity hard?
- What was the hardest part about communicating this way?
- What did it take for the partnerships to navigate the activity successfully?

For the descriptors:

- Was it hard to not just outright tell them what they were drawing?
- How specific did you feel you had to be?
- Was it hard to have to rely on someone else to get what you were describing correct?

For the drawers:

- Was it challenging to understand what the descriptors were saying?
- Did you ever feel lost and like you had to ask clarifying questions?
- What were the most helpful things your partner did to help you understand?

Overall, what did we learn about communication?

- Learning to be clear and specific without getting frustrated
- Asking clarifying questions to better complete the task
- Collaboration and team work were essential to this task, you could not do this by yourself. Learning to rely on others to help accomplish activities.

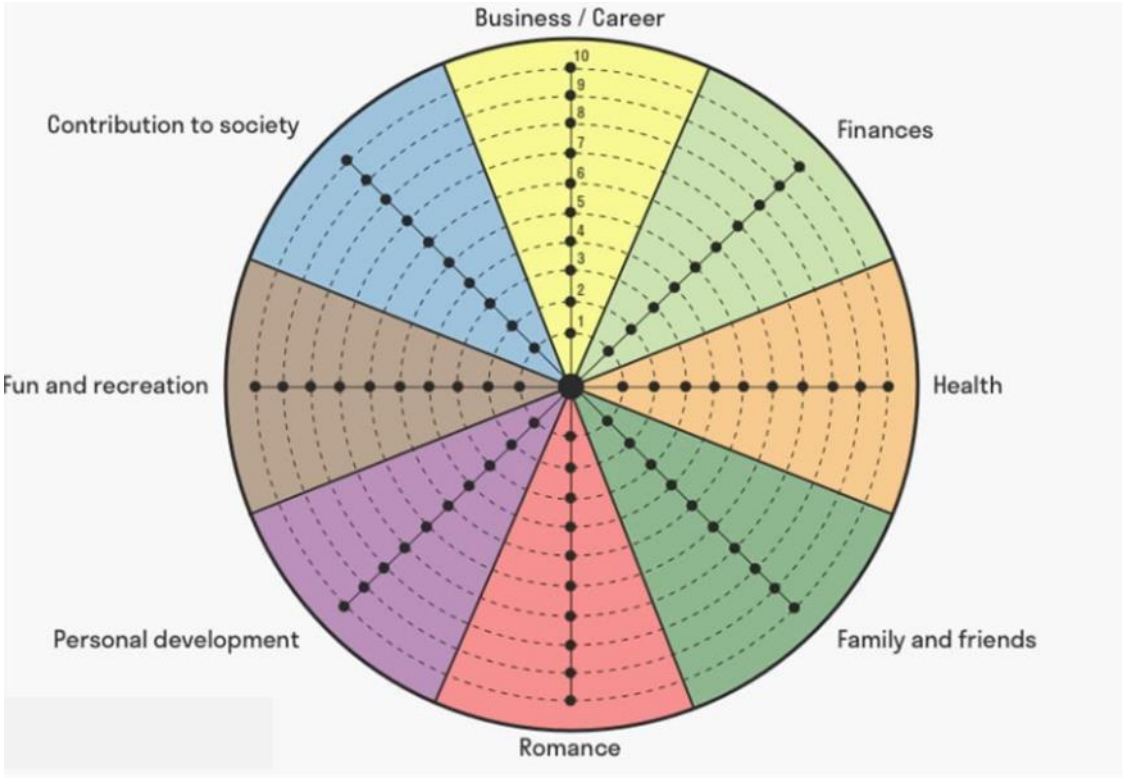
Links/Resources:
Paper, Pens/Markers, Print-outs of the drawings (see Annex I). You can also use caregiving/workplace-related images prepared by the facilitator. Print out enough for each pair to have one image.
Resource: Therapist Aid, https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/drawing-communication-exercise

Activity 2*:* Coaching wheel

This activity is suitable for a digital environment.
Participants: Individual

Time: 20-30 minutes

Aim of activity: The coaching wheel helps individuals visually assess how balanced their life or work domains are, highlighting areas of strength and those needing attention. It supports structured reflection and prioritisation, enabling targeted action planning. In coaching settings, it guides conversations from awareness to growth and change.
Wheel of Life:



Meyer, 1960

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):

It is extremely important to be totally honest with yourself as you complete this exercise. The 8 sections in the wheel represent various areas of our life. It encourages us to consider all areas of life. Imagine the center of the wheel as 0 and the outer edge as 10. Rank your level of satisfaction within each area of your life between 0-10. Then use the markings to draw a curved line in each box to visually create a wheel. (Like the image above.) The outline will give you a visual idea of possible rough spots in your wheel of life. It's good to narrow down to three areas you want to focus your energy. Although we would all love to have a perfect 10 in all areas, that is not what it is about. The most important thing is to have balance in one's life. Even having a 10 in one area can create imbalance in other areas of your life.

Reflection questions: Look at the shape of your wheel.

- What did you notice?
- Which areas would you like to work on most in your own life?
- How does one area impact another?

Learning point: Learners will recognise that different life or work areas are interdependent and that imbalance in one impact the whole. They will learn to rate and reflect on levels of satisfaction in specific domains, thereby increasing self-awareness. They will be also able to identify priority areas for improvement and translate insights into concrete, goal-oriented steps.

Links/Resources:

The coaching wheel – See Annexes

Credits: The creative soft skills training Toolkit - Link

Activity 3: The Marshmallow Care Tower

Participants: Unlimited.

Aim of activity:

- To develop **problem-solving and teamwork skills**.
- To highlight how diverse perspectives (including those of caregivers balancing responsibilities) contribute to innovative solutions.
- To practice **communication, collaboration, and adaptability** in resource-limited scenarios.

Time: 30–40 min.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):

1. Divide participants into teams of 4–6.
2. Each team's goal: Build the **tallest freestanding tower** that can support a marshmallow at the top.
3. Twist: Partway through, the facilitator introduces **"caregiver challenge cards"** (e.g., "One team member must step away for 5 minutes to take a child to the doctor" or "You lose half your tape because of a caregiving emergency").
4. Teams must adapt their strategy and continue building.
5. After the activity, each team measures their tower and presents their approach.

***Debrief questions**:*

- How did your team adapt when faced with unexpected challenges?
- Did all voices get heard?
- How does this relate to supporting colleagues with caregiving duties in real workplaces?

***Learning point**:* Success comes not only from technical problem-solving but also from flexibility, empathy, and teamwork—skills that are critical to inclusive workplaces.

Links/Resources:

- Spaghetti sticks, tape, string, 1 marshmallow per team.
- Index cards with "caregiver challenges"* to integrate. **The caregiver challenge cards should be adapted to local cultural and social contexts, ensuring that the examples are realistic and relevant for each country: I.e. replace or modify scenarios that may not apply in all national settings (e.g., family leave policies, workplace norms), and use neutral and inclusive language, avoiding culture-specific references that could limit understanding.*

Activity 4*:* Break the care code

Participants: Unlimited

Time: 30–40 min.

Aim of Activity: To strengthen **collaboration, problem-solving, adaptability, and inclusive teamwork,** while simulating how limited availability (e.g., caregivers under pressure) affects team dynamics and requires resource-sharing.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):

1. **Divide participants** into small groups (3–5).

2. Each group receives a **puzzle pack** prepared by the facilitator. The pack contains **3–4 riddles or mini-enigmas** (logic puzzles, word scrambles, number patterns, symbol matching). Each puzzle, once solved, reveals part of a 4-digit **"Care code"**.
    a. Example: A crossword where answers are words like *flexibility, empathy, support*.
    b. Example: A math riddle.
    c. Example: Matching caregiving icons with their definitions to reveal a sequence.
3. **Collaboration twist:** Not all players receive the same information. Some get partial clues , while others have puzzle sheets without certain details. Teams must **communicate and share openly** to combine their pieces.
4. Halfway through, the facilitator introduces a **caregiver challenge card** (e.g., "One member can't contribute for 5 minutes due to a caregiving emergency" or "Your team loses one puzzle sheet").
5. Teams must continue working together until they break the code.
6. The first team to submit the correct 4-digit code wins.

