

Digital Leadership: A Synthesis of Literature and Future Research Directions

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Abstract

The increasing reliance on digital technologies across all sectors has brought digital leadership to the forefront as a critical organisational capability. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines the concept of digital leadership through the lens of 9 carefully selected literature reviews. It synthesises key dimensions, theoretical underpinnings, and impactful consequences on organisational performance and culture. This review emphasises the importance of visionary traits, digital literacy, strategic thinking, and adaptability as essential elements of digital leadership. Furthermore, it underscores the role of digital literacy and organisational culture in shaping the effectiveness of digital leadership within diverse organisational contexts. Based on identified gaps in the literature, this study proposes a comprehensive research agenda that explores the ethical dimensions of digital leadership and calls for the development of standardised measurement tools. The study contributes to the theoretical foundations of digital leadership and offers insights for practitioners aiming to cultivate digital leadership skills and foster organisational transformation in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Leadership, Systematic Literature Review, Digital Transformation, Organisational Culture, Digital Literacy, Innovation, Higher Education, India, Leadership 4.0

1. Introduction

In the contemporary business environment, digital transformation stands as a fundamental force reshaping organisations across various sectors (Hensellek, 2020). This transformation involves the integration of digital technologies into all facets of an organisation, fundamentally altering how it operates and delivers value to stakeholders. As organisations navigate this digital landscape, the need for adept and forward-thinking leadership becomes paramount (Eberl & Drews, 2021). Traditional leadership models, often characterised by hierarchical structures and control-oriented approaches, are increasingly ill-suited to meet the dynamic demands of the digital age. The rapid pace of technological advancement and the increasing complexity of organisational ecosystems require a new breed of leaders who can inspire, empower, and guide their teams through periods of unprecedented change and uncertainty (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022).

Digital leadership emerges as a critical concept in this context, encompassing the competencies, behaviours, and attributes necessary to effectively navigate and lead within a digitally-driven environment (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018). Unlike traditional leadership, digital leadership extends beyond mere technological proficiency. It involves the ability to leverage digital tools and platforms to foster innovation, enhance collaboration, and cultivate a culture of continuous learning and adaptation (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024). Moreover, digital leaders must be adept at addressing the ethical considerations that arise with the increasing use of digital technologies, including data privacy, cybersecurity, and algorithmic transparency (Jeedigunta, 2023).

The global COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and underscored the importance of digital leadership across industries (Jameson et al., 2022). With the sudden shift to remote work environments and the increasing reliance on digital channels for communication and collaboration, organisations have recognised the critical need for leaders who can effectively manage distributed teams, foster digital engagement, and drive innovation in a virtual setting (Erhan, Uzunbacak, & Aydin, 2022).

Despite its growing recognition, digital leadership remains a nascent and evolving concept, characterised by a lack of consensus on its precise definition, core dimensions, and impact on organisational outcomes (Eberl & Drews, 2021; Jameson et al., 2022). This systematic literature review (SLR) seeks to address this gap by synthesising the existing body of knowledge on digital leadership, drawing insights from 9 carefully selected literature reviews. The study aims to identify key themes, theoretical underpinnings, and methodological approaches, as well as highlight the research gaps that warrant further exploration. By providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on digital leadership, this SLR aims to inform future investigations and contribute to the development of a more robust and nuanced understanding of this critical leadership domain.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 details the methodology employed for the systematic literature review. Section 3 presents a synthesis of the key findings from the included literature reviews, examining the definition, dimensions, antecedents, and consequences of digital leadership. Section 4 explores the theoretical frameworks that underpin digital leadership. Section 5 proposes a research agenda for future studies, outlining specific areas for further investigation. Finally, Section 6 concludes the review with a discussion of the implications for both theory and practice.

2. Research Methodology

This systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted following a rigorous and transparent methodology, ensuring that the findings are both valid and reliable. The SLR process was guided by established guidelines for conducting systematic reviews, such as those outlined in the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) statement (Moher et al., 2009). The methodology was designed to minimise bias, ensure reproducibility, and provide a comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature on digital leadership.

