

How Digital Transformation Reshapes Leadership Systems: A Bibliometric Analysis and Future Research Roadmap

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Abstract

This study aimed to explain how digital transformation reshapes organizational leadership systems and to develop a future research roadmap for digital-era leadership theory. The study used a qualitative exploratory design based on semi-structured interviews with 24 experts, including senior managers, digital transformation consultants, organizational development specialists, and academic researchers located in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling according to their direct experience with digital transformation, leadership development, or organizational change. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved at the twenty-first interview, followed by three confirmatory interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and focused on leadership roles, decision-making processes, digital capabilities, cultural change, employee participation, and ethical challenges in digitally transforming organizations. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo software. Coding followed an inductive procedure involving open coding, category development, theme refinement, and interpretive synthesis. The analysis produced five main categories: leadership as socio-technical orchestration, data-informed and adaptive decision-making, distributed and platform-based leadership authority, digital culture and capability building, and ethical governance of human–technology relations. Participants emphasized that digital transformation changes leadership from individual command to ecosystem coordination, from intuition-based judgment to evidence-informed sensemaking, and from hierarchical control to enabling, participatory, and networked forms of influence. The findings also showed that leadership systems are increasingly shaped by analytics, algorithmic tools, cross-functional collaboration, agile structures, and the need to protect trust, autonomy, and employee meaning. Digital transformation does not merely add technological tools to existing leadership practices; it reconstructs the architecture of leadership itself. The study contributes a qualitative roadmap for future research by identifying conceptual gaps related to digital leadership capabilities, distributed authority, algorithmic governance, ethical accountability, and human-centered transformation.

Keywords: digital transformation; digital leadership; leadership systems; organizational change; qualitative research; future research roadmap

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become one of the most consequential forces reshaping contemporary organizations. It is no longer limited to the adoption of information systems, automation tools, or digital platforms; rather, it represents a deep reconfiguration of strategy, structure, culture, work processes, value creation, and managerial cognition. Vial (2019) defines digital transformation as a process through which digital technologies create disruptions that trigger strategic organizational responses and produce changes in value creation pathways, organizational structures, and outcomes. Similarly, Verhoef et al. (2021) distinguish digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation as progressively deeper stages of organizational change, with digital transformation involving business model innovation, new capabilities, and altered performance logics. These definitions suggest that leadership can no longer be conceptualized as a stable interpersonal influence process separated from technology, platforms, data infrastructures, and digital ecosystems.



The transformation of leadership in the digital era has historical roots in earlier scholarship on e-leadership. Avolio et al. (2000) argued that advanced information technologies influence leadership processes while also being shaped by organizational structures and leadership practices. This view was later expanded by Avolio et al. (2014), who emphasized that technology changes both the source and transmission of leadership influence. These early contributions are important because they shift attention from leaders as isolated individuals to leadership as a technology-mediated process embedded in socio-technical systems. However, the current phase of digital transformation is more complex than early e-leadership contexts. Organizations now operate through cloud infrastructures, artificial intelligence, enterprise platforms, real-time dashboards, digital workspaces, hybrid teams, algorithmic decision systems, and data-driven performance architectures. Therefore, digital leadership must be examined not only as communication through technology but also as the redesign of leadership systems.

The concept of leadership systems is especially relevant because digital transformation alters the distribution of authority, knowledge, coordination, and accountability across organizations. Traditional leadership models often assumed relatively clear boundaries between leader and follower, strategy and execution, human judgment and technical support, and organization and environment. Digital transformation weakens these boundaries. Data circulate rapidly across organizational levels; employees interact through platforms rather than only through formal hierarchy; customers and external partners participate in innovation processes; and algorithmic systems increasingly influence planning, evaluation, and decision-making. Yoo et al. (2010) describe digital innovation as creating a new organizing logic based on layered modular architectures, which changes how firms organize innovation and coordination. From a leadership perspective, this means that influence is increasingly exercised through architectures, routines, platforms, analytics, and ecosystems rather than through direct supervision alone.

Recent literature has increasingly recognized digital leadership as a distinct field of inquiry. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) show that leaders are central to developing digital culture, enabling collaboration among dispersed stakeholders, and addressing ethical concerns in digitalized organizations. Bibliometric research also indicates that digital leadership is a growing but still fragmented field. Tigre et al. (2023) conducted a bibliometric and network analysis of digital leadership research and found that the field expanded rapidly but remained conceptually dispersed across different journals and research traditions. More recent reviews identify digital transformation, digitalization, virtual teams, creativity, and COVID-19-related organizational change as central themes in digital leadership scholarship. These findings suggest that digital leadership is maturing as a research domain, yet theoretical integration remains incomplete.

One reason for this incompleteness is that much of the literature focuses on the competencies of digital leaders rather than the systemic transformation of leadership. Competency-based approaches are useful because they identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes leaders need in digital environments. For instance, leaders must understand digital technologies, encourage experimentation, develop digital culture, support innovation, manage distributed teams, and communicate across multiple channels. However, such approaches may understate the extent to which digital transformation changes the very conditions under which leadership is produced. Leadership is not simply performed by more digitally competent individuals; it is increasingly enacted through networks of people, data, technologies, and institutional arrangements. This requires a broader system-level perspective.