Debrief questions:

- How did your team share resources and information?
- Did some voices dominate while others were excluded?
- What happened when one member was "unavailable" due to the challenge card?
- How does this reflect the reality of teamwork when employees have caregiving responsibilities?
- What soft skills (empathy, flexibility, communication) were most important to succeed?

Learning point: Breaking the code requires more than logic — it requires trust, collaboration, adaptability, and inclusive problem-solving. Teams that value each member's contribution, even when resources are uneven, are more resilient and successful.

Links/Resources:

- **Collaborative platform:** Google Docs, Google Slides, or Miro board for puzzle sheets **(if implemented online)**.
- **Breakout rooms**: Zoom, Teams, Webex **(if implemented online)**
- **Prepared puzzles:** 3–4 mini-enigmas leading to digits of the code (see Annex I)
- **Caregiver challenge cards:** Delivered by the facilitator to "caregivers".
    - Card 1: One participant cannot answer for 3 minutes (simulating sudden unavailability).
    - Card 2: Your group loses one clue temporarily (e.g., Puzzle 2's clue #3).
    - Card 3: One participant can only answer "yes/no" to simulate distraction.
    - Card 4: Another must work silently for 2 minutes.

Activity 5: Invisible work: When personal problems follow us to the office

Participants: Team Leaders, Managers, HR Professionals. 2–50 people (pairs or small groups: manager + Francesca + observers).

Time: 30–90 minutes (15 min role-play + 15 min debrief + 10 min group reflection).

Aim of activity: To apply soft skills in a workplace environment, to build emotional intelligence, improve handling of sensitive conversations, and create a supportive team culture while maintaining productivity.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):

1. **Welcome & Ice-breaker**
2. **Trigger warning (trainer notes):** This activity may touch on personal or emotionally sensitive experiences, particularly related to stress, caregiving, or workplace challenges. Before starting, ensure a safe and respectful environment where participants feel comfortable sharing or role-playing.
   Trainers should remind everyone that the scenarios are fictional and not intended to reflect personal situations. Allow space for debriefing and emotional processing after the role-play, offering participants the option to step back if they feel uncomfortable. Emphasise confidentiality and mutual respect throughout the session.
3. **Scenario introduction:** "You are a team leader or manager at a growing company. One of your top team members, Francesca, who has been with the company since its very beginning, has recently started underperforming. She submits incomplete or late reports, does not play an active role in her department, and is often preoccupied or distracted. She also frequently arrives late or leaves early. She has also been unresponsive to emails and messages during working hours while constantly checking her personal mobile phone. The atmosphere at work is not ideal, and her relationships with her colleagues have also been affected. They have expressed concerns about her perceived detachment and lack of collaboration, with some feeling that she considers herself above the rest of the team.
   Despite subtle reminders and nudges from colleagues, the situation has not improved. As her manager, you have decided to have a private, constructive conversation with her to address these issues directly."

4. **Assign roles**: Divide participants into small groups of 2, 4, or 6, depending on the total number of participants. Each group will be assigned one of two roles:
   - Manager Group – tasked with balancing empathy and support for an employee while addressing team dynamics and organizational needs, and recognizing potential biases
   - Francesca Group – role-playing a highly capable but overwhelmed employee struggling with an invisible caregiving burden, shaped by societal and gendered expectations.

5. **Role preparation:** Each group receives a fictional **role card** outlining Francesca's background, including
   - Demographic information
   - Type and intensity of caregiving responsibilities
   - Job duties and workplace expectations
   - Key challenges she faces at work
   - Personal goals, pressures, and emotional landscape

   Groups review their role card and reflect on a set of guided questions to better understand their character's perspective and needs.

6. **Empathy mapping:** Using an empathy map, each group explores and records insights into what their character > Thinks and feels - Sees in their environment - Says and does - Hears from others. The aim is to step into the shoes of the assigned role and build a deeper understanding of the human dynamics at play.

7. **Role-play in pairs or small groups**: Manager initiates the conversation; Francesca reveals her caregiving responsibilities and frustrations. During the meeting, when the Manager raise concerns about missed deadlines and unreliable working hours, and highlights how much you and your colleagues are preoccupied, Francesca opens up and reveals that:

- Her mother, aged 85, has recently been diagnosed with a severe autoimmune condition requiring daily care and medical supervision. Her father died 5 years ago, and since then she has been living with her.
- She is raising two challenging teenagers, and to make things harder, her husband lost his job six months ago.
- She is the only daughter in her family. Although she has two older brothers, she is expected to take on caregiving responsibilities due to a kind of atavistic mentality in her family and culture.
- She explains that nobody ever asked her if she wanted to provide this care, or if she was available or able to do so. It was simply assumed that she would do it because she is a woman and the daughter of the person in need of care.
- She talks about how tired and frustrated she feels, like she's being punished just for being a woman — both at home and at work — because all the emotional and physical labor always ends up on her.
- Francesca knows she hasn't been at her best lately, but what hurts the most is the silence around her. She's angry and disappointed that no one seems to notice or care enough to ask what's going on. No one is reaching out, no one is checking in — it's like she's invisible.
- She can't help but ask herself if a male colleague would be expected to juggle all the same pressures — at home or at work — or if things would just be easier for him.

As her manager, you realise that you've been so focused on the results that you haven't taken the time to consider what might be happening beneath the surface. You also recognise that you may have unconsciously assumed that Francesca, or any other woman, would simply manage without needing support or being asked how she's really doing.

8. **Group debrief and guided discussion:**
    - *What soft skills did the manager demonstrate? Which could be improved?*
    - *How did empathy or lack of it shape Francesca's openness?*
    - *What practical steps could HR/managers take in similar real-life cases?*

***Learning point**:* This activity highlights the importance of empathy, self-awareness, communication, and adaptability in supporting caregivers, particularly women who face disproportionate expectations.

Links/Resources:

- Scenario overview
- Role prompts for Manager and Employee (Francesca) – see below
- Discussion questions for the debrief

Role cards	Manager role	Francesca role
Your backstory	You are Francesca's manager. You've noticed a significant drop in her performance and engagement. Your goal is to have a private, constructive conversation that: - Surfaces the root causes of her behaviour - Expresses concern without judgment	You've been with the company since the beginning and have always been a high performer. Lately, you've been feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and disconnected. You're struggling with personal issues that you haven't shared with anyone. You feel judged and misunderstood by your colleagues. Your goals are:

	- Offers support while maintaining accountability	- Express your feelings honestly - Explore what support might help - Decide whether you want to stay in your current role or adjust responsibilities
Tone to aim for/ Emotional state	Calm, empathetic, and professional Curious rather than accusatory Supportive but clear about expectations	Frustrated, tired, possibly ashamed Defensive but also craving support Unsure how to express what you need
Suggested opening lines:	"Thanks for taking the time to speak with me today. I wanted to check in because I've noticed some changes lately." "I value your contributions deeply, and I want to understand what's been going on." "Let's talk about how we can support you while keeping the team on track."	"I know I haven't been myself lately… I just didn't know how to talk about it." "It feels like people are watching me all the time, waiting for me to mess up." "I'm dealing with a lot outside of work, and it's been hard to focus."
Prompts	"I've noticed that your performance has changed recently. I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing." "I hear that you're under a lot of pressure. Can you tell me more about what's been going on?' "How do you feel your responsibilities at home are impacting your work?" "What would meaningful support look like for you right now?" "Let's figure out a plan that protects your well-being and also supports the team."	Share the assumption in your family that, as a woman, you would take care of your mother. Express your resentment or exhaustion surrounding gendered expectations. Point out how these pressures are affecting your health, private life, and job. Ask why there hasn't been more support or understanding at work. Suggest what kind of flexibility or recognition would make a difference.
Possible challenges	Francesca may be defensive or withdrawn She may reveal personal struggles or frustrations You'll need to balance empathy with leadership responsibility	-
Support options to explore	Flexible scheduling Temporary role adjustments Mental health resources Coaching or mentorship	-

Unit 3.3: Developing Digital Skills and Applications in the Workplace

Unit 3.3 will focus on hard skills, and more specifically digital skills, that employers, managers and HR specialists can use to develop relevant support practices and mechanisms that promote work-life balance and flexible work arrangements for their employees.