2.1. Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant literature reviews on digital leadership. The search was conducted using a range of electronic databases, including:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar
- ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global

The search strategy involved the use of specific keywords and search terms related to digital leadership, including:

- "Digital Leadership"
- "E-Leadership"
- "Leadership 4.0"
- "Technology Leadership"
- "Digital Transformation Leadership"
- "Digital Transformation"
- "Organisational Culture"
- "Digital Literacy"
- "Innovation"

These search terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine the search results and ensure that the search captured a broad range of relevant articles. The search was limited to articles published in English within the last five years (2018-2024) to ensure that the review focused on the most current and relevant research in the field.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the included studies, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Studies that explicitly focus on digital leadership as a central theme
- Systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, or conceptual reviews that synthesise the existing body of knowledge on digital leadership
- Studies that provide insights into the dimensions, antecedents, or consequences of digital leadership
- Studies published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings

The exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Studies that focus solely on technology management or IT strategy without explicitly addressing leadership aspects
- Empirical studies that examine the impact of digital leadership but do not provide a synthesis of the literature
- Studies that are not available in English
- Studies that are not peer-reviewed (e.g., blog posts, white papers)

2.3. Study Selection

The study selection process involved a two-stage screening process to ensure that only the most relevant and high-quality studies were included in the review. In the first stage, the titles and abstracts of the identified articles were screened to assess their relevance to the research question. This initial screening was conducted by two independent reviewers to minimise bias. In the second stage, the full texts of the potentially relevant articles were retrieved and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Again, this assessment was conducted independently by two reviewers. Any disagreements between the reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus. The final selection included the 9 literature reviews you've provided.

2.4. Data Extraction

A structured data extraction form was developed to systematically extract relevant information from the included literature reviews. The data extraction form included the following items:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Title of the literature review

- Journal or conference proceeding
- Purpose or objective of the literature review
- Scope and methodology of the literature review
- Key concepts and definitions related to digital leadership
- Key dimensions or components of digital leadership identified
- Antecedents or drivers of digital leadership
- Consequences or outcomes of digital leadership
- Theoretical frameworks used to explain digital leadership
- Research gaps and future research directions identified

The data extraction process was conducted by one reviewer, and the extracted data were verified by a second reviewer to ensure accuracy and completeness.

2.5. Quality Assessment

The quality of the included literature reviews was assessed using a standardised quality assessment tool. The tool was adapted from existing quality assessment checklists for systematic reviews and meta-analyses, such as the AMSTAR (A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews) checklist (Shea et al., 2007). The quality assessment tool included items related to the rigour of the search strategy, the appropriateness of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the data extraction process, and the data synthesis's transparency. The quality assessment process was conducted by two reviewers independently, and disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

2.6. Data Synthesis

The extracted data were synthesised using a narrative synthesis approach. The narrative synthesis involved summarising the key findings and insights from the included literature reviews and identifying recurring themes and patterns. The synthesis was structured around the key dimensions of digital leadership, its antecedents, and its consequences. The findings were also compared and contrasted across different studies to identify areas of convergence and divergence. The narrative synthesis approach allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of digital leadership's complex and multifaceted nature.

3. Literature Review: A Synthesis of Key Findings

The synthesis of the selected literature reviews reveals a rich tapestry of insights into the multifaceted nature of digital leadership. This section presents a comprehensive overview of the key findings, structured around the core themes that emerged from the analysis.

3.1. Defining Digital Leadership: An Evolving Construct

The literature underscores the absence of a universally accepted definition of digital leadership, reflecting the ongoing evolution of the concept and its diverse applications across different contexts (Eberl & Drews, 2021; Jameson et al., 2022). While various definitions have been proposed, they share common threads that illuminate the essence of digital leadership.