The dynamic capabilities perspective provides a useful theoretical foundation for this argument. Warner and Wäger (2019) show that digital transformation involves an ongoing process of strategic renewal through which organizations build digital sensing, seizing, and transforming capabilities. Leadership is central to this process

because leaders interpret technological opportunities, mobilize resources, redesign structures, and institutionalize new routines. Yet digital transformation also challenges the assumption that leaders alone sense and decide. In digitally mature organizations, sensing is distributed across dashboards, analytics teams, customer data, digital platforms, frontline employees, and external ecosystems. Therefore, leadership capability becomes collective, embedded, and technologically augmented.

Complexity leadership theory also helps explain why digital transformation requires a systemic view of leadership. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argue that leadership in knowledge-producing organizations should focus on enabling learning, creativity, and adaptive capacity in complex adaptive systems. Digital transformation intensifies complexity because it increases speed, interdependence, uncertainty, and nonlinearity. Leaders cannot rely only on planning, command, and compliance; they must create conditions for experimentation, cross-functional learning, rapid feedback, and adaptive coordination. In this context, leadership becomes less about controlling organizational behavior and more about designing adaptive spaces in which human and digital capabilities can interact productively.

Empirical studies further support the importance of digital leadership for innovation and performance. Benitez et al. (2022) found that digital leadership capability improves innovation performance through platform digitization capability. Shin et al. (2023) found that digital leadership has both direct and indirect relationships with sustainable organizational performance through digital culture and employees' digital capabilities. These studies suggest that digital leadership works through mediating mechanisms rather than direct influence alone. Leadership reshapes culture, capabilities, platforms, and employee readiness, which then affect organizational outcomes. This reinforces the need to study leadership as a system of interdependent mechanisms.

Despite these advances, several research gaps remain. First, the literature has not sufficiently explained how digital transformation changes the architecture of leadership systems. Existing studies often examine digital leadership as a capability, style, or competency but pay less attention to how decision rights, communication flows, authority structures, and accountability mechanisms are redesigned. Second, the relationship between algorithmic systems and leadership remains underdeveloped. As artificial intelligence and analytics become embedded in organizational decision-making, leaders must negotiate the boundary between human judgment and machine recommendation. Third, there is limited qualitative evidence from non-Western and emerging-market contexts, where organizations often face distinctive infrastructural, cultural, regulatory, and capability constraints. Fourth, future research roadmaps often emerge from literature reviews or bibliometric analyses but are less frequently connected to the lived interpretations of managers and experts who experience digital transformation in practice.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining how digital transformation reshapes leadership systems through a qualitative exploratory approach. Although the title is bibliometric-oriented, the empirical design follows an interview-based roadmap logic, using expert accounts to identify the conceptual structure and future research priorities of the field. This approach is appropriate because leadership systems are socially constructed, context-dependent, and difficult to capture through quantitative indicators alone. By interviewing senior managers, consultants, organizational development specialists, and academic researchers in Tehran, the study seeks to develop an interpretive understanding of how digital transformation changes leadership roles, authority patterns, cultural expectations, decision-making processes, and ethical responsibilities.

Accordingly, this study aims to explain how digital transformation reshapes leadership systems and to develop a future research roadmap for digital-era leadership theory.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative exploratory design to examine how digital transformation reshapes leadership systems in organizations. A qualitative design was selected because the purpose of the study was not to test predefined hypotheses but to develop an interpretive understanding of how experts perceive changes in leadership roles, authority structures, decision-making processes, organizational culture, and human–technology relations during digital transformation. The study was conducted in Tehran, Iran, because Tehran contains a high concentration of large organizations, technology-oriented firms, consulting companies, universities, and public and private institutions engaged in digital transformation projects.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were: at least five years of professional or academic experience in leadership, organizational development, digital transformation, information systems, human resource management, or strategic management; direct involvement in at least one digital transformation or digital change project; willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview; and ability to provide reflective insights into leadership changes caused by digital technologies. The exclusion criteria were lack of practical or research experience with digital transformation, unwillingness to be audio-recorded, or incomplete participation in the interview process. The final sample consisted of 24 participants, including 8 senior organizational managers, 6 digital transformation consultants, 5 organizational development and human resource specialists, and 5 academic experts in management and information systems. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 21 interviews, and 3 additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories.

3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the literature on digital transformation, e-leadership, digital leadership, dynamic capabilities, and complexity leadership. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences of digital transformation, perceived changes in leadership roles, changes in decision-making and authority, digital culture development, employee participation, data-driven management, platform-based coordination, ethical challenges, and future research priorities. Example questions included: "How has digital transformation changed the role of leaders in your organization or field?" "What leadership capabilities are most important in digitally transforming organizations?" "How do data and digital platforms affect decision-making authority?" and "What ethical or human challenges emerge when leadership becomes increasingly technology-mediated?"

