Impact of Emotional Intelligence and Leadership on Employee Outcomes in Greek SMEs

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Abstract: Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up the majority of businesses in Greece and contribute significantly to its economy. The ever-changing business environment puts pressure on employees and leaders to respond to its demands. Employees and leaders influence each other through the expression of their emotions. The main objectives of this study focused on identifying the components of employees' emotional intelligence (EI), leaders' leadership style, and the effect of leaders' EI on employees' outcomes such as team collaboration, effective communication, job satisfaction, commitment, performance and resilience. The effect of demographic characteristics on EI was examined, too. A quantitative survey was distributed across Greek SMEs with a sample of 102 participants. The findings indicated that self-awareness and self-regulation outweighed the other components of employees' EI, while the participative and humanistic leadership styles prevailed over the visionary style of leaders. Leaders' EI had a positive effect on the examined employees' outcomes. Almost all demographic characteristics had no statistically significant effect on EI. The empirical data from the research in this specific geographic and organizational context will enrich the literature review, while the study of the impact of EI and leadership on employees' outcomes will help raise awareness of this relationship and facilitate future investment in its enhancement.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Leadership, Employee outcomes, Greek SMEs, Demographic characteristics

1. Introduction

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) account for about 90 percent of businesses and more than 50 percent of employment worldwide, and characterized as key engines of job creation and economic growth in developing countries (International Finance Corporation, 2024).

Furthermore, the conventional productivity–focused approach to which the contribution of SMEs is linked to low productivity and limited innovative activities puts aside their contribution to local development, domestically generated added value, regional growth, job creation and knowledge generation. Additionally, the explanation of low productivity as an intrinsic feature of SMEs neglects the main drivers of low productivity among which are the unequal access to crucial and strategic resources like finance, technological adoption, digital transformation, national policies, skills empowerment and human capital. Apart from this, human resources (HR) and organizational behavior (OB) in the SMEs environment have a strong influence on low productivity. To this vein, leadership and employees' outcomes could be estimated as crucial drivers to SMEs productivity.

In Greece, even though sometimes SMEs are approached either as a growth obstacle or a structural weakness of its economy, nobody can deny their significant contribution to the entrepreneurship ecosystem (Angelakis & Manioudis, 2025). According to the 2026 SME Country Fact Sheet – Greece, Greek SMEs continued their recovery, with real value added growing by 7.6% and employment by 2.8% in 2025

(https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/circabc-ewpp/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/c971b655-62e1-4190-9daa-ea9961fe3e56/download)

According to European Commission, SMEs category is made up of enterprises which employ fewer than 250 persons with an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million (medium-sized), enterprises with fewer than 50 persons and turnover not exceeding EUR 10 million (small), and enterprises with fewer than 10 persons and turnover not exceeding EUR 2 million (micro)

(https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/smes/sme-fundamentals/sme-definition_en)

In Greece, at the 2025 data the share of micro enterprises is 94.7%, of small 4.7% and of medium 0.5% out of the total of SMEs 99.9%, while 0.1% is for large enterprises. (https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/circabc-ewpp/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/c971b655-62e1-4190-9daa-ea9961fe3e56/download)

A targeted review of recent research on Greek SMEs made evident a tendency on themes such as sustainability, leadership, digitalization and organizational culture change for enhancing SMEs competiveness.

The investigation of some indicative recent research examples concerns: The impact of business communication on sustainability (Kalogiannidis, Syndoukas, Papaevangelou, & Chatzitheodoridis, 2023); the adoption of SDGs strategies in Greek Hospitality SMEs (Agkoli, 2024); the impact of technology on Greek businesses based on key performance indicators-KPIs (Challoumi, Eriotis, & Vasiliou, 2026); the resilience of SME leadership in its navigation of different economic crises, and the perception and rationalization of Greek SMEs concerning their membership in the European Union and its advantages (Choy, Jamail, Rodrigo, Tantisunthorn, & Vijayakumara, 2025); the need for change in organizational culture to unlock its growth potential through transformation, adaptation, and innovation (Boufounou & Argyrou, 2022).