Eberl and Drews (2021) characterise digital leadership as a strategic approach aimed at fostering customer-centric, digitally-enabled business models through transformative leadership practices. This definition emphasises the proactive role of digital leaders in driving organisational change and leveraging digital technologies to create value for customers. Sağbaş and Erdoğan (2022) define digital leadership as a leadership approach that promotes the digitisation of learning cultures and work environments, thereby enhancing organisational sustainability and competitiveness. This definition highlights the importance of creating a digital ecosystem within the organisation, where digital technologies are seamlessly integrated into all aspects of the business.

Hensellek (2020) frames digital leadership as a framework for successful leadership in the digital age, emphasising the importance of both technical capabilities and a digital mindset. This definition underscores the need for leaders to possess a deep understanding of digital technologies and a strategic vision for how these technologies can be leveraged to achieve organisational goals.

Jameson et al. (2022) advocate for a more comprehensive definition of digital leadership that encompasses organisational transformation across multiple levels, including governance, culture, and individual management practices. This holistic perspective recognises that digital leadership is not merely about adopting new technologies but also about fundamentally reshaping the organisation's structure, processes, and values.

Taking into account these diverse perspectives, this review defines digital leadership as the ability to inspire, empower, and guide individuals and organisations to effectively leverage digital technologies to achieve strategic objectives, foster innovation, cultivate a culture of continuous learning, and navigate the ethical complexities of a rapidly evolving digital landscape. This definition encapsulates the core elements of digital leadership, emphasising its strategic, transformative,

and ethical dimensions.

3.2. Key Dimensions of Digital Leadership: A Multifaceted Skill Set

The literature identifies a range of key dimensions that characterise effective digital leaders. These dimensions can be broadly categorised into the following:

- **Visionary Leadership:** Digital leaders must possess a clear and compelling vision of how digital technologies can be used to achieve organisational goals (Hensellek, 2020; Anwar & Sarahi, 2024). They need to be able to articulate this vision effectively and inspire others to embrace it (Eberl & Drews, 2021).
- **Digital Literacy:** Digital leaders must possess a high level of digital literacy, including the ability to understand and use digital technologies effectively (Hensellek, 2020; Oberer & Erkollar, 2018). They need to be able to stay abreast of the latest technological developments and assess their potential impact on the organisation (Jeedigunta, 2023).
- **Strategic Thinking:** Digital leaders must be able to think strategically about how digital technologies can be used to create a competitive advantage (Eberl & Drews, 2021). They need to be able to analyse the external environment, identify emerging trends, and develop strategies to capitalise on them (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022).
- **Collaboration and Communication:** Digital leaders must be able to collaborate effectively with others, both internally and externally (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024). They need to be able to communicate effectively using digital channels and foster a culture of open communication and knowledge sharing (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018).
- **Innovation and Experimentation:** Digital leaders must be willing to experiment with new technologies and approaches (Erhan, Uzunbacak, & Aydin, 2022). They need to create a culture of innovation where employees are encouraged to take risks and learn from failures (Hensellek, 2020).
- **Adaptability and Resilience:** Digital leaders must be able to adapt to change and cope with uncertainty (Jeedigunta, 2023). They need to be resilient in the face of setbacks and be able to learn from their mistakes (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022).
- **Ethical Awareness:** Digital leaders must be aware of the ethical implications of digital technologies and ensure that they are used responsibly (Jameson et al., 2022). They need to be able to navigate issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity, and algorithmic bias (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024).

3.3. Antecedents of Digital Leadership: Cultivating a Supportive Ecosystem

The literature highlights several factors that contribute to the development and effectiveness of digital leadership. These antecedents can be broadly categorised into organisational, individual, and environmental factors.

