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INSIGHTS FROM WOMEN INDEPENDENT DISTRIBUTORS WORKFORCE SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN NETWORK MARKETING

Building on the existing literature on network marketing, this exploratory study represents an initial attempt to assess the social sustainability of the workforce (WSS) in network marketing direct selling organizations (NMDSOs). A questionnaire was developed based on a conceptual framework that examines the influence of business models and practices, interpersonal work environments typical of personal networks (known as *downlines*), and individual wellbeing on WSS. The survey was administered to the entire female population of Herbalife Italy networkers. The results indicate a high level of perceived social sustainability and help rank the relative importance of each macro- and micro-level criterion in the framework, offering insights into the key factors that promote WSS in NMDSOs.

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY//NETWORK MARKETING//DIRECT SALES//WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE



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INTRODUCTION

Unlike environmental sustainability, social sustainability in the workplace is a relatively recent concept that is still being defined and explored (Grum and Babnik, 2022). Its relevance has grown in recent years in response to multiple factors. For example, recent technological developments are making many traditional roles obsolete, while at the same time new occupations are emerging. Although unemployment rates remain high in some countries, many European companies are struggling to find skilled labor. Leading global consulting firms also report a rising number of dissatisfied workers who often seek new professional opportunities. What's more, the pandemic seems to have contributed to the spread of new employment conditions, frequently associated with job instability, long hours, excessive

workloads, reduced decision-making autonomy, and less support from supervisors (Kawli, 2022). More generally, new generations entering the labor market express different priorities than their predecessors: recent studies show that their occupational choices are driven by a desire for greater work-life balance, as well as opportunities for growth and continuous learning (Pujol-Jover et al., 2020).

The concept of Workforce Social Sustainability (WSS) has been approached in the literature from different angles (Grum and Babnik, 2022). Labor-focused disciplines highlight links to the concepts of *decent, meaningful, and sustainable work* (Forbes-Mewett et al. 2020; Harlin and Berglund, 2021). Numerous research reports emphasize the central role of organizational dimensions in fostering WSS (Grum and Babnik, 2022): corporate culture (Appelbaum et al., 2016), human resource management (Mariappanadar, 2020), and leadership style (DeMatthews and Izquierdo, 2020) are found to be crucial for social sustainability in workplace settings. From this perspective, WSS implies the adoption of policies and practices geared toward preventing burnout, cutting stress-related turnover, and promoting sustainable productivity over time, limiting negative impacts on workers and the organization.

In the face of such a scenario, social sustainability in the context of network marketing offers an interesting opportunity for further investigation because of the specificity of the business model. In Network Marketing Direct Selling Organizations (NMDSOs), in fact, the workforce consists of independent salespeople who, in addition to selling products, are responsible for building and growing their networks.

Despite the global weight of the direct selling industry, there is still limited scientific literature dedicated to the topic. This exploratory study is an initial attempt to measure the main drivers of workforce sustainability in NMDSOs using a dedicated theoretical framework. Our collaboration with Herbalife Italy allowed us to analyze the main factors that influence WSS in network marketing activities (both at macro and micro levels). We also

assessed the perception of these factors by women networkers active in this benchmark company in the industry.

Specifically, we administered a survey exploring the influence on WSS of three macro-dimensions: **(i) firm characteristics and activities, (ii) the interpersonal environment in individual networks (*downline*), and (iii) individual wellbeing.** These three macro-indicators are derived from both existing literature and empirical evidence. Each one was further articulated into micro-indicators, selected according to the unique features of network marketing. The effect of each micro-indicator was evaluated both in relation to its respective macro-indicator and in relation to the overall WSS; this provided a structured, analytical representation of the determinants of social sustainability in the sector.

The results confirm the robustness of our theoretical framework: all selected drivers contribute significantly to the overall social sustainability score. These findings provide useful indications for building a managerial agenda aimed at strengthening the sustainability of the female workforce and, more generally, improving organizational performance (Ko, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social sustainability in the workplace is a relatively new concept, analyzed in the literature with different approaches and with reference to different thematic categories and research areas (Grum and Babnik, 2022). Although an unambiguous definition has not yet been established, some recurring elements trace its boundaries with respect to the broader notion of social sustainability in general.

First, social sustainability incorporates two basic dimensions: social equity and the sustainability of community dynamics (Polese and Stren, 2000; Bram et al., 2006). The latter refers to the ability of society (understood as a collective entity) to maintain vitality, internal cohesion, and wellbeing over time, commonly summarized in

the concept of “community.” From this perspective, notions such as social capital, social cohesion and social exclusion assume a central role in qualifying sustainability. In any case, social equity and sustainable community dynamics are not entirely independent; rather they interact and reinforce each other in the comprehensive sphere of social sustainability.

Even in the corporate context, this distinction retains its relevance. Social sustainability does not end with equity between individuals; instead it also encompasses the structural and relational dimensions that characterize the collective workforce. At the same time, workforce sustainability is only one component of the broader social sustainability of the enterprise, as it also involves other stakeholders such as investors, entrepreneurs, managers, customers and suppliers.

In considering factors that influence worker wellbeing and satisfaction, we must look beyond economic sustainability. Indeed, dimensions such as emotional, physical, and social wellbeing, along with the sense of accomplishment and happiness associated with work, are central in creating a sustainable work environment (Bittencourt Bastos, 2023). The ultimate goal of such an environment is often equated to attaining a state of occupational happiness. This concept is difficult to measure objectively, but it is closely linked to individual motivation, self-awareness, spirituality, and the ability to attribute meaning to one’s work activity (Awada, 2019). In an attempt to systematize the complexity of factors that define an ideal workplace, Eurofound (2021) proposes a framework consisting of seven dimensions: (i) physical environment; (ii) work intensity; (iii) quality of work time; (iv) social environment; (v) job content and skills; (vi) job outlook; and (vii) pay.

One of the main reasons why the social dimension of sustainability has long been neglected lies in the inherent difficulty in conceptualizing it (Burton, 2003) and (even more complicated) measuring it. Attempts to assess the social sustainability of the workforce so far have often proven to be either overly limited or poorly

transferable to practice. This highlights the need to adapt measurement tools to the specifics of each sector or organizational model. Although such an approach may reduce comparability between different contexts, it is now the most effective strategy for achieving an accurate, contextualized, and operationally relevant understanding of workforce social sustainability.

Job quality, job satisfaction, and sustainable work environments

The vast literature on the ideal workplace offers a detailed picture of the main factors that contribute to employee satisfaction. An organization can be considered sustainable from a workforce perspective when successfully combines high levels of productivity with positive employee perceptions of the work environment (Eurofound, 2021). The Eurofound report draws attention to the close link between job satisfaction and perceived sustainability among employees.

