

Achieving work–life balance for Korean entrepreneurs in the USA

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New England
Journal of
Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of our study was to explore and identify the type of work and life domain strategies that Korean small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) entrepreneurs in the USA implemented to mitigate challenges for achieving a work–life balance (WLB).

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 17 Korean entrepreneurs volunteered to participate in our qualitative exploratory case study, who shared successful strategies they developed to mitigate work–life challenges. A thematic analysis supported the data collected from interviews and a focus group meeting.

Findings – A total of four themes emerged from the data analysis. The findings revealed that successful entrepreneurs achieved work–life balance by (1) having sufficient money, preparation, experience and family, (2) having delegated quality time for recreational activities and hiring more employees and (3) prioritizing and scheduling quality time for culture, family, health and faith. The fourth theme revealed challenges to acquiring business knowledge, health, money, skills and sufficient time.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations indicated potential research weaknesses outside the researchers' control (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). The most significant limitation was the identification of participants from the Western region of Korean Association for the research. Originally, 20 participants were planned: ten for interviews and ten for a focus group meeting. Maybe due to the reserved personality of Koreans, very few participants volunteered. From these seed volunteers, additional participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Due to this limited recruiting process, participants were not selected in a random fashion. Thus, the research results might not be generalizable.

Practical implications – The findings may help policymakers, Korean community leaders and other minority group leaders train ambitious future SME entrepreneurs to maintain WLB from the onset of their businesses.

Social implications – The findings may shed light on how Korean minority entrepreneurs coped with WLB, which may answer research needs for minority groups. The findings may contribute to the scarce Western literature and provide intervention tools to practitioners. By discovering behaviors and the leadership skills of the struggling Korean SME entrepreneurs in achieving WLB, this study may provide some intervention strategies to practitioners helping future entrepreneurs.

Originality/value – While there is an abundance of WLB research about American SME entrepreneurs, studies on Korean SME entrepreneurs in the Western region of the USA were exiguous. Our study contributes to expanding the knowledge and understanding of WLB among Korean SME entrepreneurs.

Keywords Work–life balance, WLB, Korean entrepreneurs, SME, Small and medium-sized enterprise

Paper type Research article

Received 11 December 2024
Revised 10 July 2025
Accepted 8 September 2025

Introduction

Since the Industrial Revolution, work and family domains have been segmented from the all-in-all environment in the world (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Clark, 2000). While extant research focused on dichotomous classification between work and family aspects in the past, the new trend in work–family balance research expanded to all other non-work aspects of life (Gragnano *et al.*, 2020). The efforts to maintain work–life balance (WLB) have been overwhelming for new Korean entrepreneurs in the USA, where they faced dramatic



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New England Journal of
Entrepreneurship
Vol. 28 No. 2, 2025
pp. 167–179
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2574-8904
p-ISSN: 1550-333X
DOI 10.1108/NEJE-12-2024-0126

challenges in culture, language, environment and access to needed resources while fighting for a delicate balance between work and non-work domains (Haynes *et al.*, 2009; Jang, 2021).

Statement of problem

The problem is Korean small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) entrepreneurs in the Western region of the USA experience an imbalance of work and life domains, resulting in difficulty achieving successful strategies to practice good WLB (Jang, 2021). Jang (2021) focused on Korean SME entrepreneurs in New York and New Jersey. Shelton *et al.* (2008) focused on Korean American business owners throughout the USA. Nam and Herbert (1999) focused on family businesses in metro-Atlanta, Georgia.

Research questions

We developed two research questions to support an exploratory case study design to unearth strategies and challenges in maintaining a WLB employed by Korean entrepreneurs in the USA. Our research questions were developed to explore the “what” of the phenomenon within the case to generate understanding and insights, not just data points (Stake, 1995).

- RQ1. What are the perceptions and experiences of Korean SME entrepreneurs about the strategies they implemented for achieving WLB?
- RQ2. What are the perceptions and experiences of Korean SME entrepreneurs about the challenges they faced in achieving WLB?