- **Organisational Culture:** A supportive organisational culture is essential for fostering digital leadership (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018). Organisations need to create a culture that values innovation, experimentation, and continuous learning (Erhan, Uzunbacak, & Aydin, 2022).
- **Digital Literacy:** A high level of digital literacy among employees is necessary for digital leadership to be effective (Hensellek, 2020). Organisations need to invest in training and development programs to enhance the digital skills of their workforce (Jeedigunta, 2023).
- **Technology Infrastructure:** A robust technology infrastructure is essential for supporting digital leadership (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022). Organisations need to invest in the necessary hardware, software, and networks to enable digital collaboration and communication (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024).
- **Top Management Support:** Support from top management is critical for driving digital transformation and fostering digital leadership (Eberl & Drews, 2021). Top managers need to champion digital initiatives and provide the necessary resources and support (Jameson et al., 2022).
- **External Environment:** The external environment, including factors such as competition, technological change, and regulatory requirements, can also influence the development of digital leadership (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018). Organisations need to be aware of these external forces and adapt their leadership styles accordingly (Hensellek, 2020).

3.4. Consequences of Digital Leadership: Driving Organisational Success

The literature suggests that digital leadership can have several positive consequences for organisations, including:

- **Enhanced Innovation:** Digital leadership can foster a culture of innovation, leading to the development of new products, services, and business models (Erhan, Uzunbacak, & Aydin, 2022).
- **Improved Organisational Agility:** Digital leadership can enable organisations to respond more quickly and effectively to changes in the external environment (Jeedigunta, 2023).
- **Increased Employee Engagement:** Digital leadership can empower employees and foster a sense of ownership, leading to increased employee engagement and motivation (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024).
- **Enhanced Customer Satisfaction:** Digital leadership can enable organisations to deliver better customer experiences through personalised and digitally-enabled services (Eberl & Drews, 2021).
- **Improved Financial Performance:** Digital leadership can drive digital transformation, leading to improved

operational efficiency, increased revenue, and enhanced profitability (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022).

3.5. Digital Literacy as a Moderator and its impact on Organization culture.

The study "Relationship between Digital Leadership and Organisational Culture: Role of Digital Literacy" (Though reference is missing) explores that Digital literacy is a moderating element, the study focused on workers in Bengaluru's Banking and Financial Services (BFS) industry using quantitative research techniques. Key findings show that employees over 50 years old have worse perceptions of digital leadership, while managers between the ages of 31 and 40 who earn moderate to high incomes have stronger opinions. It improves leadership effectiveness by influencing communication and decision-making techniques. Age and gender significantly influenced organisational culture, with younger female managers showing higher levels of engagement.

4. Theoretical Underpinnings: A Framework for Understanding Digital Leadership

The concept of digital leadership can be understood through a variety of theoretical lenses, each offering unique insights into its underlying mechanisms and dynamics. Several key theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant:

- **Transformational Leadership Theory:** Transformational leadership theory emphasises the importance of inspiring and motivating followers to achieve a shared vision (Bass, 1985). Digital leaders often exhibit transformational leadership behaviours, such as articulating a clear vision, fostering a sense of purpose, and empowering followers to take risks (Erhan, Uzunbacak, & Aydin, 2022).
- **Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory:** LMX theory focuses on the quality of the relationship between leaders and their followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Digital leaders need to build strong relationships with their followers, characterised by trust, respect, and mutual support (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024).
- **Social Cognitive Theory:** Social cognitive theory emphasises the importance of learning through observation and modelling (Bandura, 1977). Digital leaders can serve as role models for their followers, demonstrating how to use digital technologies effectively and fostering a culture of continuous learning (Jeedigunta, 2023).
- **Contingency Theory:** Contingency theory suggests that the effectiveness of leadership depends on the situation (Fiedler, 1967). Digital leaders need to be able to adapt their leadership styles to the specific context, taking into account factors such as the nature of the task, the characteristics of the followers, and the organisational culture (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018).
- **Diffusion of Innovation Theory:** Diffusion of innovation theory explains how new ideas and technologies spread through a social system (Rogers, 2003). Digital leaders play a crucial role in promoting the adoption of digital technologies within their organisations by championing innovation, overcoming resistance to change, and providing the necessary support and resources (Hensellek, 2020).