From this standpoint, job satisfaction is often the result of the interaction between company policies and practices that act on two main dimensions: employment conditions and the possibility of reconciling work and family life. Sorribes, Celma, and Matínez-García (2021) identify sixteen variables that significantly affect the level of employee satisfaction: work organization, career opportunities, feedback and evaluation by superiors, the nature of duties performed, personal development, autonomy and independence, degree of participation, motivation, hours and flexibility, breaks during the workday, vacation, contractual stability, health and safety, access to training, and social benefits. All these elements help to determine the level of sustainability of the workforce.

Since work profoundly affects quality of life, mapping out balanced boundaries between the professional and private spheres is essential for organizations that wish to promote elevated employee satisfaction (Ko, 2021). However, the relative weight of different factors that contribute to wellbeing at work may vary depending on the context: for example, in times of economic crisis,

workers tend to prioritize employment stability over aspects such as opportunities for professional advancement (Sorribes, Celma and Martínez-García, 2021).

Among the most critical factors impacting the quality of working life is employment insecurity. As a result of the profound changes induced by the pandemic, many people have experienced a deterioration in working conditions, characterized by contractual insecurity, increased stress, reduced wages, extended working hours, task overload, loss of operational autonomy, and less support from supervisors (Myhill et al., 2021). Environmental factors such as noise or lack of privacy also contribute negatively to job quality. In addition, longer workdays, indefinite hours, and high demands are strongly associated with higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction (Barrena-Martinez et al., 2018). In contrast, effective internal communication strengthens employees' trust in management, fosters a more open and inclusive organizational climate, and gives a sense of being heard. Clear and transparent communication also helps to alleviate stress, uncertainty, and anxiety with respect to the future (Dhone and Sarwoko, 2022), with positive effects on job satisfaction and, consequently, job performance.

Studies show that a good quality of work life is correlated with higher levels of satisfaction, performance and lower turnover (Ko, 2021). These benefits also extend to the private sphere, triggering a positive effect known as *spillover*: a favorable emotional state experienced in the work context tends to be reflected in extra-work areas such as family, leisure, relationships, health, and finances. As Ko (2021) points out, "a happy employee is a productive, dedicated and loyal employee." More recent research confirms that job characteristics, active involvement, and a sense of organizational belonging positively influence job satisfaction, while stress and unhealthy lifestyles exert a negative impact (Gumasing and Ilo, 2023). Consequently, an organization concerned with the health and wellbeing of its employees should focus on three key priorities:

- a) An engaging and collaborative environment based on teamwork.
- b) Opportunities for professional and personal growth, supported by well-defined career plans.
- c) Corporate sustainability, meaning environmental protection, community wellbeing, ethical work practices and sustainable procurement.

These elements have a positive impact on four key dimensions of wellbeing:

- a) Emotional wellbeing.
- b) Health and physical wellbeing, that is, not only in relation to the material environment (noise, air quality), but also to stress generated by organizational culture, processes and relational dynamics.
- c) Social wellbeing, which translated into trust in management and quality of interpersonal relationships within the organization.
- d) Job satisfaction and happiness, associated with the perception of value and meaning attributed work.

To promote workforce sustainability, companies must distinguish between short-term and long-term policies. In the short term, it is crucial to create an environment that fosters motivation, competence, and internal consistency; in the long term, evolutionary strategies must be formulated that can develop these potentials. Since the profile of the ideal worker is not constant over time, companies should not only enhance but also cultivate the competencies of the workforce (McKinsey, 2020). This implies adopting targeted training, as well as personal and professional development strategies.

Network marketing, job satisfaction, and social sustainability

Network marketing has been shown to contribute to job creation by providing individuals with opportunities for financial independence and a stable source of income (Sobaih, Ghannam and Aliedan, 2021). Despite the economic significance of the field and the support it has received from well-

known gurus internationally, scholarly output on the topic of direct selling and network marketing remains limited and, in part, controversial (Guerini and Minelli, 2016, 2018; Gross, 2008, 2019, 2023).

Coughlan and Grayson (2001) explain that network marketing organizations differ from traditional retail channels. NMDSOs are businesses that rely largely – if not exclusively – on personal selling. They adopt a compensation model that rewards salespeople for both the sales they make and the new promoters they recruit. The latter constitute their downline, i.e., small groups of independent salespeople who work closely together, linked by shared economic interests (Albaum and Peterson, 2011; Choudhary and Kamal, 2013).

The remuneration of independent distributors depends on commissions and bonuses from both direct and indirect sales generated within their downline. What differentiates NMDSOs from more traditional forms of direct sales is precisely the multilevel model, in which an individual's income is also influenced by the performance of the people they recruit. In sum, sales and recruitment activities jointly contribute to the income of network marketers (Kumar et al., 2024). A further peculiarity of these organizations lies in the fact that most NMDSOs do not invest in advertising, nor do they have physical outlets, making motivation and performance of the sales network determinants of the success of the distribution model (Sourav Jain, Singla, and Shashi, 2015).

In network marketing, the sponsor (or *upline*) performs a leadership function vis-à-vis their *downline*, taking responsibility for training. This organizational configuration ensures that new members receive ongoing support, without being left alone to deal with the system. In the context of the analysis of multilevel marketing (MLM), Schiffauer (2018) identifies several motivations that drive people to engage in this type of activity: a sense of obligation, the expectation of mutual support, group pressure, and individual aspiration to improve their economic condition. Indeed, network marketing typically develops in a collaborative context, in

which the community dimension plays a central role (Polese and Stren, 2000; Bram et al., 2006).

Personal interaction constitutes a cornerstone of this model. In direct selling, value for the customer arises precisely from the interpersonal relationship and dialogue established with the salesperson. Products are distributed through extensive networks of independent salespeople, characterized by strong social ties. Corporate events, such as conventions and training workshops, take on a strong social value, becoming central occasions in the professional and relational life of network marketers (Gross, 2008).

However, a portion of the literature adopts a critical stance toward network marketing, specifically analyzing the behavioral dynamics that characterize NMDSOs. Some authors have likened this model to something like a cult (Bhattacharya and Mehta, 2000), although this label should not be interpreted literally. According to this perspective, the high level of community cohesion tends to override economic rationality, reducing the propensity of members to critically question their own involvement (Gross et al., 2023). Despite perplexities related to economic sustainability for those who devote numerous hours per week to this activity (Bradley, 2021; Backman and Hanspan, 2022), some alternative interpretations of the low-income levels of some salespeople recognize that many participants consider network marketing a secondary activity and find satisfaction in aspects that transcend the economic dimension. Schiffauer (2018), for example, underscores how the quality and innovativeness of the products can be powerful motivational levers for participants' engagement in multi-level marketing.