Theoretical Content

Hard skills refer to specific, teachable, and measurable abilities that people obtain through education, training, or hands-on experience. These skills are often job-specific and can be acquired through certifications, tests, or practical application (Qandle, n.d.). Hard skills, which are specific to technical knowledge and training skills set, can refer to skills such as software development or machine learning. Hard skills differ from soft skills which are usually personality traits such as leadership, time management, or interpersonal skills (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025a). Hard skills are characteristically (Qandle, n.d.):

- Measurable – They can be tested and proven.
- Teachable – They are learned through training, courses, or practice.
- Job-Specific – Different businesses require different hard skills.
- Certifiable – Professionals can obtain certifications or degrees to validate them.

With many jobs now adopting online formats, whether fully remote or hybrid, the development of digital hard skills has become essential for employees. Digital tools and technologies enhance efficiency, improve effectiveness, and provide significant support for daily tasks while transforming the traditional notions of work. Understanding the intricate dynamics between remote work, work-life balance, and productivity becomes imperative. Research findings underscore the significance of work-life balance as a critical determinant of employee well-being in the remote work structure (Nagaprakash et. al., 2024). Encouraging remote work and flexible work arrangements can help employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance, which results in a happier, more productive

workforce. Managers and employers have numerous responsibilities in their day-to-day work. However, apart from leading and planning, an equally important aspect of being a manager or employer is ensuring the well-being of their employees. Promoting work–life balance and providing flexible work arrangements are vital in fostering a positive workplace environment, enhancing employee satisfaction, and ultimately improving task delivery and organizational performance.

The EU is taking steps towards making flexible work a normality for employees who may benefit largely from it. Interestingly, results have shown that flexible working schedules increase work time by 1.4 days extra a month per employee (Airtasker, 2024). In response to the increasing need for employees providing informal care to family members and balancing work and care responsibilities, the EU introduced the Work-Life Balance Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158), adopted on June 20, 2019. The Directive aims to promote a more equitable sharing of care responsibilities between men and women (European Union, 2019). The Directive was designed to improve the balance between private life and work for parents and caregivers, promote gender equality in the labor market, and encourage a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities between men and women. To achieve these goals, the Directive establishes minimum standards for parental leave, paternity leave, caregiver leave, and flexible work arrangements, requiring Member States to integrate them into their national legal frameworks (European Commission, n.d.).

Digital tools and technologies can support the promotion of a work-life balance which is especially important for professionals with caring responsibilities. They can increase effectiveness and efficiency at home while allowing remote working tailored to one's needs and schedule. Research has also investigated the link between caregiving and remote work, highlighting that caregivers who work remotely are happier and more productive. A study found that 73% of caregivers use the time they save from working from home to care for their children, and 70% use it to spend more time with their partner or spouse (Tsipursky, 2023). The study also found that 77% of managers and 76% of caregivers agree that remote work improves workers' overall quality of life. Initiatives such as the Work-Life Balance Directive aim to increase opportunities of remote and flexible working for individuals with caregiving responsibilities by making it national legislations. Using digital tools in the workplace can allow for balance in work and care responsibilities, retaining work while caring for a family member, and increasing opportunities for employment for women informal carers. Without these tools, even the best intentions for flexibility can fail because there's no reliable mechanism to support them.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about dramatic changes in the work environment and introduced remote work for the first time to many professionals. However, the post-pandemic era has seen a shift in working styles and has accelerated the adoption of cloud-based platforms. Digital workplace tools are software and technologies that help improve productivity, collaboration, and communication in a digital environment. These tools support remote and hybrid work by enabling real-time interactions, project management, file sharing, and task automation. They make work more efficient, streamline processes, and allow flexible working arrangements, resulting in more connected and productive teams (Atomicwork, n.d.).

Many employees see the benefits of remote work which presents opportunities for flexibility and autonomy. Nevertheless, some concerns remain, such as how flexible working arrangements can pose potential risks to the delicate equilibrium between professional and personal life (Nagaprakash et. al., 2024). Challenges exist that can make it difficult to maintain a work-life balance in a remote work setting. Firstly, working remotely can create blurred lines between work and personal life with professionals feeling like they are constantly "at work" if there isn't a physical divide between their home area and workstation. Also, while real-time updates and email notifications can seem like a great way to keep productive and on top of things, they can foster an "always-on" mindset that severely compromises work-life balance. Additionally, working remotely can feel lonely sometimes, especially

for employees spending a lot of time at home and not communicating often with their team. Lastly, the adaptability of working remotely has its drawbacks. It might be alluring to continue working during downtime or to miss out on breaks which are necessary to recharge (TheEmployeeApp Blog, 2024).

Research also suggests that in the fast-changing Internet era, the notion of controlling employees seems to be outdated, and managers have turned to more flexible management methods. Organizations are increasingly implementing job autonomy policies to improve employee motivation and productivity. However, in a highly flexible and indirectly controlled work environment, too much of job autonomy may bring uncertainty and ambiguity, which will have the opposite effect and produce a "too-much-of-a-good-thing" effect (Zhou, 2020). Research emphasizes the need for organisations to proactively implement strategies that foster flexible working arrangements, recognising it as a cornerstone for sustaining employee satisfaction and overall productivity, while at the same time supporting and equipping employees on how to achieve a work-life balance (Nagaprakash et. al., 2024).

Despite preconceptions and challenges around productivity and efficiency, remote and flexible working is gaining popularity and is becoming a favored working pattern among many professionals. Importantly, flexible work offers significant benefits, particularly for professionals with care responsibilities. It provides opportunities for women to continue developing professionally and helps reduce the gender divide by promoting more equal opportunities for both men and women. In addition, the availability of various tools and technologies, can improve work-life balance by increasing productivity, enhancing workload management, and enabling managers and employers to better support their teams and having a better overview of any challenges or difficulties that may arise, in order to provide the necessary support for their employees with empathy and understanding.

In this Unit, some examples of digital tools will be presented, along with their workplace applications, to demonstrate how they can contribute to creating an employee-friendly environment that promotes flexibility and balance. A wider range of tools is available, many of which can be adapted to suit specific work environments.

Digital Collaboration Tools

Digital technologies have advanced more rapidly than any innovation in history – reaching around 50 per cent of the developing world's population in only two decades and transforming societies (United Nations, n.d.). Digital collaboration refers to the use of digital technologies and tools to facilitate teamwork, communication, and information sharing among professionals. This type of collaboration involves using online platforms, messaging apps, video conferencing, and other digital tools to share documents, ideas, and feedback, and to collaborate in real-time regardless of one's physical location (Tripathi, n.d.).

Over the past few years, especially due to the Covid-19 pandemic, organizations and their employees have faced changes in their patterns of work, including working from home and having meetings online. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented global crisis which affected working styles and employees' productivity (Calvino et al., 2024). According to Eurostat (2025), in 2024, 53% of EU businesses conducted remote meetings via online platforms like Skype, Zoom, MS Teams and WebEx. Regarding the size of the business, online meetings were highly popular in large businesses (94%), while they were less common for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (52%) (Eurostat, 2025).

Additionally, research highlights that "pre-existing digital and productivity gaps among firms, as well as their characteristics, significantly influenced firms' ability to react to the Covid-19 crisis and, relatedly, to adopt new digital technologies. Indeed, firms that were more digital, more productive,

and larger before COVID-19 were those increasing more significantly their digital technology installs during the pandemic" (Calvino et. al., 2024, p.7). This highlights the importance of digital collaboration tools which support smooth running of organizations and task delivery among employees.

Digital collaboration tools include software applications designed to facilitate real-time communication and collaboration among professionals. They can offer a wide range of features such as real-time chat, video conferencing, file sharing, project management, and more. These tools serve as a "meeting point" for team members, where they can work together seamlessly, irrespective of their geographical location or time zone (Lark Editorial Team, 2024). Specifically, digital collaboration tools include communication and messaging tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Asana (Hure, 2025), video conferencing applications such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex, and Skype, (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025b), file sharing and cloud storage such as OneDrive, Google Drive or DropBox (Martin, 2025).