Significance of study

While most Korean entrepreneurs have solid aspirations to achieve business, many lacked the necessary knowledge, training and resources to realize their desires. These Koreans are a type of transitional or transnational diaspora entrepreneurs who came from a different background (Chen *et al.*, 2024; Lucas and Mitra, 2023). We sought to bridge a gap in the scholarly world by providing unique individual responses for achieving WLB by Korean SME entrepreneurs whose conceptualizations of the future and past differed from the mainstream Western culture. Koreans’ view of future and past is opposite to the Western views (Gu *et al.*, 2019). Thus, it is necessary to research how Koreans view their WLB in the Western world. The findings may help policymakers, Korean community leaders and other minority group leaders train ambitious future SME entrepreneurs to maintain WLB from the onset of their businesses. The findings may shed light on how Korean minority entrepreneurs coped with WLB, which may answer research needs for minority groups (Lee *et al.*, 2015). The findings may contribute to the scarce Western literature and provide intervention tools to practitioners. By discovering behaviors and the leadership skills of the struggling Korean SME entrepreneurs in achieving WLB, this study may provide some intervention strategies to practitioners helping future entrepreneurs.

Literature review

In this study, we identified three work domains: (1) job demands (e.g. physical and mental demands such as meeting deadlines, completing goals and meeting customer needs), (1) job control (e.g. regular work hours, overtime and work schedule) and (3) job support (e.g. interactions with and support from employees) (Lin and Lin, 2021). The six life domains encompassed: (1) family, (2) education, (3) recreation, (4) health, (5) hobby and (6) community involvement (Gragnano *et al.*, 2020).

WLB in National/cultural context. Given the collectivistic and Confucian cultural background of Korean entrepreneurs, it is important to understand how these values shape their WLB. Korean SME entrepreneurs often face compounded WLB challenges due to cultural adjustment and language barriers (Kim, 2001; Best and Chinta, 2021; Walsh and

Cooney, 2023). Without proper support, these issues can escalate into stress, depression and marital conflict (Best and Chinta, 2021).

Despite the health and performance risks of long working hours, Asians often work longer hours (Wong and Ko, 2009). In Norway, immigrant husbands' involvement in domestic tasks was found to support their wives' WLB and entrepreneurship (Munkejord, 2017), underscoring the importance of spousal support and cultural context.

Collectivist cultures like Korea prioritize family over the individual (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010), leading Korean entrepreneurs to integrate family and business (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). Confucian values reinforce this through filial piety and familism, where economic success honors one's ancestors (Lew et al., 2011). Unlike Western individualism, Confucianism emphasizes collective responsibility, making family central to business support and shaping a distinct approach to Korean entrepreneurs' WLB.

Immigrant minorities, especially women, often struggle with WLB in Western settings, with language fluency being key to integration (Ali et al., 2017; Lin and Lin, 2021). However, research on immigrant WLB remains limited. Cultural expectations in Asian societies, such as working beyond official hours (Le et al., 2020), are reflected in Korean hotel employees averaging 52 h per week (Yu et al., 2022), highlighting a work-centric norm.

Cultural differences shape immigrant WLB behaviors, with those from collectivist societies like Korea prioritizing group needs over individual ones (Walsh and Cooney, 2023). Korean SME entrepreneurs often see work as vital for survival abroad (Lin and Lin, 2021). Confucian values further influence WLB, particularly by limiting female workforce participation (Le et al., 2020). These insights guided the development of interview questions to explore Korean entrepreneurs' unique experiences.

Immigrant entrepreneurs face challenges like language barriers, cultural differences and limited financial access (Walsh and Cooney, 2023). Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex but central process in immigrant entrepreneurship (Kim, 2001). While Williams (2009) linked success to traits like education and experience, Contín-Pilart and Larraza-Kintana (2015) found no such correlation in a large-scale study.

Individualism and collectivism. US entrepreneurs typically value individualism and prioritize WLB, maintaining a clearer boundary between work and personal life. In contrast, Korean culture emphasizes collectivism, where family needs often outweigh individual goals (Ashforth et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2015). Korean immigrants in the US must navigate this cultural divide, balancing traditional values with the demands of immigration and acculturation (Kim, 2024).