The scarcity of scholarly output on NMDSOs does not, to date, allow for a clear picture of the perceptions of network marketers – particularly women, who represent the clear majority of workers in the field. Although some recent research sponsored by SELDIA (the European Direct Selling Association) has begun to address related issues (Ipsos Survey, 2023), there is a lack of systematic research dedicated to the social sustainability of the workforce.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This study aims to make an initial contribution to the academic debate on network marketers' motivations and business model sustainability in the direct selling industry. A clear representation of the drivers of social sustainability perceived by women network marketers can offer important insights into their work experience, accentuating both aspects they perceive as rewarding and potentially critical. The identification of WSS drivers can also guide NMDSOs in setting their strategic priorities, considering that effective sales force management is a key determinant of business success. The specifics of network marketing, deeply rooted in social interaction and personal network building, raise questions about the applicability of traditional managerial models, requiring a targeted adaptation of the WSS concept to this peculiar organizational context.

In light of the above, and considering the multidimensional nature of WSS described in the literature – including the perspective of the worker, the company and the organization as a whole – the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Three macro-drivers – the company, the restricted operating group and personal wellbeing – significantly influence the overall perceived satisfaction/social sustainability of the workforce (WSS).

Based on the empirical evidence supporting the relevance of these macro-indicators, further hypotheses were developed:

H2: The firm is the most influential macro driver of WSS.

This hypothesis is based on the belief that company choice strongly influences perceived WSS.

Since the vast majority of networkers are women, a third hypothesis emerged:

H3: Women consider network marketing a performing sales channel.

From an organizational perspective, and considering the strong interpersonal relationships that characterize network marketing environments, a fourth hypothesis was proposed:

H4: Small group (upline) leaders contribute significantly to the perceived sustainability of work among employees.

Finally, considering recurrent claims that network marketing offers unique characteristics often associated with personal satisfaction, such as flexibility and self-expression, a fifth hypothesis was developed:

H5: For network marketers, wellbeing is primarily related to autonomy and the ability to express oneself fully.

METHODOLOGY

As anticipated, this study takes the form of exploratory research designed to measure the social sustainability of the female workforce in network marketing. Based on the available knowledge on network marketing and WSS, the survey represents an initial attempt to explore and assess the social sustainability of the workforce within NMDSOs.

The analysis is based on an empirical survey conducted in late 2023 targeting Herbalife Italy's freelance workers. The sample was selected from the company's entire population of independent distributors. Each participant received a personalized e-mail invitation with an explanation of the objectives of the study and the link to access the online questionnaire, administered according to CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) methodology. In line with methodological recommendations in the literature, anonymity of respondents was ensured to minimize the most common biases related to self-completion. Prior to the official launch, a pilot phase was conducted on a small subset of participants which served to test the clarity and usability of the questionnaire. Once

the data collection phase was completed, the final sample was evaluated in terms of representativeness with respect to certain demographic and occupational variables, such as age, educational qualification, work experience, and role within the organization.

The questionnaire was designed to collect information and perceptions related to the social sustainability of the workforce, as experienced by the independent distributors. The objective was to analyze the influence on WSS of three macro-indicators which were considered particularly relevant in the context of network marketing:

1. The characteristics and activities of the company.
2. The interpersonal environment of the small groups (downline).
3. Individual wellbeing.

Considering that many network marketers also hold leadership roles in the management of their downlines (sometimes very prominent ones) the questionnaire was divided into separate thematic sections. The first section investigated perceptions of the company as a whole; the second focused on relational dynamics upline/downline, with particular attention to respondents with direct sponsorship experience. The third section examined personal wellbeing in the work environment. In the latter part, respondents were asked to rate the quality of the work environment in relation to variables such as autonomy, quality of personal relationships, opportunities for personal and professional growth, opportunities for self-expression, work-life balance, economic sustainability, and compatibility between one's skills and the demands of the job. The three macro-indicators were analyzed according to their impact on perceived WSS through a series of micro-indicators summarized in Table 1.

To decide on the macro and micro indicators to include in the study, we conducted a thorough review of the literature, not only on the topics of job quality, job satisfaction, and sustainable work environments, but also on the specifics of network marketing. In particular, Gross (2008) points to

several relevant dimensions for compiling the survey:

- a) *Transparency*, reflected in the completeness of information and the frequency of updates about the nature and conditions of work.
- b) *Friendliness and social interaction*, assessed by the level, frequency, and quality of interpersonal relationships.
- c) *Involvement* (Schiffauer, 2018), which equates to a sense of pride, identification, and group membership.
- d) *Mobility* understood as (relative) stability of one's position within the upline/downline structure.
- e) *Collective group activity*, measured by participation in formal teams and sharing of knowledge, skills and tools (Guerini and Minelli, 2018).

Questions on these dimensions were formulated using a 10-point numerical scale, with verbal anchors only at the extremes. This approach made it possible to produce meaningful descriptive statistics and to apply multiple regression models to estimate the impact of individual variables on the perceived social sustainability of the workforce. Compared with traditional Likert scales (ordinal type), this methodology offered greater sensitivity in measurement and superior analytical robustness in determining the relative weight of each factor.

The questionnaire was designed to generate measures consistent with the theoretical dimensions delineated in the literature. Participants were first asked to score their overall satisfaction, which was used as a proxy for perceived WSS. Then, the same dimensions were investigated separately with reference to each of the three macro-drivers (company, group, individual wellbeing) to derive specific mean scores for each indicator. Two-level multiple regression analysis was then conducted: to estimate the influence of each macro-indicator on perceived sustainability; and to assess, within each domain, the impact of individual micro-indicators on satisfaction relative to that domain. To complement this, the value of *Top-2-Boxes* (T2B) and *Top-3-Boxes*

TABLE 1. MACRO CRITERIA AND MICRO VARIABLES MEASURED THROUGH THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Section 1: COMPANY 's BUSINESS MODEL AND POLICIES	Sezione 2: AMBIENTE DI LAVORO NEL GRUPPO DI APPARTENENZA (UPLINE/DOWNLINe)	Sezione 3: BENESSERE PERSONALE
Autonomy-based business model	Social cohesion	Self expression
Social Equity	Sense of belonging	Work/life balance
Meritocracy	Knowledge & tools sharing	Endowment of competences
Policy transparency	Teamwork (task sharing)	Personal growth
purpose impact on population wellness	Group stability	Professional growth
Workers' support through sales tools	Leadership and leader's role	Autonomy
Company's social commitment	Group support	Economic sustainability
Direct sales effectiveness towards customers in terms of customer acquisition		
Direct sales effectiveness towards customers in terms of customer retention		

(T3B) was calculated; these summary indicators express the percentage of respondents scoring 9-10 and 8-10 out of 10, respectively. These metrics are commonly used to represent the level of high satisfaction in a sample.