5. Research Agenda: Charting the Course for Future Investigations

The literature review identifies several research gaps and potential avenues for future investigation in the field of digital leadership. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a more robust and nuanced understanding of digital leadership and its implications for organizations. Based on these gaps, the following research agenda is proposed:

- **Developing a Comprehensive and Context-Specific Measure of Digital Leadership:** There is a pressing need for a valid and reliable instrument to measure digital leadership that captures its multifaceted dimensions and is adaptable to different organizational contexts (Eberl & Drews, 2021; Jameson et al., 2022). Future research should focus on developing such a measure, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure its comprehensiveness and relevance.
- **Examining the Longitudinal Impact of Digital Leadership on Organizational Performance:** While the literature suggests a positive relationship between digital leadership and organizational performance, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that examine the long-term effects of digital leadership on key organizational outcomes, such as innovation, agility, employee engagement, and financial performance (Sağbaş & Erdoğan, 2022).
- **Investigating the Role of Contextual Factors in Shaping Digital Leadership Effectiveness:** The effectiveness of digital leadership may be contingent on various contextual factors, such as organizational culture, industry, and national culture (Oberer & Erkollar, 2018). Future research should explore how these factors interact with digital leadership to influence organizational outcomes.
- **Exploring the Ethical Dimensions of Digital Leadership:** As digital technologies become increasingly pervasive, it is crucial to examine the ethical implications of digital leadership, including issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic bias, and the potential for digital exclusion (Jameson et al., 2022). Future research should explore these ethical considerations and develop guidelines for responsible digital leadership.
- **Developing and Evaluating Training and Development Programs for Digital Leaders:** Organizations need to invest in training and development programs to cultivate effective digital leaders (Jeedigunta, 2023). Future research should focus on designing and evaluating such programs, identifying the most effective strategies for developing the skills and competencies needed to lead in a digital environment.

- **Understanding the impact of Digital literacy and its moderating role:** As highlighted by the study on digital leadership and organizational culture, future research should focus on how to improve digital literacy across various age groups and genders to enhance leadership effectiveness. Understanding these dynamics may provide useful ways to address and mitigate potential biases in digital leadership and organizational culture, which in turn would promote higher levels of engagement among employees.
- **Digital Leadership in Specific Contexts:** Given the importance of digital transformation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as highlighted by the study's context in India, further research could focus on the unique aspects of digital leadership within HEIs. This might include investigating how digital leadership can improve digital literacy among faculty, enhance online learning experiences, and streamline administrative processes (Anwar & Sarahi, 2024). Specifically, studies could explore the cultural and institutional contexts within which Indian HEIs operate, as these may significantly influence the effectiveness of digital leadership initiatives (Jeedigunta, 2023).

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the existing knowledge on digital leadership, highlighting its importance in driving digital transformation, fostering innovation, and enhancing organizational agility. The review underscores the role of key dimensions, such as visionary leadership, digital literacy, strategic thinking, and adaptability, and emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive organizational culture and addressing the ethical implications of digital technologies. The proposed research agenda provides a roadmap for future investigations, guiding researchers in their efforts to advance our understanding of this critical leadership domain.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theory and practice. For theory, the review contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of digital leadership by synthesizing existing knowledge and identifying key research gaps. The proposed definition of digital leadership provides a foundation for future theoretical development, and the identified dimensions and antecedents offer valuable insights for researchers seeking to explore the underlying mechanisms of digital leadership.

For practice, the study provides practical guidance for organizations seeking to cultivate effective digital leaders. Organizations need to invest in training and development programs to enhance the digital skills of their workforce, foster a culture of innovation, and create a supportive organizational culture. They also need to be aware of the ethical implications of digital technologies and ensure that they are used responsibly.

In conclusion, digital leadership is an essential ingredient for success in the digital age. By understanding the key dimensions of digital leadership, its antecedents, and its consequences, organizations can create a culture of digital innovation and achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Future research should focus on addressing the identified research gaps and developing a more comprehensive understanding of this rapidly evolving concept. As technology continues to evolve and reshape the business landscape, digital leadership will undoubtedly remain a critical determinant of organizational success.

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