WLB for entrepreneurs. Scholars paid little attention to the WLB of entrepreneurs until the time Drnovšek et al. (2023) wrote an article about entrepreneur's satisfaction with WLB. Korean entrepreneurs considered their well-being as their personal outcome and company growth as their organizational outcome (Drnovšek et al., 2023). Korean entrepreneurs' work and life domains were one interconnected domain. Thus, maintaining a balance for Korean entrepreneurs was more difficult compared to organizationally employed workers.

Traditionally, women's involvement in household chores and child-caring trends remained the norm (González Ramos and García-de-Diego, 2022; Wong and Chan, 2021). The traditional perception about the female role in the family domain, emphasized that most female entrepreneurs had a highly intertwined connection between the work and family domains (Neneh, 2021). Despite constant efforts in improving balance in business and other areas, gender balances in business and entrepreneurship have not been achieved (Adamu and Manuwa, 2022). Women's participation in the workforce showed substantial growth in the 21st century (Kayaalp et al., 2021). As women's inherent involvement in caring for families increased, the time and energy to put into work by women would decrease compared to men with less devotion to caring for families (Kayaalp et al., 2021). Regardless of the different perspectives on WLB by male and female, Noda (2020) asserted that implementing WLB policies resulted in positive WLB satisfaction for both men and female.

WLB controversy. Past and current research produced mixed and controversial results regarding the positive and negative impact on WLB. Drawing from Chinese data regarding Chinese entrepreneurs, [Xiao and Fu \(2022\)](#) noted that entrepreneurs' higher passion caused a positive spill-over effect into the family and community domains. Using the data gathered from Muslim women scholars, [Mahmudah et al. \(2022\)](#) suggested negative role conflicts and lack of co-worker support. While researching entrepreneurs' sleep, the research results showed that entrepreneurs or self-employed individuals reported longer sleep times ([Wolfe and Patel, 2020](#)). However, when entrepreneurs experienced higher psychological distress, their sleep time and quality declined ([Bettac and Probst, 2021](#)). [Gragnano et al. \(2020\)](#) seemed to agree that a perfect WLB was not feasible. Regardless of the arguments, the benefits of WLB realized by employees contributed to less stress and a sense of control over personal schedules and responsibilities leading to greater production for employers ([Marques and Berry, 2021](#)).

WLB strategies. One recommendation from [van Zoonen et al. \(2020\)](#) was that supervisors should increase the use of communication means such as the use of mobile devices to decrease work–life conflicts. [Yang et al. \(2022\)](#) suggested increased support from family could enhance employees' thriving at work. [Kayaalp et al. \(2021\)](#) suggested a need for organizational programs or benefits to support employees while battling with work–life conflicts. [Cho et al. \(2020\)](#) noted the benefits of using information and communications technology (ICT) contributed to an increase in work performance. [Dilmaghani and Tabvuma \(2022\)](#) noted several benefits from using public childcare. Providing immigrant workers with more autonomy and flexibility for arranging their work and family life differ from how natives in the USA arrange their work life balance ([Lin and Lin, 2021](#)).

Theoretical framework

The four theories framing this study are (1) cross-cultural theory, (2) boundary/border theory ([Ashforth et al., 2000](#); [Clark, 2000](#); [Nippert-Eng, 1996](#); [Wilensky, 1960](#)), (3) self-efficacy theory ([Bandura, 1995](#)) and (4) conservation of resources (COR) theory ([Hobfoll, 2011](#)). These four theories served as a lens to explore the WLB of Korean SME entrepreneurs. The boundary/border theory served as an overarching theory. The self-efficacy theory provided a lens to analyze how entrepreneurs' mental capacity worked to deal with WLB. COR theory provided another lens to examine entrepreneurs' interactions with limited resources to maintain WLB.

Cross-cultural theory. Cross-cultural theory encompasses various frameworks and approaches used to understand how culture influences human behavior, cognition and communication ([Christie et al., 2003](#)). Cross-cultural theory examines similarities and differences across cultures, exploring how cultural contexts shape individuals and societies ([Christie et al., 2003](#)). Many cross-cultural studies confirm that culture influences one's ethical perception, attitude and behavior. Studies also indicate that culture plays a role in the way people across cultures identify situations posing ethical problems ([Bhawuk, 1998](#)). The cross-cultural theory supports our study as we compared Korean cultural beliefs with those of the Western culture, specifically in the US to determine how cultural beliefs influence WLB for Korean entrepreneurs in the US.