The adoption of digital collaboration tools can be highly beneficial both for the organization and its employees. First of all, digital collaboration tools can increase productivity, as they can enable real-time communication between colleagues allowing teams to work more efficiently and complete tasks faster. With many organizations collaborating on an international level, digital collaboration allows for better communication and cooperation among colleagues from different countries, and it does not limit collaboration only in face-to-face environments (Tripathi, n.d.). Additionally, digital collaboration tools allow for more flexible, collaborative and modern working methods that are favored by many professionals (Maubareyt, 2020). Teams can use video calls, group chats and collaborative document editing tools to stay connected and reduce phone calls and numerous back and forth emails. Digital collaboration enhances flexibility as it "enables remote teams to work together, improving work-life balance and increasing job satisfaction. It also allows organizations to access a wider pool of talent and reduce overhead costs associated with physical office space. Teams can work from anywhere, anytime, without being tied to a physical location" (Tripathi, n.d.).

It seems evident that digital collaboration offers numerous benefits for organizations, as it promotes work–life balance and flexible work arrangements. However, some employers remain skeptical about the effectiveness of digital collaboration and how it may negatively impact employee's productivity and performance. Indeed, there are some challenges that need to be considered in terms of digital collaboration and different tools that can be used. The main threat to using digital collaboration tools and sharing sensitive documents of a company is their security. Digital collaboration tools are vulnerable to cyber-attacks and data breaches (Tripathi, n.d.). Additionally, technical issues can arise when using digital collaboration tools such as slow internet or the difficulty of some professionals to use specific software. Up until 2023, more than 90% of jobs in Europe require basic digital knowledge. However, approximately 32% of Europeans still lack basic digital skills (European Commission, 2023). This indicates that using elaborate software can prove challenging and stressful to some professionals and highlights the need for adequate training provided by companies to less digital literate professionals. Some professionals, especially if older, can even feel anxious and intimidated with modern technologies. Lastly, miscommunication can occur when team members are communicating digitally. Tone and context can be misinterpreted, leading to misunderstandings and conflict (Tripathi, n.d.).

Despite existing misconceptions about digital collaboration that some managers and employers may have about employee's productivity and work outcomes, as it mentioned above digital collaboration tools can promote work-life balance and flexible work arrangements for their employees. More so, for employees with care responsibilities who may struggle daily, commuting to offices and being, for many hours, away from family members in need of care and support. Digital collaboration tools can allow for collaborating with colleagues, while staying at home balancing care responsibilities. As remote work continues to gain momentum, digital collaboration will play an increasingly important role in the future of work (Tripathi, n.d.).

Project Management techniques and tools

Project management tools assist the management and organization of an organization's tasks and projects effectively and efficiently. Project management tools significantly facilitate monitoring, planning, and executing projects while creating transparency, so everyone knows their responsibilities and obligations (ActiveCollab Team, 2025). Project management platforms help project managers control costs, stay within scope, and stick to deadlines. The tools can be specialized software programs such as Asana, Trello, Jira but can also include simpler solutions such as Gantt Charts, project calendars and task lists (Abbamonte, 2024).

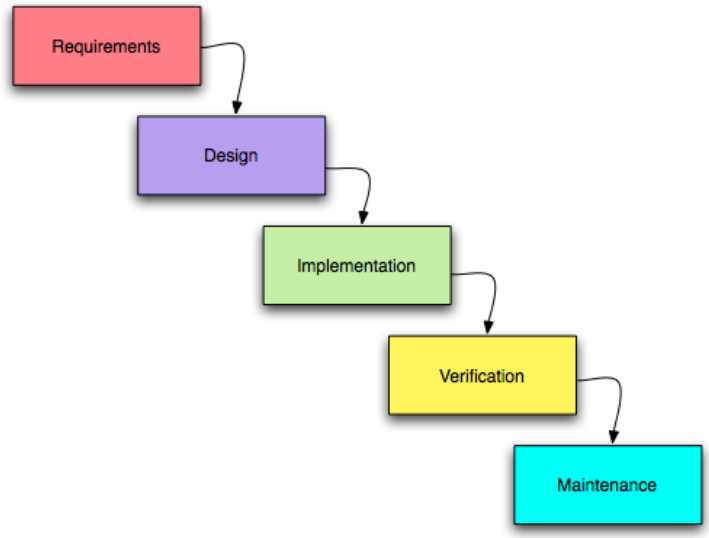
Using project management tools has significant benefits, as they are very helpful in making project planning easier, boosting the productivity of employees, and improving overall efficiency. Project management tools help increase productivity by providing the necessary structure and organization for managing projects. Project management software applications include features such as resource allocation, time tracking, reporting, task management and document management (BCS ProSoft, n.d.). These features can support employees in efficient and effective planning and execution of projects and employers in monitoring task completion, employees' workload and team collaboration. Also, by using a project management tool, all project-related information is transparently available. This includes task progress, schedules, and other records. This transparency allows teams and stakeholders to track progress in real-time and understand individual contributions to the project. It also strengthens accountability and motivates teams and professionals to achieve project goals (VirtualSpace, 2023).

Apart from modern tools that allow for project management and can be used by organizations in the forms of software, there are traditional project management techniques that refer to strategies that can be used for project management. Some of these include (Jurčić, 2025):

Waterfall Methodology

The Waterfall project management approach is one of the oldest and most traditional methodologies and a linear sequential design process originally formalized by Winston W. Royce in his seminal 1970 paper "Managing the Development of Large Software Systems (Royce, 1970). In the Waterfall model, the development proceeds through distinct phases: Requirements, Design, Implementation, Verification and Maintenance. Each phase of the workflow needs to be completed before moving on to the next step with minimal overlap. This methodology is well suited for projects where the objectives are clearly outlined from the beginning (Hoory et al., 2023). However, the Waterfall Methodology has been increasingly criticized in recent years for its rigidity and limited adaptability to changing project requirements, especially in dynamic or complex environments (Alanazi & Alrwais, 2024). Interestingly, many of the risk mitigation strategies originally proposed by Royce, such as iterative development, early prototyping and continuous stakeholder development, have been adopted and expanded by modern Agile methods (Morgan, 2018).

Figure 1. Phases of the Waterfall Methodology



Source: https://www.umsl.edu/~hugheyd/is6840/waterfall.html

Agile Methodology

Over the last two decades the Agile Project Management approaches have become increasingly popular (Gemino et al., 2022). The Agile methodology was developed to address the limitations of the previous project management approaches , which were expensive and time consuming (Anifa, et al., 2024). Agile is a quick and efficient methodology that enables teams to make spontaneous decisions and adapt to rapidly evolving market conditions and it can be used in any volatile environment (Anifa, et al., 2024; Asnawi et al., 2011; Yusoff et al., 2019). Unlike the traditional management model Agile emphasizes iterative development via short structured cycles and ongoing feedback enabling teams to deliver incremental progress, while rapidly adapting to evolving requirements (Dugbartey& Kenhide, 2025). Agile methods are defined by five key characteristics: Flexibility, Sustainability, Suitability, Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness. These qualities are the main reason behind the private sector's shift to Agile methodologies ensuring its success (Lishner & Shtub, 2019). Agile's six major industry applications are the following : Software development, project

management, manufacturing, marketing, supply chain management and education (Anifa, et al., 2024). Gradually, Agile has evolved into various specialized methodologies to support different business needs such as: Scrum, Extreme Programming, Kanban, Lean, Scrumban (a combination of Scrum and Kanban) and the Agile PeopleOps Framework (APF) (Omonije, 2024). Since Agile focuses on flexibility, teamwork and customer centered approach the following companies consist of success stories of its implementation: Sony, Netflix, Spotify, Toyota, Walmark, etc.