It seems that there is limited empirical research on Greek SMEs concerning EI, leadership and their impact on employees' outcomes, even though, there is a considerable amount of research on the same themes in different countries' context (e.g. Alwali & Alwali, 2022; Lee, Yeh, Yu, & Lin, 2023). Thus, there is ground for going on and the present research pursuits to fill this gap.

In the contemporary era, as leaders have to address the complexity and uncertainty of many challenges in their business environment, their EI plays a vital role while it considers the main concern of all the organizations. There is a wide range of definitions, constructs, and models in the field of EI (McCleskey, 2014) as well as criticisms about their meaning and validation. Mainly, the concept of EI is based on three premises: Emotions play an important role in daily life; people may vary in their ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions; these variances may affect individual adaptation in a variety of different contexts, including the workplace" (Cherniss, 2015). In the workplace, EI increases occupational performance, leadership and organizational productivity (Bharwaney et al, 2011).

Leadership is one of the most complex and multidimensional concepts in the field of management and OB (Yukl, 2013) while the common component to nearly all its classifications is that leadership is an influence process that assists groups of individuals toward goal attainment" (Northouse, 2013). In every organization leaders and followers are part of the leadership process, interact, influence each other, and share emotions, either positive or negative. The identification of the employees' EI is of great value to the employees themselves, and to the leaders the leadership style of whom has an influence on the employees' outcomes.

2. Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Salovey & Mayer (1990) view emotions as organized responses that typically arise in response to an internal or external event which has a positive or negative meaning for the individual. They define EI as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). In a revised definition, EI is "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional meanings, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote both better emotion and thought" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). According to the EI literature the term emotional refers to moods and emotions (George, 2000).

Feelings (both emotions and moods) play an important role in leadership and influence its effectiveness (George, 2000). Since EI has been suggested to possess stronger and greater reliability in predicting leadership effectiveness, more interest in research and development of models toward establishing the relationship between EI and leadership effectiveness emerged (Tan, Voon, & Ngui, 2022). These namely were "the Ability Model of EI" (Mayer et al, 2016), "the Mixed Model of EI" (Bar-On 1997), and "the Competence Model of EI" (Goleman, 1995), which consists of five components, self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy and social skills.

Leadership has been defined in so many different ways that they are almost as numerous as the people who have attempted to define it (Stogdill, 1974). The four key components of leadership, across the wide range of definitions, are as follows: leadership is a process; leadership involves influence; leadership occurs in groups; leadership involves common goals" (Northouse, 2013).

Leadership as a process focuses on influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how it should be done, as well as on facilitating individual and collective efforts to achieve common goals (Yukl, 2012; 2013). Furthermore, it puts emphasis on the reciprocal influence between leaders and followers, whether positive or negative (Yukl, 2012). It is also accepted that leadership is an emotionally charged process, in which a leader can manage their own emotions and demonstrate empathy towards others and, as a result, be more effective in the workplace (Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009).

A leader's leadership style influences employees' performance and the trust they place in their leader, which in itself is a key factor affecting job performance (Lee, Yeh, Yu, & Lin, 2023). Participatory leadership is a democratic form of leadership that involves subordinates in decision-making and the management of the organisation, with the aim of effectively strengthening employees' sense of ownership (Wang, Hou, & Li, 2022). Visionary leadership is characterised by the ability to formulate and instil a clear vision, which gives meaning and purpose to an organisation; this vision is developed and aligned with that of the employees, whilst empowering them to take action (Karwan, Hariri, & Ridwan, 2021). Humanistic leadership is leadership based on the concept of humanism, which, primarily and in the broadest sense, emphasises the dignity and intrinsic value of people in the pursuit of the common good (Gotsis & Grimani, 2024).

To study the impact of EI and leadership on employee performance in Greek SMEs, this study adopted a process-based approach to leadership. The participative, visionary and humanistic leadership styles were selected due to their people-centered orientation. Based on these assumptions, the hypotheses set out below were formulated.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological Approach

A quantitative approach was selected as "it can describe trends, attitudes, and opinions or examine associations among variables and helps researchers to answers different kind of questions such as descriptive, answers about relationships of variables including the predictive ones over time" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The main objectives of this study were to investigate employees' EI (self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, empathy, social skills), their leaders' leadership styles (participative, visionary, humanistic) and the impact of leaders' EI on employees' outcomes (teamwork, effective communication, job satisfaction, commitment, performance and resilience). Furthermore, the relationship between and the influence of demographic characteristics on EI were investigated.