Although the study focused on female networkers, the questionnaire was structured to be applicable to more heterogeneous future samples as well, allowing comparative analyses by gender, age group, and experience level. The survey was conducted in collaboration with Herbalife from April to June 2023, yielding a total of 1,653 complete responses, representing a response rate of about 17%.

The sample consisted mainly of female Italian network marketers, with 9.3% being international female employees affiliated with the Italian subsidiary. Regarding age distribution:

- 16.2% are between 18 and 35;
- 40.0% between 36 and 50;
- 39.4% between 51 and 65;
- 4.4% are over 66.

In terms of seniority with Herbalife:

- 21.6% have been working for less than 1 year;
- about 30% from 1 to 3 years;

- another 30% from 3 to 10 years;
- the remaining 18.4% for more than 10 years.

As for educational qualification, 2.1% have completed only elementary school, 28.3% have a secondary school diploma, 33.2% hold a university degree, and more than 36% hold a bachelor's degree.

Geographically, 98.5% of the participants reside in Italy, while 1.5% live abroad. Among residents in Italy:

- 41.2% live in the Northwest;
- 21.2% in the Northeast;
- 21.1% in the central regions;
- 15.0% in the South.

Relative to the type of collaboration:

- 64.4% identify themselves as part-time network marketers;
- 35.6% are active full-time or consider Herbalife their primary employer.

The average duration of collaboration is significant:

- Among those with more than one year of experience (78.4%), collaboration lasts and average of 7.8 years

- Among those who have been working for less than a year (21.5%), the average is 5.25 months.

Finally, the sample appears well distributed along the hierarchical scale of the organization: Almost half of the respondents (45.5%) belong to the topmost levels (see Table 2).

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Following the structure of the questionnaire, there are a number of relevant findings. After exploring participants' motivations for engaging in network marketing, the survey examined the perceived influence of the three macro-indicators on WSS (company characteristics and activities, restricted work environment (downline), and personal wellbeing). The results also reveal the contribution of the underlying micro-indicators, offering an articulated representation of the role of each driver in shaping overall satisfaction.

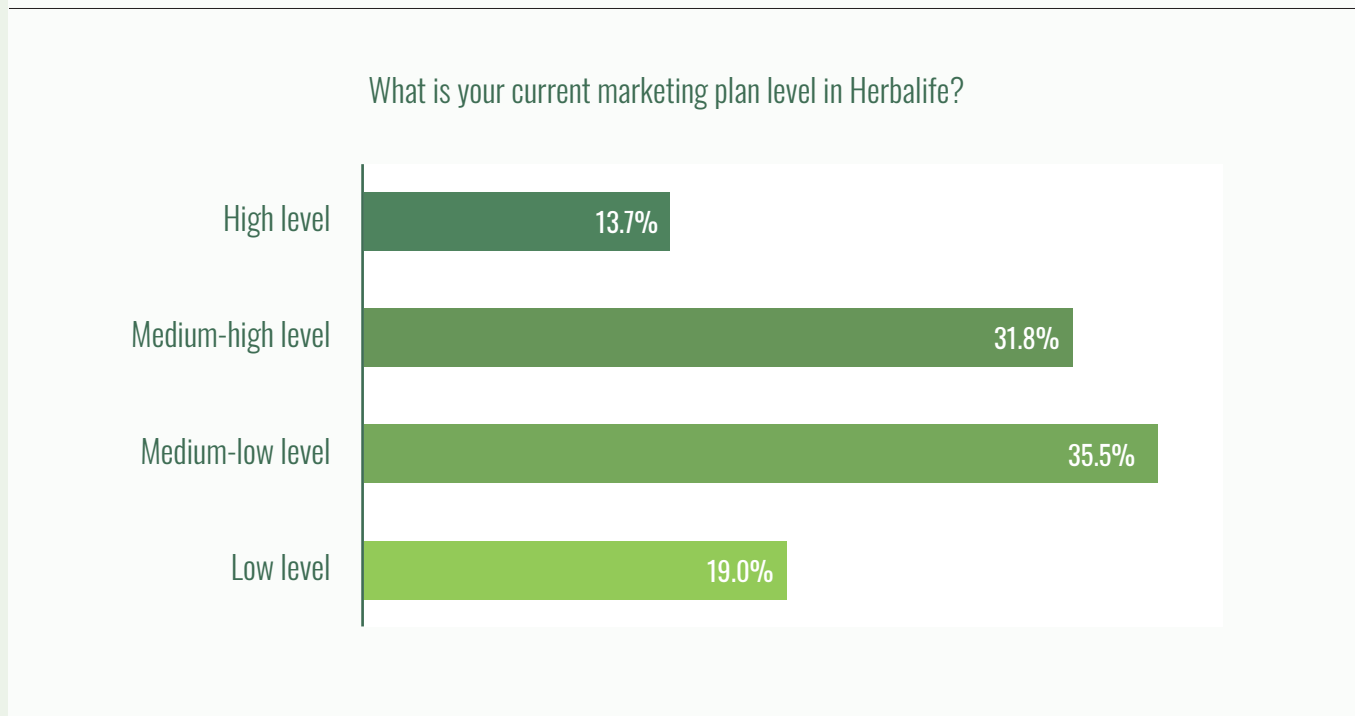
Responses related to motivations for joining Herbalife indicate that sustainability is perceived as

a relevant criterion in choosing a job, alongside other factors such as: alignment with the company mission (40.7%), job autonomy (37.1%), social environment (34.2%), and financial reward (32.5%). These elements emerge as the main motivational levers in the decision to start working with the company.

Next, participants were asked to express their level of satisfaction in relation to three areas: the company as a whole, their reference group (upline/downline), and personal wellbeing. The average scores were high: 8.85 for the company, 8.2 for the group and 9.05 for personal wellbeing, confirming a very positive assessment of the work environment overall and a strong perception of social sustainability. Analyzing the age variable, the company receives the best score in the 18-35 age group (9.09) and the lowest score in the 36-50 age group (8.74). A similar trend is observed for the work group, with the 18-35 bracket expressing the highest rating (8.42) and the 51-65 bracket registering the lowest (8.09).

Of the three macro-indicators, personal wellbeing gets the top average score (see Table 2). However,

FIGURE 1. THE RESPONDENTS' CAREER LEVEL (N = 1,653)



from linear regression analysis (conducted using overall satisfaction as the dependent variable and the three macro-indicators as independent variables), we find that the company is the factor with the most significant influence on perceived WSS, followed by personal wellbeing. The group-related indicator (upline/downline), while positive, shows a smaller impact.