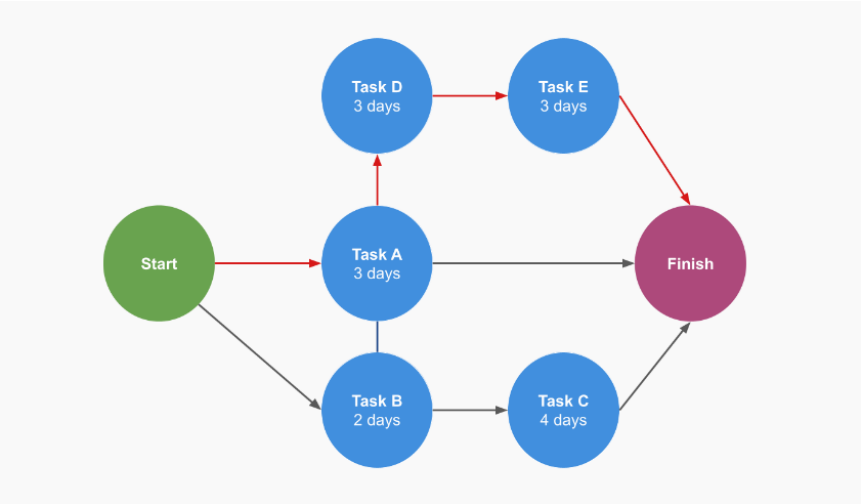
Figure 2 Agile Methodology Life Cycle Model

Source: A model for Stock Market Value Forecasting using Ense mble Artificial Neural Network (Ajoku, et al, 2021) Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Critical Path Method (CPM)

The Critical Path Method (CPM) is a project management technique that helps teams identify the most crucial project objectives (or tasks) that determine the overall project timeline. Developed in the late 1950 the CPM allows project managers to prioritize activities, allocate resources effectively and predict proactively delays by calculating task durations and dependencies (Perrucci et al, 2025, Bagshaw, 2021; Madhuri et al., 2012; Gopalasamy & Mansor, 2013). This method is crucial for effective project planning and control (MindMap AI, 2025). Its application in construction and engineering is beneficial, because precise scheduling is essential to avoid cost overruns and ensure timely delivery (Lima et al., 2023). A common CPM diagram (see below) consists of nodes that represent project activities and directed arrows that indicate project dependencies and sequencing.

Figure 3. CPM Network diagram

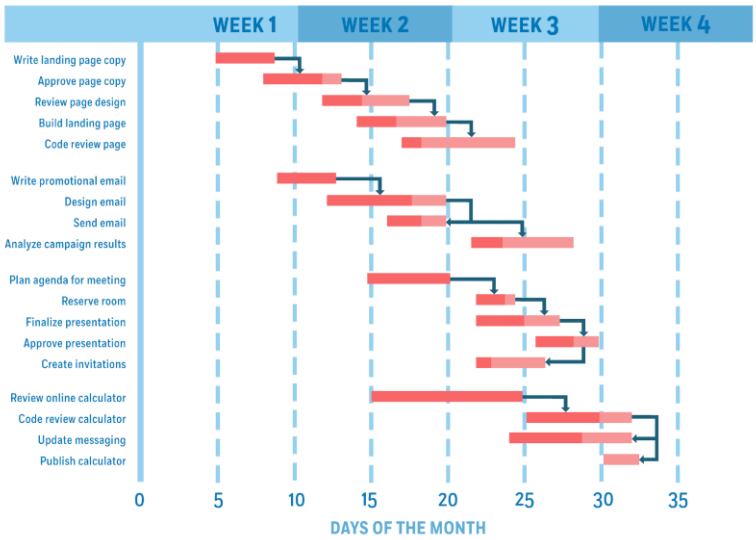


Source: https://planyway.com/blog/critical-path-method-for-project-managers

Gantt Charts

Gantt charts are a project management tool that can significantly help with project visualization through the planning and scheduling of projects. A Gantt chart is defined as a graphical representation of activity against time which can help professionals monitor progress. Gantt charts are essentially task scheduling tools: project management timelines and tasks are converted into horizontal bars (also called Gantt bars) to form a bar chart. These Gantt bars show start and end dates, as well as dependencies, scheduling and deadlines, including how much of the task is completed per stage and who the task owner is (Association for Project Management, n.d.). In addition to visualizing timelines, Gantt Charts facilitate communication and coordination among stakeholders by offering a shape and perspective on project status and project allocation (Wadhwa, 2024).

Figure 4. Gantt Chart visualizing task durations, dependencies and progress over time



Source: https://management.org/how-to-use-a-gantt-chart

Project management tools are essential for flexible and remote work because they provide centralized platforms for task management, communication, and progress tracking, enabling seamless

collaboration regardless of location. Achieving work-life balance requires intentional effort and the right set of tools. By integrating productivity tools into their daily routine, professionals can streamline their work processes, reduce stress, and allow more time for personal wellbeing (ReCom, 2025). This is especially important for individuals who are undertaking care responsibilities as optimization of their work can allow for better project management and higher productivity and efficiency. These tools help set clear project priorities, manage remote work effectively, and provide real-time insights, leading to better productivity and less burnout for teams and individuals.

Whether traditional project management strategies and methodologies are adopted or modern digital software applications obtained, employers and managers who use project management tools can help develop strategies that will ensure the work-life balance of their employees through better planning, organization, execution, evaluation and monitoring of their work and tasks. By having a clear and general overview of all tasks, employers can ensure that workload is fairly distributed to employees based on their expertise, skills and availability.

Having a centralized project management system also allows for greater visibility into potential difficulties or delays in employees' work delivery. For example, frequently missed deadlines may indicate the need for a more balanced allocation of responsibilities or suggest that employees are experiencing challenges they have not shared with their managers. Project management tools are not only effective for monitoring employees' workloads but also for fostering better communication among employer-employee. When managers have a clear overview of their employees' tasks, they are better positioned to provide timely support and demonstrate empathy, which contributes to a healthier work–life balance.

Remote Access Solutions

Remote and hybrid work environments are being adopted by many businesses and companies, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as employees, managers, and teams spend less and less time at the office, it is crucial that they can securely and easily access their work devices no matter where they are (Pleasant, 2025). In a post-Covid reality, remote access remains a significant aspect of working, evolving from a necessity during lockdown to a flexible approach.

It is evident that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an indelible impact on the world of work, such that the "post-Covid workplace" is quite different to the working conditions years ago (Cooke et al., 2021). In the first half of 2020, the greatest change to work arrangements caused by the pandemic was the shift to working from home (WFH) (McPhail et al., 2023). With remote desktop access, employees can use any device to access all their files, programs, notes, and tools stored on their work computers. This provides flexibility that's vital to working efficiently on any device, anywhere. Remote access doesn't just allow users to access a single device remotely – it provides access to workstations and resources from any location. This unlocks a new level of flexibility and ease of management, as organizations, managers, and support teams will always have the computing resources they need within reach (Pleasant, 2025).

Remote-access solutions like VPN, RDP, and cloud-based remote workspaces play a critical, multi-layered role in supporting flexible working models, as they enhance productivity, efficiency, and agility (Buckman, 2025). Remote access software helps users securely access a computer from any location. For remote employees or IT support technicians, remote access software can be used to access important information remotely, streamline work processes and enable screen sharing for presentations or troubleshooting (Indeed Editorial Team, 2025c).

Remote access allows employees to work from any location, whether they are traveling, working from home, or even outside of the country. This flexibility can lead to increased productivity and job satisfaction. By enabling remote work, companies can save on costs associated with office space and utilities, while employees save on commuting costs and time. Additionally, tools like remote desktop software enable real-time access to files and applications, making it easier to stay productive. Also, in case of difficulties or challenges at work, employees can take advantage of remote access with the support of their IT team from a distance. Technicians can simply launch a remote connection to their user's device to take control and fix an issue, without needing to physically travel to the device (Jackins, 2025).

All in all, benefits of remote access are numerous as it extends flexibility and efficiency. It empowers employees to stay productive, working in a remote or hybrid format while it facilitates seamless file sharing and teamwork across geographically distributed teams. It also simplifies remote troubleshooting, updates, and monitoring. Remote access ensures operational continuity even during disasters or travel restrictions and it also eliminates the need for travel or an in-person presence (Buckman, 2025).

Time and Task Management Tools

For busy employees with numerous responsibilities which can include taking care of family members in need, time and task management are vital skills.

Time management is the process of consciously planning and controlling time spent on specific tasks to increase how efficiently they are finalized. Good time management can lead to a healthy, balanced lifestyle (Coursera Staff, 2025a).

Task management is the process of planning and completing tasks in the most effective and efficient way. With task management, professionals oversee the whole lifespan of their tasks, from conception to completion, in order to achieve specific goals and objectives. That involves defining tasks, prioritizing tasks by urgency, assigning tasks to other professionals, setting timelines and deadlines, making adjustments and monitoring progress towards set objectives (Noori, 2025).