The research was conducted on the basis of the following questions:

1. What are the components of the employees' EI?
2. Do participative, visionary and humanistic leadership styles form part of their leaders' leadership styles?
3. Does leader's EI influence employees' outcomes?
4. How do demographic characteristics influence EI?

The main hypotheses were:

H1: The components of employees' EI are related to the five components of Goleman's model.

H2: The leader's leadership style is related to participative, visionary and humanistic leadership styles.

H3: The leader's EI has a positive influence on employees' outcomes (team collaboration, effective communication, job satisfaction, commitment, job performance, resilience).

H4: There is no difference in the impact of demographic characteristics on EI.

The hypotheses H3 and H4 have relative sub-hypotheses, too.

3.2 Sample, Data Collection and Analysis

The sample consisted of 102 employees at Greek SMEs across various sectors. The exclusion criteria for the study were employment with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and with public-sector enterprises and organizations.

Data collection took place from December 2025 to February 2026 in SMEs operating in different sectors. The questionnaire was distributed via an online survey (using Google Forms, where a digital version of the questionnaire had been prepared) and in accordance with the principles of research ethics. All responses were anonymous, participation was voluntary, and the consent of all participants was required.

The questionnaire used for data collection consisted of four sections. The first section covered demographic details, whilst the remaining three sections covered the research topics, comprising 40 questions. The demographic details of the respondents were: gender, age group, work experience, job position and the enterprise's sector of activity. The second section comprised 12 questions relating to EI (e.g. 'I can easily recognise my own emotions', 'I adjust my behaviour based on other people's emotions', 'I can easily recognise

my colleagues' emotions'). The third section consisted of 12 questions relating to leadership style (e.g. 'My leader encourages participation in decision-making, emphasising teamwork and transparency' (participative style); 'My leader envisions the future and promotes innovation' (visionary style); My leader promotes the professional development of employees (humanistic style). The fourth section comprised 16 questions regarding the leader's EI and its impact on employees' outcomes (e.g. My leader's EI improves my performance; My leader's EI contributes positively to my job satisfaction; My leader's EI improves teamwork). A five-point Likert scale (ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') was used for all dimensions, except for demographic data. The independent variables were the employees' EI, leadership style and the leader's EI, whilst the dependent variables were the employees' outcomes (team collaboration, effective communication, job satisfaction, commitment, job performance, resilience).

The data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to summarise the data, answer the research questions and test the hypotheses.

4. Results and Findings

The reliability and internal consistency of the items were examined using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha was 0.974, which demonstrates an exceptionally high level of reliability (values > 0.9 are considered excellent), confirms the internal consistency of the items and the accuracy of the measurements in capturing the intended constructs. The reliability analysis for each item showed that the adjusted correlations between items and the total score ranged from 0.215 to 0.882, indicating a satisfactory to very high contribution of the individual items to the overall scale. More specifically, Cronbach's alpha was: 0.975 for items 2, 3, 5, 6, 9 and 12; 0.974 for items 1, 4, 7, 8, 19 and 11; 0.973 for items 13–25 and 28–40; and 0.972 for items 26 and 27. Analysis of the item-total correlations showed that all items contribute positively to the reliability of the scale, whilst the removal of any single item does not substantially improve the reliability index.

The total number of questionnaire respondents was 102 employees of Greek SMEs. The demographic characteristics of the research sample were: the percent of 61.8% consisted of females and 38.2.4% of males. The age distribution of the participants shows a strong concentration in the middle and upper productive ages. Specifically, the largest group of respondents belongs to the age range of 35-45 years (49%). This means that the majority of participants are employees within their mature career phase with a distinct professional identity. Then follows the age group of 45-55 (23.5%), 25-35 (21.6), more than 55 (15%) and 18-25 (4.9%). Most respondents had 20 and more years of work experience (34.3%), from 16 to 20 years (25.5%), from 11 to 15 years (16.7%), from 6 to 10 years (10.8%0 and from 0 to 5 years (12.7%). Concerning the job position, the majority were employees (68.6%), low level managers (13.7) and mid-level executives (9.8%). Concerning the enterprise activity, service provision (60.8%), health services (20.8%) and product trade (18.6).