The relational dimension related to upline/downline does not emerge as a determinant in explaining overall satisfaction, suggesting a marginal role compared to the other macro-indicators.

The R-squared value obtained from the overall model is 53.6%, a result considered satisfactory for this type of analysis. This finding confirms the validity of Hypothesis H₁, according to which the three selected macro-drivers explain more than half of the observed variability in overall satisfaction.

Company - Hypothesis H₂

As noted above, the company appears to be the most influential driver on perceived WSS. The strong sense of appreciation for Herbalife is mainly attributed to its perceived positive social impact: the company promotes a healthy lifestyle, offers structured support to the sales force, and adopts a business model that is seen as effective.

From the regression analysis conducted on the individual items, the following statements emerged as most impactful:

- “Herbalife’s business model rewards meritocratically.”
- “Herbalife provides adequate tools to support sales activity (e.g., catalogs, website, etc.).”

The submodel related to the “company” dimension recorded an R-squared of 55.6%, confirming the robustness of the H₂ hypothesis.

On average, perceived social sustainability related to Herbalife is rated 8.85/10, regardless of sociodemographic characteristics or professional seniority of participants. In addition, the data also confirm Hypothesis H₃: people who work for

TABLE 2. MACRO-INDICATORS AND AVERAGE SUSTAINABILITY SCORES

OVERALL SATISFACTION	8.08
MAIN SECTIONS - SATISFACTION	Mean
COMPANY’S BUSINESS MODEL AND POLICIES	8.85
GROUP (UPLINE/DOWNLIN) WORK- ENVIRONMENT	7.91
PERSONAL WELL-BEING	9.05

Herbalife perceive network marketing as an effective sales channel. In fact, the scores for customer retention (9.02) and new customer acquisition (9.09) are among the highest recorded in the questionnaire.

Work Environment - Hypothesis H₄

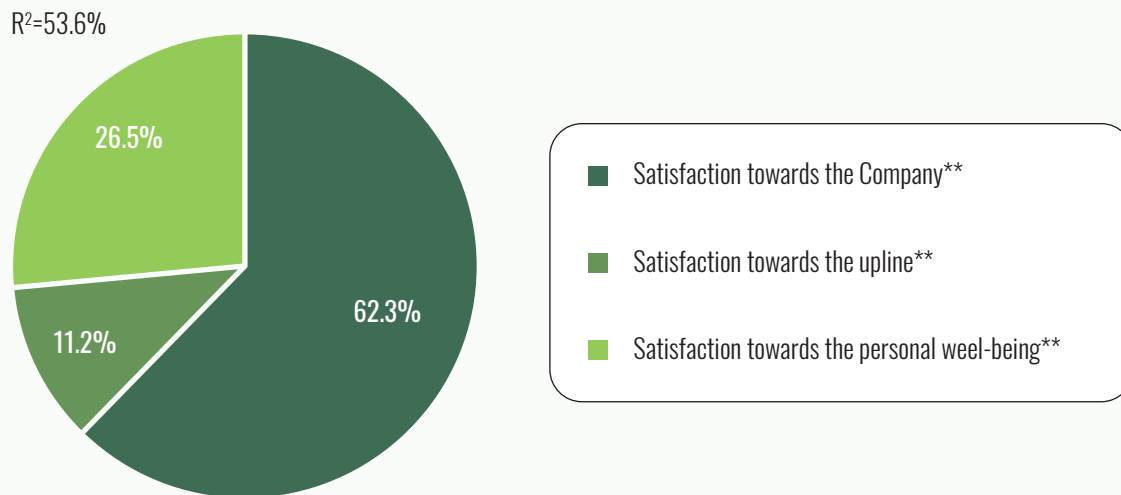
Analysis of the section on personal networks (upline/downline) shows that people at lower career levels place a greater value on this macro-indicator. This trend is confirmed by the T₃B indicators, which increase as career level decreases: 9.3% in the highest levels versus 73.2% in the lowest levels (a finding also confirmed by the T₂B and arithmetic averages). In addition, people who have never sponsored anyone tend to attach more importance to the support received from their upline (see Table 3), indicating that the group environment is particularly relevant in the early stages of the activity.

Qualitative analysis shows that perceived WSS is fostered by the sharing of tools and knowledge, typical of network marketing communities (Guerini and Minelli, 2018), but also by peer support, leadership, a sense of belonging, group stability, and teamwork. All items in this section have high mean scores (Table 4).

TABLE 3. CROSS BETWEEN UPLINE-SATISFACTION AND SPONSORSHIP

	Independent Distributor with downline	Independent Distributor without downline
Average score	8.13	8.28

FIGURE 2. LINEAR MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS – IMPACT OF EACH WSS MACRO INDICATOR ON THE OVERALL SATISFACTION TOWARDS HERBALIFE (N = 1,653)

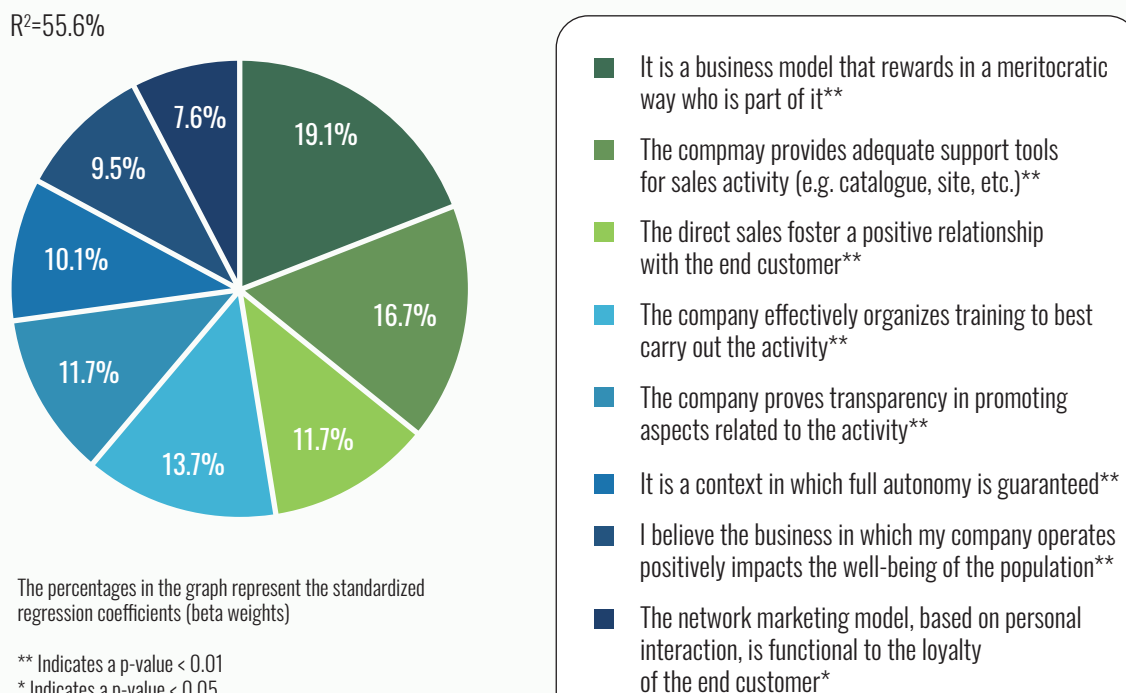


The percentages in the graph represent the standardized regression coefficients (beta weights)