Border theory. In [Clark's \(2000\)](#) view, border-crossers were individuals who made daily transitions between work and family domains. Border theory lacked consideration for other non-work domains ([Staines, 1980](#)). [Clark \(2000\)](#) asserted that the balance between work and family was nearly unattainable. Korean SME Entrepreneurs might face different degrees of reactions from the border-keepers and domain members than their Western counterparts because Korean SME entrepreneurs came from a collectivistic culture that valued overtime work ([Lin and Lin, 2021](#); [Yang et al., 2022](#)).

Boundary theory. The boundary theory incorporated integration and segmentation of work and home domains. [Nippert-Eng's \(1996\)](#) boundary theory had a broader view than the spillover theory and the border theory by expanding work and family to work and home. Using

the calendars and keys examples, boundary theory represented the integrating and segmenting aspects of people dealing with work and home boundaries.

Self-efficacy theory. Individuals strive to control events that affected them (Bandura, 1995). This belief that they could control events and accomplish tasks stemmed from their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Individuals tried to affect events because the ability to influence events could enable them to predict their outcomes. By contributing enormous efforts and expecting favorable outcomes, individuals exercised their capacity to influence events as best as they could. According to Bandura (1997), individuals were producers and products of the environment. At the same time, individuals were products of the environment.

Conservation of resources theory. Hobfoll's (2011) conservation of resources (COR) theory has been used in various academic fields to understand the impact of stress in life. COR was individuals' attempt to obtain, retain and protect the resources they valued (Hobfoll, 2011). The conservation of resources theory approached WLB from the availability of tangible resources that entrepreneurs could use. Schwartz and Bilsky (1990) noted that culture was important in arranging and ranking resources. Korean SME entrepreneurs in the USA came from a collectivist country. Thus, culture might influence Korean entrepreneurs differently than other entrepreneurs in the decision-making process and allocation of resources when they faced challenges.

Methodology

Research design

This study used a qualitative, exploratory case study design to examine Korean SME entrepreneurs' WLB within a bounded system (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). A case study was appropriate for exploring a contemporary issue in depth and real-world context (Yin, 2018). Multiple data sources supported validity and reliability (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Interviews and a focus group were conducted via Zoom, revealing rich insights into participants' WLB strategies, challenges and perceptions of entrepreneurial life.

Sample and data collection

With IRB approval, the Western region Korean Association's president authorized recruitment by posting letters in the group's closed chat room. A snowball sampling method followed. All participants signed informed consent forms. Data collection included Zoom-based interviews with nine participants and a one-hour focus group with eight, totaling 17 approved participants. Table 1 presents participant demographics.

Data analysis

The participants' raw data were transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-steps thematic analysis were implemented to assist with the systematic analysis procedures. After generating codes from the raw responses, categories emerged grouping similar codes together. Four themes emerged in support of participants' key words and phrases.

Results

Findings

Research question 1 (R1) supported the focus group meeting. Research question 2 (R2) was developed to support the interviews. Three themes emerged in support of R1 for the focus group. For R2, one theme emerged in support of the interviews.

R1: Theme 1. strategies recommended for new entrepreneurs are money, preparation, experience and family. All nine participants (100%) recommended strategies for new entrepreneurs, emphasizing the importance of family balance—especially for those with

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Years of experience	Industry	# Of employees	Work Hours/Week
P1	M	50+	5+	Food	1–10	51+
P2	F	50+	5+	Food	11–20	51+
P3	M	50+	5+	Food	1–10	51+
P4	F	50+	1–2	Food	1–10	51+
P5	F	50+	5+	Customer Service	1–10	51+
P6	F	50+	5+	Food	11–20	51+
P7	F	50+	5+	Retail	1–10	51+
P8	M	50+	5+	Customer Service	0	51+
P9	F	50+	5+	Other	1–10	51+
P10	M	50+	5+	Retail	1–10	41–50
P11	F	50+	5+	Customer Service	0	21–40
P12	M	50+	3–4	Food	1–10	21–40
P13	M	50+	5+	Food	21+	41–50
P14	F	50+	5+	Customer Service	1–10	51+
P15	M	30–39	5+	Other	1–10	41–50
P16	M	40–49	5+	Food	21+	21–40
P17	M	50+	5+	Other	1–10	11–20

Note(s): P1 through P9 indicate interviewees. P10 through P17 indicate focus group participants. M indicates Male. F indicates Female. Although P8 and P11 indicated zero employees, they hired temps as needed

Source(s): Primary research conducted by primary author. Unpublished data

children—adequate start-up funds, business knowledge and skills and maintaining a clear separation between work and family.