Considering that many modern jobs involve juggling numerous tasks, tight deadlines, and competing priorities, employees often end up working long hours and risking burnout. Implementing tools that support effective time and task management—such as digital to-do lists, workflow management systems, and scheduling tools—can help better plan daily responsibilities, reduce stress, and improve focus. These tools not only enhance productivity by organizing work more efficiently but also promote a healthier work-life balance by preventing unnecessary overworking. By providing structure, visibility, and reminders, they empower employees to manage their workload more strategically and sustainably.

Popular time and task management tools include Todoist, Harvest and Trello which are widely used applications that can be downloaded on one's laptop or work phone (Dublino, 2025). Use of time and tasks management tools can be reinforced by employers and managers and represent a "company policy", however employees can also take their own initiative and use such tools to support their work and better manage their workload and working time. This can help eliminate work stress and allow professionals to complete tasks on time without the need for longer hours at work.

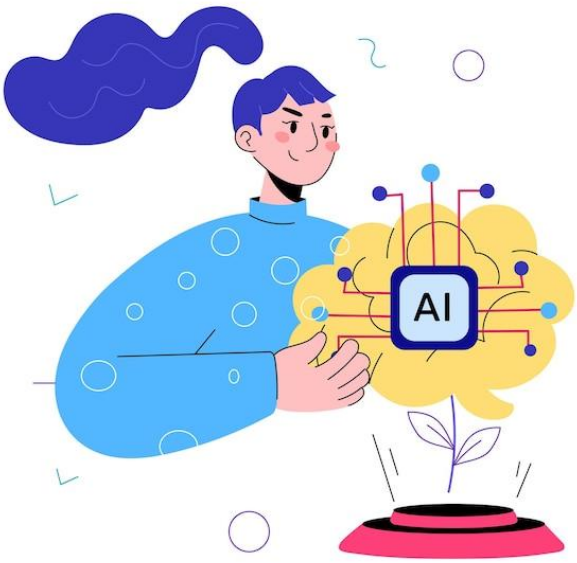
AI tools

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become very popular, very quickly and is playing a crucial role in the modern workplace. AI offers more than access to information. It can summarize, code, reason, engage in a dialogue, and make choices. AI tools can lower skill barriers, helping more people acquire proficiency in more fields, in any language and at any time. AI holds the potential to shift the way people access and use knowledge. The result will be more efficient and effective problem solving, enabling innovation that benefits everyone (Mayer et. al., 2025).

According to the European Commission, "people and businesses should be able to enjoy the benefits of AI while feeling safe and protected" (European Commission, 2024). According to the European AI Strategy, the EU should have a coordinated approach to make the most of the opportunities offered by AI and to address the new challenges that it brings. The EU can lead the way in developing and using AI for good, based on its values and its strengths (European Commission, 2018).

AI is significantly changing the nature of work. Jobs will be created while others will disappear. However, most workplaces will be transformed. Most people in Europe believe that digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, have a positive impact on their jobs and consequently on their quality of life. 62% of Europeans view AI positively at work and 70% believe it improves productivity. While a majority supports using AI to make decisions at work, 84% of Europeans think

that AI requires careful management to protect privacy and ensure transparency in the workplace (European Commission, 2024). More and more companies and organizations are encouraging their employees to use AI tools. The 2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report from Microsoft and LinkedIn indicates that 90% of workers use AI tools to save time, 85% to prioritize work, and 84% to increase their creativity (Coursera Staff, 2025b).



There is a wide variety of AI tools which can help employees in project management, collaboration, scheduling and overall improvement of their productivity. Specifically, AI tools can help professionals reduce the time they spend on daily work tasks such as managing their emails, organizing to-do lists or creating collaborative documents (Coursera Staff, 2025b). AI is widely used by many professionals; however, it is essential to follow company policies and guidelines in relation to entering potentially sensitive information into an AI tool.

Expert AI assistants for knowledge management include ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Notion AI and Claude which use information available on the internet to provide the appropriate answer or generate text. Additionally, there are available AI tools for project management that can help break down projects into tasks, track spent time and plan future workload. These include Zapier, Zoho Projects, and AI Agent. There are also AI tools for scheduling, communication and collaboration but also for transcribing meetings and summarizing topics (Coursera Staff, 2025b).

AI can significantly benefit employees and support overall companies' organization. Through the available tools, different aspects of work can be supported, allowing for effectiveness and efficiency. This is specifically important for employees with care responsibilities who value the reduced time they can spend on specific tasks with the support of AI. However, despite the evident benefits of AI tools and their wide use, there are employers and managers who remain skeptical about the use of AI to complete tasks, generate ideas and content for projects. Indeed, many organizations are following specific guidelines and rules around the use of AI at work. Additionally, the EU is regulating AI as part of its digital strategy to ensure better conditions for the development and use of this technology. The use of artificial intelligence in the EU is regulated by the AI Act – the world's first comprehensive AI law. It aims to make AI development safe, transparent, traceable, non-discriminatory, environmentally friendly, and with an innovation angle (European Union, 2023).

Despite the efforts to regulate AI use, it looks like employees are often seeing only the benefits that AI can provide in their work life and use different tools without informing their employers or managers. Research shows that 78% of AI users are bringing their own AI tools to work, which is even more common at small and medium-sized companies (80%). Also, 52% of people who use AI at work are reluctant to admit to using it for their most important tasks. Even so, 53% of people who use AI at work worry that using it on important work tasks makes them look replaceable (Microsoft & LinkedIn, 2024).

AI is here to stay, and when applied thoughtfully, it has the potential to bring significant benefits to both employers and employees. For employers, AI tools can enhance decision-making, support smooth organizational operation and help with time-consuming tasks. For employees, AI can serve as a powerful tool that reduces workload stress, increases productivity, and supports skill development. When used responsibly, AI can assist in areas such as learning, personal development, and collaboration, creating opportunities for more meaningful and fulfilling work. Employers and managers are encouraged to openly discuss with their employees the use of AI, how it can support their work, and what are the ethical and practical implications of its use to their work.

In summary, digital tools and technologies are very important in the workplace. They can allow for better management of employee's tasks as they provide technical support to help organize, distribute and monitor workload. Digital tools provide managers with the ability to effectively plan, measure, and optimize task distribution, leading to increased productivity and a less stressful work environment for employees. This structured approach fosters better workflow management, improves resource allocation, and supports a healthy work-life balance for employees. Digital skills can also increase flexible working by giving organizations the tools and technical infrastructure for non-traditional work arrangements that make it possible to coordinate, communicate, and collaborate effectively regardless of time or place, through remote working. They can also encourage teamwork and collaboration by providing applications and shared tools that allow team members to work together effectively, even when they have different schedules, locations, or responsibilities. As for time management, tools and systems are available for employees to plan, track, and optimize how they spend their working hours. Lastly, in terms of risk aversion, digital tools and technologies give employers the ability to detect risks early and assess them accurately. If, for example, there is fear of not meeting a deadline due to care responsibilities of an employee, employers and managers can plan accordingly and distribute the workload, while having tools and systems to track task distribution.

The main benefits of the digital tools presented in Unit 3.3 can be summarized as follows:

- **Better organization and prioritization**: time and task management allow employees to break down complex tasks, allocate time effectively, and meet deadlines more consistently.
- **Reduced stress and burnout:** by providing structure and clarity, time and task management helps employees avoid overworking or extending their workday unnecessarily.
- **Work–life integration:** employees can balance professional tasks with personal responsibilities more seamlessly with time and task management.
- **Access to files and resources from anywhere:** Remote access solutions allow employees to retrieve and work on essential documents without needing to be physically connected to the office network.
- **Reliable technical support and sense of security:** With remote access systems, employees can feel reassured that technical issues will be promptly addressed by IT teams, reducing stress and minimizing downtime. This creates a safer and more supportive digital environment that encourages flexible work.