The total number of respondents was 102 employees of Greek SMEs. The demographic characteristics of the research sample were as follows: 61.8% were women and 38.2 %were men. The age distribution of the participants shows a strong concentration in the middle and upper working-age groups. Specifically, the largest group of respondents belongs to the 35–45 age groups (49%). This means that the majority of participants are employees who are at a mature stage in their careers and have a distinct professional identity. This is followed by the 45–55 age groups (23.5%), 25–35 years (21.6%), over 55 years (15%) and 18–25 years (4.9%). Most respondents had 20 or more years' work experience (34.3%), between 16 and 20 years (25.5%), between 11 and 15 years (16.7%), between 6 and 10 years (10.8%) and between 0 and 5 years (12.7%). Regarding job position, the majority were employees (68.6%), lower-level managers (13.7%) and middle-level managers (9.8%). In terms of enterprise activity, the sectors were service provision (60.8%), health services (20.8%) and trade in goods (18.6%).

With regard to the first question, employees' EI is characterised by the following components: self-awareness, self-regulation (self-control, mindfulness), intrinsic motivation, social sensitivity (empathy), social skills (communication, influence, teamwork). In conclusion, the participants demonstrated a high level of self-awareness (83.3 per cent) and self-regulation (70.6 per cent).

With regard to the second research question, the participants demonstrated elements of participatory, visionary and humanistic leadership styles. The participatory and humanistic styles predominated over the visionary style, with percentages of 56.9 per cent and 54.9 per cent, respectively.

With regard to the third research question, there was found to be a positive effect of the leader's EI on employees' outcomes (teamwork, effective communication, job satisfaction, commitment, performance and

resilience), with high percentages observed in teamwork, performance and communication (57%, 55% and 60%, respectively).

With regard to the fourth research question, namely the effect of demographic characteristics on EI, the results of the ANOVA showed that gender, age, work experience and sector of activity do not have a statistically significant effect on emotional intelligence. However, job position appears to have a small, albeit not entirely significant, effect on emotional intelligence ($\eta^2 = 0.087$). Further details regarding the effect of demographic characteristics on EI are presented in the tables below.

Table 1: Emotional intelligence and gender

Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Overall Model	4.73	1	4.73	3.16	0.079	
Gender	4.73	1	4.73	3.16	0.079	0.031
Residuals	149.79	100	1.50			

Table 2: Emotional intelligence and age group

Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Overall Model	5.52	4	1.38	0.899	0.468	
Age Group	5.52	4	1.38	0.899	0.468	0.036
Residuals	149.00	97	1.54			

Table 3: Emotional intelligence and work experience

Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Overall Model	2.85	4	0.712	0.456	0.768	
Work experience	2.85	4	0.712	0.456	0.768	0.018
Residuals	151.67	97	1.564			

Table 4: Emotional intelligence and job position

Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Overall Model	13.4	4	3.35	2.31	0.064	
Job position	13.4	4	3.35	2.31	0.064	0.087
Residuals	141.1	97	1.45			

Table 5: Emotional intelligence and enterprise sector activity

Factor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2
Overall Model	8.26	5	1.65	1.08	0.374	
Enterprise's sector activity	8.26	5	1.65	1.08	0.374	0.053
Residuals	146.26	96	1.52			

Where df =degrees of freedom, **η^2 =**the proportion of variance in a dependent variable explained by a predictor variable

The research hypotheses were all confirmed.

5. Limitations, Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

The sample size is one of the main limitations of this research study. Future studies with a larger and more representative sample could enhance the generalisability of the findings and enable the investigation of differences between sub-groups, such as different hierarchical levels, industry sectors or types of organisations. Another limitation was the use of convenience sampling rather than random sampling, which also prevents generalisations to other populations.