They should have enough startup funds to start the business. I want to tell them not to go into much debt. If they invest too much in debt, they may not maintain WLB. So, consider all aspects of WLB. I would recommend them to allot some time for family also. I would prioritize family over money and pay special attention to education. If I go back in time, I would spend more time and effort on the kids.

R1: Theme 2. delegated quality time for recreational activities and hired more employees to improve work–life balance. In Theme 2, seven focus group participants (88%) reported prioritizing quality recreation time with family, often hiring staff to make this possible. They agreed that such activities improved their WLB. Delegating tasks reduced stress and fostered a positive work environment, with many placing family first.

When the business was stabilized, we began to hire employees, and I had some time for myself. So, when the business was stable, I spent more time with my kids and wife. In order to have a higher quality of work, we hired employees to take care of lower tasks. I think delegation is really needed.

R1: Theme 3. culture, family, health, faith and religion promote work–life balance. In Theme 3, all eight focus group participants (100%) agreed that culture, family, health, faith and religion enhanced their WLB. They expressed pride in their Korean heritage and emphasized family as their top priority. Living in an individualistic US culture, they maintained a collective mindset that placed family above all.

The reason Koreans are successful is they have a Korean mindset, which is being honest and kind to customers. Many Koreans are successful and raise their kids successfully. Koreans’ image in the United States is good. If I say I am a Korean, people love it these days. Korean videos and culture influenced many people. I think it is a good thing. It seems like Koreans spend less time with their kids

when they run a business. In my case, my kids had good friends. The new generation of Koreans spend more time with their kids and go on trips. They also do sports with their kids.

R2: Theme 1: challenges were lack of business knowledge, health, money, skills and sufficient time. From the interview participants' responses, nine (100%) of the participants stated five challenges: (1) lack of business knowledge, (2) health, (3) money, (4) skills and (5) sufficient time to take care of WLB. A notable concern was poor health, often caused by long working hours, which also limited time for other life domains.

I worked so hard for 72 hours per week. Because I didn't have the skills to perform my work. I lived without WLB in my life at the beginning. Money was the problem, but the biggest problem was that I didn't have the skills to run the business from the beginning. Because I was unskilled, I always worried about the deadline with quality work. I didn't do my regular health checkups. We didn't have health insurance, so when I was sick, I couldn't go to the doctor. I just endured the sickness after taking some medicine. I didn't see the dentist at all. Because it was a small business, I couldn't afford health insurance.

Discussions: comparing and contrasting prior studies

R1: Theme 1: strategies recommended for new entrepreneurs are money, preparation, experience and family. Struggling Korean entrepreneurs emphasized the need for sufficient start-up capital to improve WLB, echoing [D'Ambrosio et al. \(2020\)](#) on the link between financial stability and life satisfaction. Many sacrificed time for money, worsening their WLB. They highlighted the importance of mental, physical and business preparation ([Choi et al., 2021](#)). Boundary theory suggests that psychological disengagement makes work reentry difficult ([Ashforth et al., 2000](#)). These entrepreneurs prioritized work ([Choi et al., 2021](#); [Jang, 2021](#)) and, reflecting collectivist culture, relied on family resources over institutional support ([Lee et al., 2015](#)).

R1: Theme 2: delegated quality time for recreational activities and hired more employees to improve work–life balance. Successful Korean entrepreneurs maintained WLB by engaging in recreational activities, which boosted their energy and job performance ([Wang et al., 2022](#)). Despite long work hours, younger Koreans increasingly value recreation over income ([Yu et al., 2022](#)) and quality leisure time proved beneficial ([Wong and Chan, 2021](#)). Unlike struggling entrepreneurs who avoided hiring due to income concerns, successful ones delegated tasks to employees, helping preserve their WLB.