** Indicates a p-value < 0.01

* Indicates a p-value < 0.05

FIGURE 3. LINEAR MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS – IMPACT OF EACH MICRO VARIABLE ON THE OVERALL SATISFACTION TOWARDS THE COMPANY (N = 1,653)



The percentages in the graph represent the standardized regression coefficients (beta weights)

** Indicates a p-value < 0.01

* Indicates a p-value < 0.05

TABLE 4. WSS AND THE ROLE OF THE GROUP

Statement	Mean
Within my Group I receive/transfer the right tools to carry out our work in the best possible way	8.34
In the event of a request for help, the members of the group are supported by all members	8.33
We rely on the leader (upline) to resolve any business issues	8.23
Within the Group there is a high sense of belonging	7.95
The level of social cohesion within my working group is high (our relations are intense)	7.63
Most of the members of my group have been working with Herbalife for some time	7.49
Within the Group we work by dividing the tasks (as in a real team)	7.38

Regression analysis identifies the most relevant variables: the leader's role as problem solver; direct support offered to group members; and perceived sense of belonging and cohesion. The model records an R-squared of 48.8%, confirming hypothesis H4.

Regarding the downline-specific component, the results appear more nuanced. The explanatory variables show a similar impact on each other, with group cohesion as the predominant factor. In this case, the R-squared stands at 35.2%, a lower value that suggests the need for further investigation.

Personal wellbeing - Hypothesis H5

In the third section, devoted to personal wellbeing, top marks went to human relations (9.09); autonomy (9.02); and personal growth (8.96). Economic gratification scored slightly lower (8.27), while the lowest value was matching skills to job demands (7.77).

Regression analysis showed the following as the main determinants of perceived wellbeing: autonomy, the ability to express oneself, and economic gratification. These were followed by the availability of opportunities for personal growth and consistency between skills and activities, which still showed significant impact. In this case, the R-squared is 35.8%, suggesting that additional variables may

help to better explain satisfaction in this area. These results support hypothesis H5.

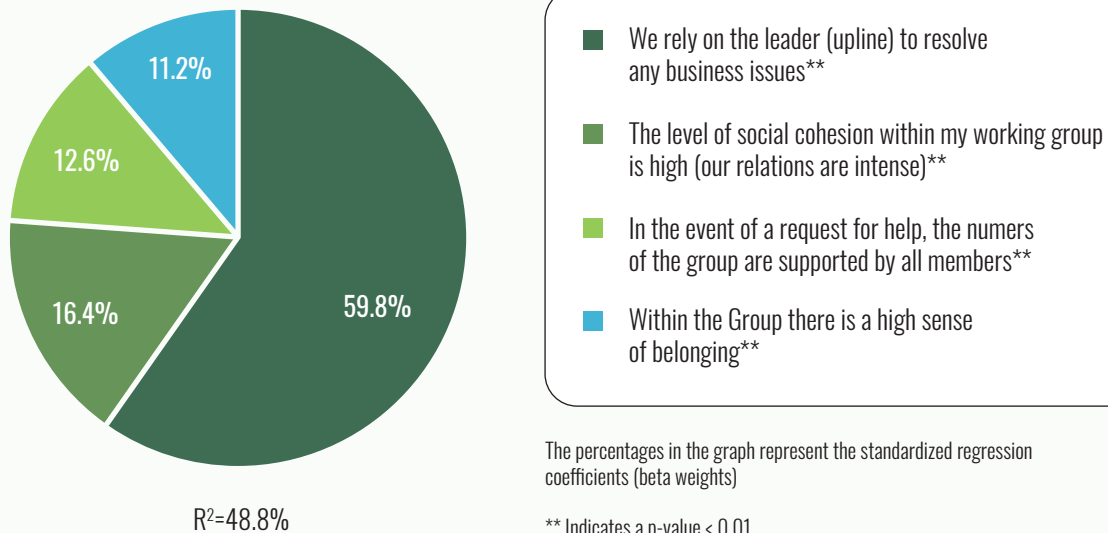
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since their origins in the 19th century, NMDSOs have promoted the idea that the work of direct sellers is particularly suited to creating jobs and promoting personal wellbeing and involvement (Baker, 2010). The results of the present research confirm that Herbalife's network marketers chose an activity that, *ex post*, is found to meet multiple expectations, from economic gratification to social integration. This is particularly relevant for understanding levels of perceived WSS: although there are instances of dissatisfaction or dropout, participants who receive adequate training (Grum and Babnik, 2022) and have realistic expectations of the model show high levels of satisfaction.

To understand more fully the impact of individual drivers on overall satisfaction and perceived WSS, further reflection is needed. First, Herbalife's business model and corporate policies emerge as the most influential drivers in shaping perceived WSS (Sorribes, Celma, and Martínez-García, 2021). By promoting a culture marked by emotional wellbeing and meritocratic career enhancement through clear and transparent organizational processes, the company contributes to positive emotions and reinforces perceptions of WSS (Appelbaum et al., 2016). In a context marked by growing distrust of business (often perceived as predatory, irresponsible, or dehumanizing) ethical and relational characteristics of the organization take on increasing weight in assessing sustainability (Fisk, 2010).