- **Business continuity and inclusivity:** Remote access ensures that employees can remain connected and productive even during disruptions (e.g., illness, caregiving duties, or external crises). It also opens opportunities for employment of professionals living in other cities or even countries.
- **Fair distribution of work:** Project management tools allow managers to fairly assign tasks, ensuring workloads are balanced across the team. This helps prevent employee burnout and supports sustainable work–life balance.
- **Tracking deadlines and potential difficulties:** By observing progress and detecting delays early, project management tools can highlight when employees are struggling to meet deadlines. Managers can then implement flexible solutions, such as adjusted timelines or redistributed tasks, to reduce stress and protect work–life balance.
- **Remote collaboration among employees:** Digital platforms allow professionals to work together effectively without the need for physical presence. This enhances flexibility in daily living, reduces commuting time, and enables individuals to manage their professional and personal responsibilities more efficiently.
- **Adapting work schedules and balancing home duties:** Digital collaboration tools provide employees with the ability to structure their working hours around personal commitments. Asynchronous communication allows employees to work at their own pace and on their own time. This flexibility can be especially beneficial for employees who have other commitments, such as caregiving (Salesforce, 2024).
- **Enhanced employee autonomy and productivity:** The flexibility offered by digital collaboration empowers employees to work in ways that suit their personal circumstances. Research shows that greater autonomy often leads to improved job satisfaction, motivation, and overall wellbeing (Zhou, 2020).
- **Access to a wider talent pool for organizations:** Beyond employee benefits, digital collaboration expands hiring possibilities for employers by removing geographical limitations. This allows employers to attract employees who prioritize flexible work arrangements.

As work and personal life become increasingly intertwined, it's vital for employers to support their teams in achieving a healthy balance. This doesn't mean separating work and life entirely but rather integrating the two in a way that allows for harmony and productivity. In today's digital age, achieving work-life balance is both a personal and organizational priority. Flexible work options supported by remote access solutions offer a pathway to this balance. As organizations continue to adapt to the evolving needs of their workforce, investing in practical and versatile remote access solutions is not just a smart move, it's essential (Butler, 2024).

Technology is moving fast and the range of digital tools available is vast. These tools are highly beneficial, increasing the productivity of employees and making their workload easier to manage. Especially for employees with care responsibilities, digital tools can promote work-life balance and support flexible and remote work with opportunities for growth and learning. The tools available can help plan and manage daily tasks while working efficiently and effectively.

Interactive activities

Activity 1: Open discussion on application of digital tools in your workplace.

Aim of Activity:
Reflection on application of digital tools in the workplace. Exchange of ideas and practices.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Divide participants into smaller groups of 3-4 individuals.

Step 2: Ask them to spend 25-30 minutes discussing about digital skills and their application in their workplace and exchange experiences and ideas from their organisation around different technologies and tools they have used or are currently using (It is suggested to provide participants with a table of categories, to support them during group work:

Communication	
Recruitment	
Feedback	
Learning	
Data	

Step 3: Provide them with the prompt questions: *What digital skills are you using? How do digital technologies and tools strive for the work-life balance of your employees? How can these tools benefit employees with care duties, especially women? What challenges are you experiencing?*
Step 4: Ask each group to present some key points from the discussion to the whole group.
Step 5: Allow time for open discussion and group reflection.

Links/Resources:
-

Activity 2: Demonstration of a digital tool.

Aim of Activity:
To understand the practical use of a digital tool.

Steps (prompt questions/scenario):
Step 1: Divide participants into smaller groups of 3-4 individuals. Step 2: Ask them to spend 15-20 minutes to choose a digital tool they have learned from the training or a tool they are using in their workplace and has proven very beneficial for their employees. You can also choose the tool you would like to present as a trainer (ex. Trello, Asana, Monday, Slack).
Step 3: Each group will present the chosen tool to the plenary. Open the software/application on a big screen using a projector. To support the participants, you can share with them the following key requirements for their presentation:
Name and category of the tool:
Benefits: mentioning factors such as friendly user, impact to their work
Limitations: mentioning factors such as technical failures, security and privacy issues

Step 4: Allow time for participants to reflect on the tool and share their ideas of how it could promote work-life balance and enhance flexibility of employees with care responsibilities. Ask them to refer to their workplace and how the tools are being used/could be used.

Links/Resources:
https://trello.com/
https://asana.com/
https://monday.com/
https://slack.com/

Key Takeaways of Module 3

Module 3 explores the intersection of gender, caregiving, workplace inclusion, and digital transformation. It highlights how long-term care across Europe remains deeply gendered, with women disproportionately responsible for both unpaid and paid caregiving roles. Cultural norms, intersectional inequalities, and underinvestment in formal care services intensify this burden. At the same time, soft and hard skills play a vital role in creating inclusive, flexible, and supportive work environments that recognize and accommodate caregiving responsibilities.
By developing empathy, communication, and digital competencies, organizations can foster fairer care distribution, improve employee well-being, and promote gender equality. Soft skills strengthen collaboration and inclusion, while hard skills—especially digital tools—enable flexible work arrangements and task management. Together, these competencies support a sustainable workplace culture that values care and productivity.

- Women remain the primary providers of both formal and informal long-term care across Europe.
- Cultural norms and gender stereotypes reinforce unequal caregiving expectations and occupational segregation.
- Intersectional factors like age, migration, and socio-economic status intensify caregiving burdens.
- Stigma around care responsibilities limits recognition and access to support.
- Underfunded formal LTC systems increase reliance on informal care, especially from women.
- Soft skills—empathy, communication, adaptability—are essential for inclusive and supportive workplaces.
- Interpersonal skills help distribute workloads fairly and prevent caregiver isolation.
- Ethical values and integrity build trust and reinforce fairness in workplace culture.
- Role plays and team challenges show how soft skills apply in real-world scenarios.
- Hard skills enable flexible work through digital collaboration and task management tools.
- Managers can better support employees by monitoring workloads through digital systems.
- Time and task tracking tools help caregivers balance work and personal responsibilities.
- Digital literacy enhances productivity and supports remote work opportunities.
- Supporting caregivers with tech-based solutions helps reduce gender gaps in employment.
- Inclusive skill development contributes to long-term organizational resilience and sustainability.

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Annex I

Materials for participatory activities

Activity 1: Back-to-back drawing

Figure 1:

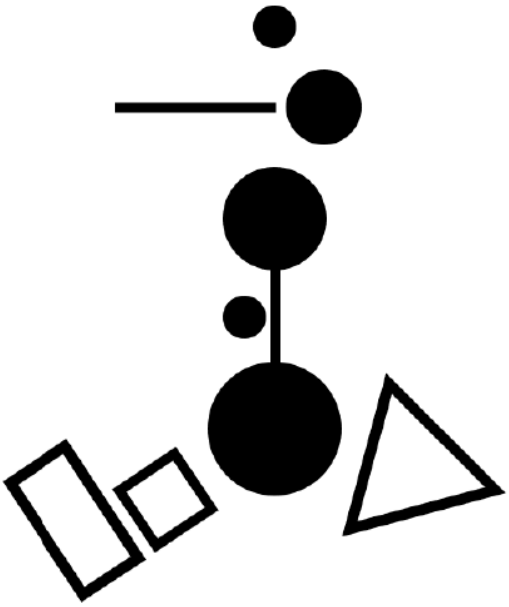


Figure 2

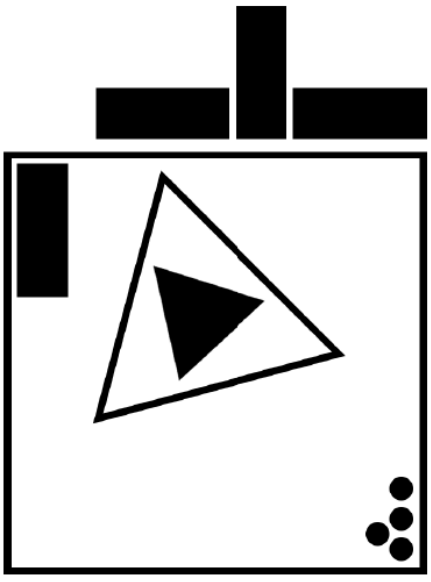
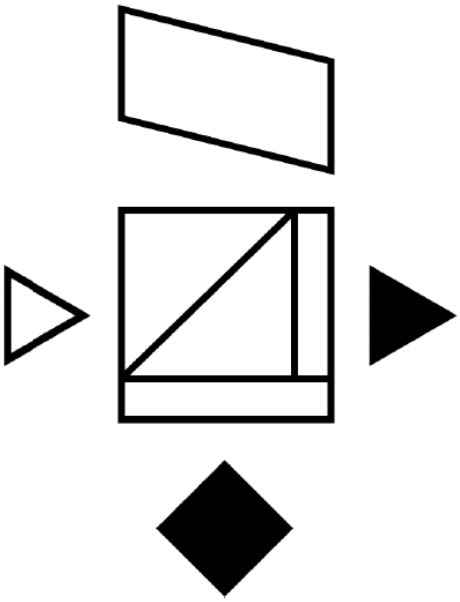
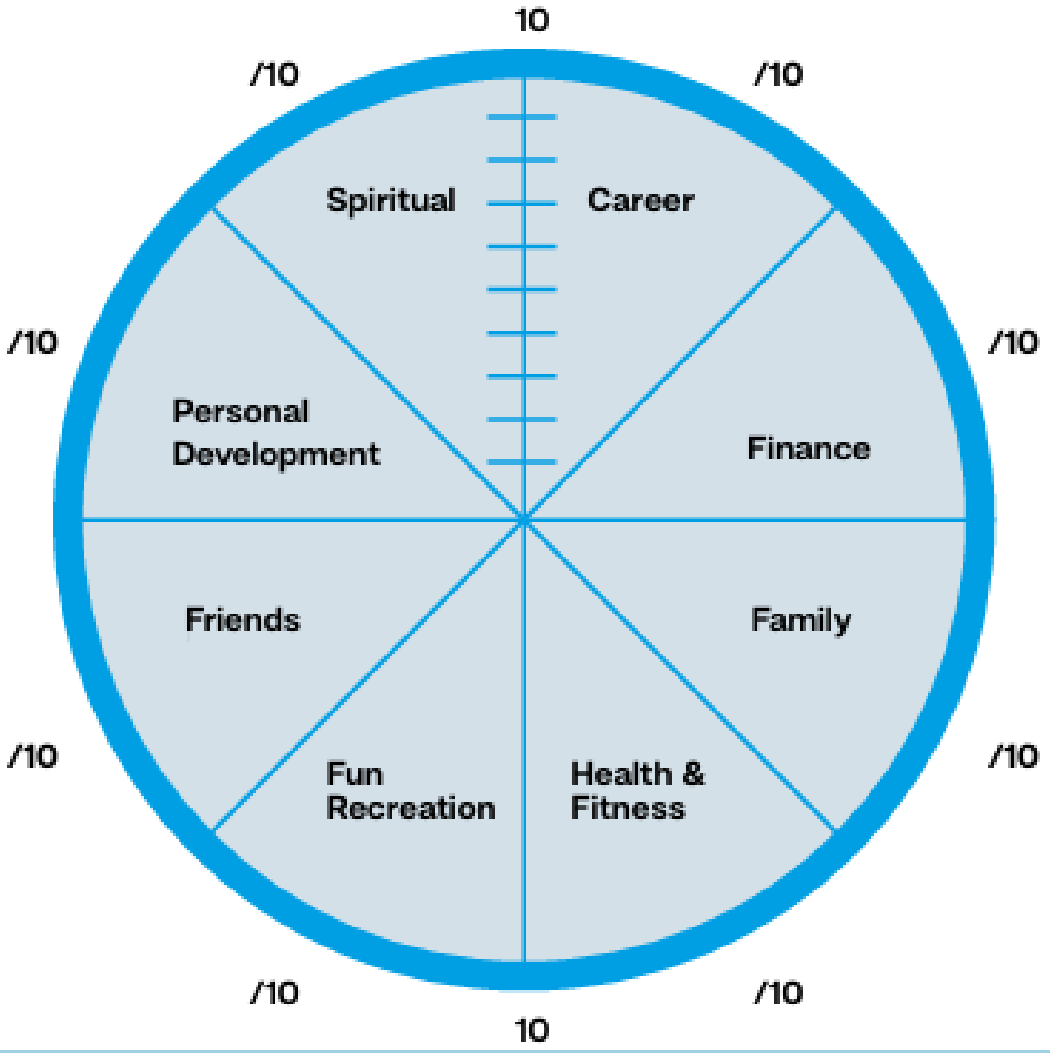


Figure 3



<u>Activity 2:</u> The coaching wheel



<u>Activity 3:</u> Puzzle pack for "Break the care code" activity

Final Solution: The Code = 7 – 4 – 1 – 9

Puzzle 1 **Title**	*Mixed cipher (Digit 7)*
Question	*Decode the following message:* *13-1-11-5 / 9-14-3-12-21-19-9-22-9-20-25*
Response	*MAKE INCLUSIVITY*
Feedback	Correct! Each number corresponds to a letter (A=1, B=2, etc.). Incorrect — look again at the cipher. Decoded text = MAKE INCLUSIVITY. **Instructions**: Count the syllables MAKE (1) + IN-CLU-SIV-I-TY (6) = 7. **Digit = 7**

Clue given separately to some team members: Each number corresponds to a letter (A=1, B=2, etc.).

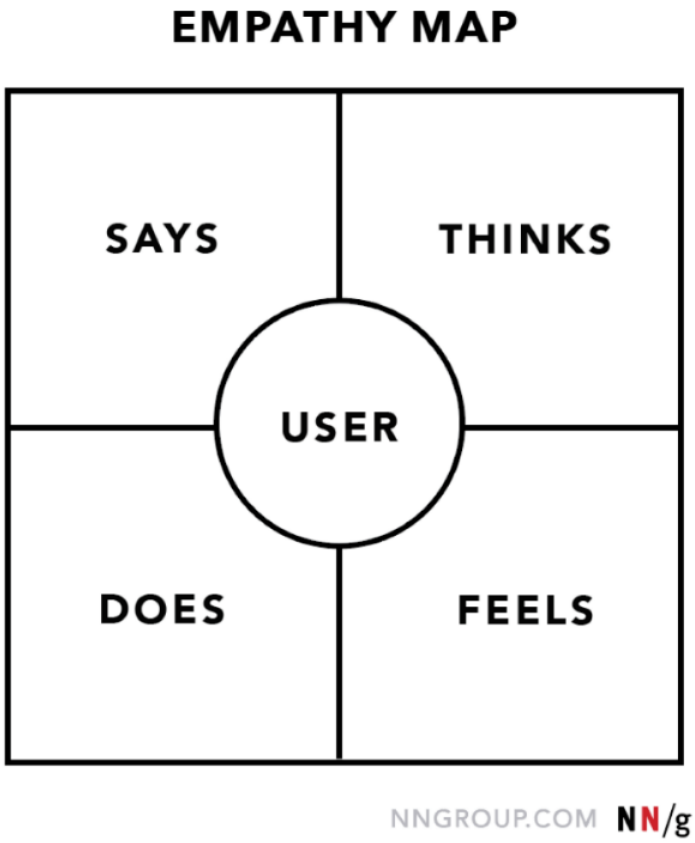
Puzzle 2 **Title**	*Advanced logic grid (Digit 4)*
Question	Match each colleague with their department and arrival time. Four colleagues (Anna, Ben, Clara, David) each work in a different department (HR, IT, Finance, Marketing) and arrive at work at different times (8:00, 8:30, 9:00, 9:30). **Clues:** 1. Anna does not work in Finance. 2. The IT employee arrives last. 3. David arrives before Clara. 4. The Marketing employee is not Ben. 5. The HR employee arrives at 8:00.
Response	Solution: ● Anna = Marketing, 9:00 ● Ben = Finance, 8:30 ● Clara = IT, 9:30 ● David = HR, 8:00
Feedback	**Instruction:** Take the hour of Clara's arrival (9:30). Add the digits (9+3+0 = 12). Subtract 8 = **4**. **Digit = 4**

Puzzle 3 **Title**	*Math sequence (Digit 1)*
Question	Fill in the missing number: 2 – 6 – 18 – ? – 162
Response	Pattern: 2 × 3 = 6 6 × 3 = 18 18 × 3 = 54 54 × 3 = 162 Missing number = **54**
Feedback	**Instruction:** Add the digits of the missing number (5+4) = **9**, then subtract 8 = **1 Digit = 1**

***Clue given to another member:** The sequence multiplies alternately by 3 and then by itself.

Puzzle 4 **Title**	*– Riddle + hidden word (Digit 9)*
Question Text	Riddle: I am always in front of you but can never be seen. I can be lost, but never found again. What am I?
Accepted Answer(s)	*The future*
Feedback	**Instruction:** Count the number of letters in the word FUTURE = **6**. Multiply by 1.5 = **9** **Digit = 9**

Activity 4: Empathy map



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