R1: Theme 3: culture, family, health, faith and religion promote work–life balance. Korean entrepreneurs emphasized family importance, aligning with [Nayar and Clair \(2020\)](#). Korean immigrants in Los Angeles assimilated more slowly than other Asians ([Min, 1990](#)) and those in the US West experienced slow initial business growth followed by later success ([Jang, 2021](#)). Successful entrepreneurs maintained clear work-family boundaries, supported by collectivist values aiding role transitions ([Ashforth et al., 2000](#)). Despite limited English, many relied on fluent family members. They reported better health and stable marriages, which supported income ([Becker, 1981](#)), while less successful peers faced poorer health from long hours ([Jang, 2021](#)). Religion supported WLB, echoing findings among Australian Muslim men ([Sav, 2019](#)) and aligned with COR theory, where faith served as a resource ([Hobfoll, 2011](#)).

R2: Theme 1: challenges included a lack of business knowledge, health, money, skills and sufficient time. Struggling Korean entrepreneurs in the US West lacked essential business knowledge, echoing [Ghazali et al. \(2021\)](#), who found early knowledge gaps hinder success. Education and applied skills are critical for SME performance ([Latifi-Mustafa and Havolli, 2020](#); [Spahiu and Durguti, 2023](#)). Many cited this lack as a key early challenge. While 75% of successful entrepreneurs overcame initial difficulties by gaining knowledge, struggling ones

reported poor health and reluctance to continue due to long hours (Yu *et al.*, 2022). Poor health among SME owners threatens both personal and economic stability (Veeramuthu *et al.*, 2022). Korean entrepreneurs worked longer hours than successful peers, leading to burnout, consistent with broader Asian WLB struggles (Wong and Chan, 2021) and poorer health among Korean immigrants in New York and New Jersey (Jang, 2021). They also faced limited capital and income, trading time for money and lacked key skills like time management (Lee *et al.*, 2015; Veeramuthu *et al.*, 2022). This left little time for life outside work (Sav, 2019). According to COR theory, people strive to preserve resources (Hobfoll, 2011) and disciplined time management supports both business success and health (Veeramuthu *et al.*, 2022).

Limitations

Limitations reflected factors beyond the researchers' control (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). The main issue was participant recruitment from the Western region of the Korean Association. Although 20 participants were planned (10 interviews, 10 focus group), few volunteered—possibly due to Koreans' reserved nature. Additional participants were recruited via snowball sampling, resulting in a non-random sample and limiting generalizability.

Recommendations

Leaders should develop programs—through the Korean Association or government—to provide practical business education and guidance on securing start-up funds. Reflecting collectivist culture, many Korean entrepreneurs relied on family resources rather than financial institutions, sometimes leading to failure. Programs should include WLB training, covering culture, family, health, faith, money, skills, time, preparation and experience, as identified by participants. Training should also compare individualistic and collectivist business cultures to help entrepreneurs understand their impacts.

Only one participant was aware of WLB, though many recognized its importance during business operations. Given Drnovšek *et al.* (2023) found WLB positively affects well-being and firm growth, incorporating WLB principles into training is essential. This would help Korean entrepreneurs maintain balance using acquired knowledge, funding and WLB strategies.

Implications

Government leaders and educators must recognize cultural differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies to tailor support for new entrepreneurs. Customized organizational, financial and educational assistance can improve survival rates in host countries. Peer mentoring from experienced entrepreneurs, as shown by Lorenzetti *et al.* (2023) in the context of foreign students in Canada, can also enhance success. Further cross-cultural research is needed to compare WLB across minority and native entrepreneurs and to evaluate the effectiveness of training programs. Collaboration between policymakers and scholars can help identify and address program gaps.

Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to explore and identify the type of work and life domain strategies that Korean small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) entrepreneurs in the USA implemented to mitigate challenges for achieving a WLB. The problem is that Korean SME entrepreneurs in the Western region of the USA experience an imbalance of work and life domains, resulting in difficulty achieving successful strategies to practice good WLB (Jang, 2021). The research objective, bridging a gap in literature, was achieved by learning and sharing more about Korean SME entrepreneurs' perceptions, experiences and strategies to

maintain WLB in the USA as noted from the responses provided by the participants in our study.

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