However, although the organizational dimension appears predominant, it is not sufficient on its own to explain WSS. Operational autonomy and hourly flexibility, intrinsic to the network marketing model, play a key role in job satisfaction. In line with the literature focused on job content, we find that personal growth, professional fulfillment, and the opportunity to express oneself are also determinants

FIGURE 4. LINEAR MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS – IMPACT OF EACH MICRO INDICATOR ON THE OVERALL SATISFACTION TOWARDS THE UPLINE (N = 1,653)

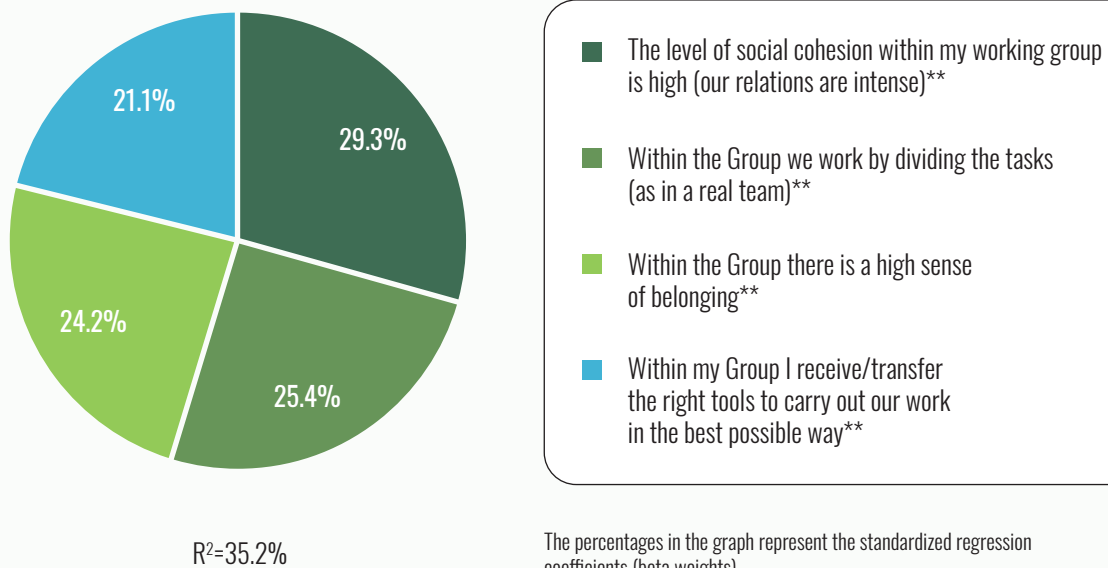


The percentages in the graph represent the standardized regression coefficients (beta weights)

** Indicates a p-value < 0.01

* Indicates a p-value < 0.05

FIGURE 5. LINEAR MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS – IMPACT OF EACH MICRO INDICATOR ON THE OVERALL SATISFACTION TOWARDS THE DOWNLINE (N = 1,273)



The percentages in the graph represent the standardized regression coefficients (beta weights)

** Indicates a p-value < 0.01

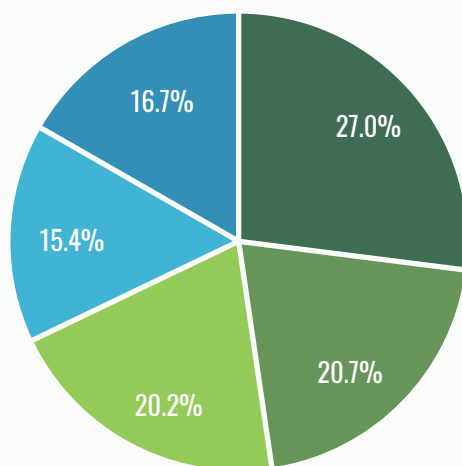
* Indicates a p-value < 0.05

TABLE 5. PERSONAL WELL-BEING AVERAGE SCORES

Statement	Mean
Network marketing in Herbalife promotes human relationships	9.09
Network marketing in Herbalife allows you autonomy in your work activities	9.02
I consider the working environment stimulating from the point of view of personal growth	8.96
I consider the working environment stimulating from the point of view of professional growth	8.86
I work in a context that allows me to express my individuality and my value from a human standpoint	8.69
The environment allows me to achieve work-life balance	8.48
Financial compensation is in line with my expectations	8.27
Nowadays, personally or at Group level we are able to sponsor new talents	8.06
Nowadays, I'm endowed the right skills to do my job	7.77

in the perception of WSS among participants. Considering the growing impact of stress and overload burnout, several recent studies have pointed out that flexible work environments can activate positive motivational processes and alleviate conflicts between professional and personal spheres (Coote, Harper and Stirling, 2021).

Research from Austria (Gerold and Nocker, 2018) and other countries (Buhl and Acosta, 2016; Hanbury, Bader, and Moser, 2019) finds a preference for leisure over salary increases, motivated by a desire to dedicating more time on family, personal interests, and wellbeing. These preferences are reflected in the concepts of downshifting, i.e., the choice to voluntarily reduce work and income to improve quality of life (Sorrell, Gatersleben, and Druckman, 2020), and voluntary simplicity, that is, giving up material consumption in favor of a lifestyle richer in wellbeing (Alexander and Usher, 2012; Elgin, 2010).

FIGURE 6. LINEAR MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS – IMPACT OF EACH MICRO INDICATOR ON THE OVERALL SATISFACTION TOWARDS THE PERSONAL WELL-BEING (N = 1,653)

$R^2=35.8\%$

- Network marketing in Herbalife allows you autonomy in your work activities**
- I work in a context that allows me to express my individuality and my value from a human standpoint**
- Financial compensation is in line with my expectations**
- Nowadays, I'm endowed the right skills to do my job**
- I consider the working environment stimulating from the point of view of personal growth**

The percentages in the graph represent the standardized regression coefficients (beta weights)

** Indicates a p-value < 0.01

* Indicates a p-value < 0.05

In summary, the distinctive features of business models such as direct sales and network marketing—particularly operational autonomy and flexibility in time management—provide a viable alternative for those who experience work overload or experience difficulties in reconciling professional and personal life. Such characteristics are also an attractive factor for other segments of the population with similar needs. The data collected confirm this trend: the network marketers surveyed show a high level of satisfaction, with an average stay in the industry of 7.8 years. Flexibility and the ability to customize one's career path contribute significantly to achieving a more harmonious work-life balance. Since career and personal life are not always experienced as separate spheres, network marketing seems to foster an integration between the two spheres (US Chamber of Commerce, 2023). In particular, in a sample composed exclusively of women – who are traditionally more involved in family responsibilities – the average score of 9.5 for personal wellbeing and the average score of 8.3 related to work-life balance are exceptionally high.

One aspect that deserves special attention is the issue of economic reward. NMDSOs and their promoters tend to present network marketing as an opportunity to “earn more money, live healthier and be happier.” However, skepticism remains in some of the literature. According to Gross and Martin (2023), “most distributors invest more than they earn,” and the promise of financial freedom would concern a small elite, supported economically by a large, underpaid base. Although the present study does not directly address the issue of financial sustainability, the mean score given to the statement, “My personal income is consistent with my goals,” (8.26) indicates a substantially positive perception. This is likely influenced by the composition of the sample (predominantly part-time) and the multifaceted nature of individual goals which, as Schiffauer (2018) suggests, are often not purely economic. Indeed, in our study, factors such as socialization, personal expression, and individual growth turn out to be more relevant than pay alone in determining perceived sustainability. This confirms the existence

of multiple and integrated drivers in the construction of sustainable work models and reinforces the evidence in the literature that emphasizes the unique nature of network marketing as a relationship-based model.