The findings of this study have certain implications for practice, society and research. An analysis of leaders' EI and its impact on employee performance could encourage managers to pay greater attention to it and organisations to invest in programmes to develop it. Managers in SMEs can choose the appropriate combination of leadership styles in order to foster high-quality social relationships linked to positive outcomes for employees. As organisations reflect the values and behaviours of the people who lead them and work for them (Grojean et al. 2004), organisations with leaders and employees who possess EI could attract other employees to work with them. Finally, compared with research conducted in different countries and cultural contexts (Shaari et al., 2023), this study provides empirical data within this specific geographical and organisational context, helping to bridge the research gap observed in the relevant literature.

Future research could further explore the relationship between leadership and certain other variables, by examining additional factors and analysing mediating or moderating factors, such as organisational culture, burnout, emotional flexibility, commitment, resilience and well-being. Combining qualitative research approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of EI and leadership on employees' outcomes. Furthermore, self-reports from senior executives could also prove useful in correlating the views of both sides, with a view to studying the convergence or divergence of opinions. Future research could broaden the theoretical framework by incorporating other leadership theories, such as authentic, ethical, empowering or servant leadership. A comparative examination of different leadership approaches could reveal which form of leadership is most effective in different organisational environments or working conditions within SMEs.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

SMEs are drivers of competition and key catalysts for job creation and economic growth in developing countries (International Finance Corporation, 2024). In Europe, 99% of businesses are SMEs, which provide jobs for more than 85 million European citizens and contribute to a sustainable and digital economy, which is central to Europe's competitiveness (https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/smes_en).

In Greece, the majority of the economy consists of SMEs, and a prerequisite for their growth (as is the case for all SMEs across Europe) is access to critical resources, such as investment, finance, technology and national policies. In addition to these resources, productivity in SMEs depends on leadership, EI among both employees and managers, and their impact on employee performance, which is the main focus of this research study.

Some of the findings of this study are consistent with those of other research studies. One such study is that by Lee et al (2023), who examined the relationship between EI, leadership style and employee performance. Their results show that a leader's EI enhances both employees' trust and commitment, factors that are directly related to job performance. The importance of EI and work performance was highlighted in another study, which emphasised EI as a critical factor that significantly influences various aspects of work performance' (Mrisho & Mseti, 2024).

The role of EI in organisational leadership was examined by the researcher Iyer (2025). The findings revealed the following: emotional intelligence skills significantly enhance decision-making, promote employee engagement and improve team performance; EI has a positive influence on leadership and its effectiveness; leaders with EI are able to resolve conflicts and enhance productivity and stronger team collaboration.

Moreover, the findings of this study are consistent with research carried out in different professional and cultural contexts. A recent study in a different cultural context, conducted by Shaari et al (2023), found that the three dimensions of EI (social skills, empathy and motivation) are significantly associated with employee performance. Another study in the field of education showed that the EI of primary school teachers have a positive impact on their interactions with their team members and their professional performance (Lu & Chen, 2024). Although these studies concern different work environments, their conclusions reinforce the generalisability of the findings and suggest that the importance of EI, leadership and job performance is not limited to a single academic field or organisational context.

EI plays a significant role in work-related processes and organisational outcomes, such as leadership effectiveness and job performance (Cherniss, 2015). EI influences the performance of leaders and employees in today's rapidly evolving business landscape. There is no doubt that leaders and employees who possess EI will enable teams to thrive, be better prepared to cope with the pressures imposed by a changing work environment, and demonstrate resilience in dealing with uncertainty, stress and various ambiguous situations (Khan, 2023).

EI is linked to effective leadership, particularly when this is defined by five key elements, namely: setting collective goals and objectives; fostering a sense of appreciation; generating and sustaining enthusiasm, self-confidence, optimism, cooperation and trust; encouraging flexibility in decision-making and change; establishing and maintaining a meaningful identity for an organisation (George, 2000). Indeed, the role of EI in leadership effectiveness is indisputable and non-negotiable. Leaders and followers are, in a sense, interdependent, and a good understanding of their emotions on both sides is of great value, with people-centred leaders being effective and followers being productive, satisfied and committed.

Ethics Declaration: An ethical clearance was required. Approval of permission to conduct this research dated the 3rd of April 2025 was issued by the National Bioethics Committee of the country to which the AF belongs.

AI Declaration: No AI tools were used.

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