The results regarding the internal relational structure also confirm this dynamic. Network marketing takes place within small groups, in which the upline exercises a coordinating and guiding role, independently setting down rules and work methods. As pointed out by Guerini and Minelli (2018), such figures actively promote the wellbeing of their downline by encouraging them to share tools and knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that in the present investigation the figure of the leader is perceived as a true problem solver, capable of directly influencing social sustainability by organizing teamwork.

Finally, we should take a moment to dwell on the role of the gender dimension. Since the 1960s, with the massive entry of women into the labor market, numerous studies have focused on the difficulties faced by working mothers, such as dealing with work-family conflict, childcare, and inequalities in career paths (Kossek, 2006). The debate has also extended to the issue of whether women can “have it all”: a fulfilling career and a balanced family life. Some research has gone so far as to analyze perceptions of parental guilt, particularly among fathers, related to the effects that a busy career can have on their children's wellbeing (Menaghan and Parcel, 1990). More recently, Peters and Blomme (2019) have challenged dichotomous views on the relationship between flexibility and gender equality, noting that men and women develop different approaches to managing work-life boundaries, influenced by experience in flexible contexts (Cañibano, 2019). Many women, in particular, tend to experience flexibility not as a concession, but as an enabling resource, capable of generating intrinsic motivation. It is perceived as a value to be returned to the organization, in the form of commitment, loyalty, and availability, even outside the traditional boundaries of working hours (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Since the present study involved exclusively

female workers, in future it would be desirable to extend the analysis to a male sample, in order to test whether satisfaction, the drivers of WSS, and the very conception of social sustainability are partly influenced by the gender dimension.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research offer enlightening insights to guide the strategic choices of NMDSO in defining and enhancing workforce sustainability. In particular, our findings show how the business model in question and related organizational practices directly influence the perception of WSS. The evidence presented here suggests that managers should focus their attention on top performers and experienced distributors, who, unlike colleagues in more early career positions, express lower levels of job satisfaction. An additional indication emerges around training and support activities, which should be extended to the entire network and not limited to new entrants. Despite notable levels of operational autonomy, internal relational dynamics and the quality of perceived support emerge as central to building a sustainable work experience.

Our qualitative analysis also brings out explicit requests from participants, including the need for greater efforts to improve the industry's image and reputation. This is already an internationally recognized issue, as demonstrated by the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations (2016), which identified reputation as a strategic priority. Therefore, it is essential to incentivize scientific production to further validate or refute erroneous beliefs and assumptions prevalent in this field.

Another strategic recommendation concerns the early stage of collaboration: statistical analysis shows that perceived social sustainability is correlated with years of service. With this in mind, network marketing firms Herbalife included should shore up communication and targeted training for new distributors to foster a more sustainable work environment from the outset.

Finally, also deserving attention is the slightly lower score found in the dimension related to consistency between individual skills and the demands of the role. The data we collected do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions, but our work does offer food for thought on the ideal profile of the direct salesperson and network marketer. Although the belief of many in the industry is that "direct selling will never die," the evolution of buying behaviors and marketing practices calls on companies in the sector to redefine the skills required of the network marketer.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While our research design has many strengths, it has some limitations as well. The empirical base, composed of 1,653 responses, represents only a fraction of the estimated global population of more than 128 million network marketers. This restricts the generalizability of the results.

Although our findings are in line with the theoretical assumptions that have emerged from the network marketing literature, the survey must be replicated on larger, more diverse samples, including independent distributors operating in both homogeneous and heterogeneous settings. Further study in different geographic areas (both within the same company and in other NMDSOs) would be useful to test the robustness of our results, considering that the work-life relationship is influenced by cultural and social factors (Tahir, 2023). In other words, it would be revealing to discover whether the evidence gathered among Italian networkers can be traced back to cultural specificities or if it reflects more universal dynamics.

A further limitation concerns the gender composition of the sample. While women are predominant in the direct selling workforce, they do not represent the totality. Comparison with their male counterparts could enrich the analysis, making it possible to corroborate or revise the picture that emerged and contribute to the development and validation of the WSS construct.

Finally, although the study focuses on NMDSOs, a systematic comparison with other organizational types—particularly those with loose ties—could offer additional insight to clarify the nature and applicability of the concept of workforce sustainability in different organizational contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of workforce sustainability (WSS), the subject of various theoretical interpretations, has no single definition to date. Any attempt to measure must be adapted to the relevant operational context, especially within atypical organizational environments such as NMDSOs.

Our study, focusing on a well-known global NMDSO, shows that women distributors (regardless of age, level of education, or time spent on the business) tend to exhibit high levels of job satisfaction. This in turn contributes to the company's qualification as socially sustainable. The framework we adopted here allowed us to pinpoint what factors fuel WSS and how much relative impact they have, offering a initial operational model for measuring WSS in similar contexts.

Among the three macro-indicators we examined (the company, the upline/downline environment, and personal wellbeing), the firm emerges as the main enabler of job sustainability,

while complementing personal wellbeing and the interpersonal environment represented by the work group. In particular, networkers value operational autonomy, freedom of expression, consistency between economic expectations and results, personal skills that match work activity, and opportunities for personal growth. The third macro-indicator, related to the proximity network, confirms the importance of social support, teamwork, and above all the figure of the leader (upline), who is central to onboarding and supporting new employees.

While acknowledging the methodological limitations of the study, the survey makes an original contribution to the network marketing and sustainability literature by emphasizing factors that are positively perceived by direct sellers and the impact of these factors on WSS. Our findings provide potentially useful operational insights for NMDSOs, particularly for sales managers tasked with the strategic management of extended, multi-level sales networks. Finally, the study reveals that any organizational inconsistency or off-performance situations in one or more operational areas can undermine the overall sustainability of the workforce. In conclusion, we hope that this research will contribute to social and institutional reflection, driving home the fact that assessing the social sustainability of a business model is indispensable not only for corporate performance, but also for economic health and collective wellbeing.

MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **Optimizing the business model and corporate communication:** The meritocratic model and structured support are perceived as pillars of sustainability.
- **Managing motivation and wellbeing, (but not just economic):** Sustainable work experience relies on extra-monetary factors: personal growth, relationships, and fulfillment.
- **Developing network and relational skills continuously:** Upline/downline dynamics require constant training and leadership to ensure effective support.
- **Focusing on experienced workers to curb declining satisfaction:** Strategies must include specific plans for top performers, who are often less satisfied in the long run.
- **Enhancing autonomy and work flexibility:** There are central elements in the perception of wellbeing, especially for the female workforce.
- **Prioritizing industry reputation and scientific validation:** This is critical to legitimize network marketing and attract new talent responsibly.



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