Interviews were conducted individually and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also prepared after each interview to capture contextual observations, preliminary interpretations, and emerging analytical ideas. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no substantially new codes or categories emerged from additional interviews. To improve credibility, participants were given the opportunity to clarify or expand their views when needed.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. The analysis followed an inductive coding process inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework and the Gioia methodology for qualitative rigor. In the first stage, transcripts were read several times to achieve immersion in the data. In the second stage, open codes were generated line by line to capture meaningful statements related to leadership transformation, digital culture, decision-making, authority, collaboration, ethics, and future research gaps. In the third stage, similar codes were grouped into preliminary categories. In the fourth stage, categories were refined through constant comparison across interviews. In the fifth stage, five main themes were developed to explain how digital transformation reshapes leadership systems. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a future research roadmap.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several strategies. Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement with the data, participant clarification, and the use of direct quotations. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category revisions, and analytical memos. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo-writing to reduce researcher bias. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants, context, and analytical procedures.

5. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that 24 experts participated in the study. In terms of gender, 15 participants were men and 9 were women. Regarding age, 5 participants were between 30 and 39 years old, 11 were between 40 and 49 years old, and 8 were 50 years old or older. In terms of professional background, 8 participants were senior managers, 6 were digital transformation consultants, 5 were organizational development or human resource specialists, and 5 were academic experts. Regarding work experience, 4 participants had 5–10 years of experience, 12 had 11–20 years, and 8 had more than 20 years. In terms of organizational sector, 9 participants were from private companies, 6 from public or semi-public organizations, 5 from consulting firms, and 4 from universities or research institutions.

The first main category was **leadership as socio-technical orchestration**. Participants emphasized that digital transformation changes leadership from direct supervision to the coordination of people, technologies, processes, and external partners. In their view, leaders in digital organizations must not only guide employees but also align data systems, digital platforms, customer interfaces, technological infrastructures, and organizational routines. One participant stated, "In the past, leadership meant telling people what direction to take; now it means making sure people, platforms, and processes can move together without blocking each other" (P7). Another participant explained, "The leader is no longer just above the system; the leader is inside a network of technology, data, users, and teams" (P14). This category shows that digital transformation expands the object of leadership from human behavior alone to socio-technical alignment.

The second main category was **data-informed and adaptive decision-making**. Participants described digital transformation as shifting leadership decision-making from experience-based judgment to evidence-informed sensemaking. However, they did not view data as a replacement for managerial judgment. Instead, they argued that leaders must interpret data critically, combine analytics with contextual knowledge, and avoid blind dependence on dashboards. One participant noted, "Data gives speed, but it does not automatically give wisdom. Leaders still need to ask what the numbers cannot show" (P3). Another participant stated, "Digital transformation

creates a new discipline: leaders must decide faster, but they must also question the algorithm before accepting its recommendation” (P19). This category indicates that digital leadership involves the capacity to balance analytics, human interpretation, uncertainty, and ethical responsibility.

The third main category was **distributed and platform-based leadership authority**. Participants explained that digital transformation weakens traditional hierarchical authority by enabling more horizontal communication, faster access to information, and greater employee participation. Digital platforms allow employees, teams, customers, and partners to contribute to decision-making and innovation. As a result, leadership becomes more distributed across roles, teams, and networks. One participant observed, “When everyone can see the same dashboard, authority changes. The manager cannot control information like before” (P11). Another participant explained, “Leadership is becoming less about position and more about contribution. The person who understands the platform or the customer data may lead the conversation, even without a formal title” (P22). This category shows that digital transformation redistributes influence and requires leaders to design participatory governance mechanisms.

The fourth main category was **digital culture and capability building**. Participants consistently argued that digital transformation fails when organizations focus on technology implementation without developing culture, skills, and learning capacity. They emphasized experimentation, psychological safety, digital literacy, cross-functional collaboration, and tolerance for failure as core cultural requirements. One participant stated, “Buying software is the easiest part. Changing the mindset of managers and employees is the real transformation” (P5). Another participant said, “Digital leadership means creating a culture where people are not afraid of data, not afraid of learning, and not afraid of saying that an old process no longer works” (P16). This category indicates that leadership systems are reshaped through capability development and cultural renewal rather than technological adoption alone.

The fifth main category was **ethical governance of human–technology relations**. Participants highlighted privacy, surveillance, algorithmic bias, employee autonomy, digital fatigue, and trust as major leadership challenges. They argued that leaders must protect human dignity while using digital systems for efficiency and innovation. One participant explained, “Digital tools can make the organization smarter, but they can also make employees feel constantly watched” (P9). Another participant stated, “The future of leadership depends on whether people trust the technology and trust the leaders who use it” (P20). This category shows that digital transformation creates new ethical responsibilities for leaders, especially when technology mediates performance evaluation, communication, and decision-making.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that digital transformation reshapes leadership systems through five interrelated mechanisms: socio-technical orchestration, data-informed decision-making, distributed authority, digital culture building, and ethical governance. The first finding indicates that leadership is no longer limited to interpersonal influence or hierarchical coordination. Instead, it increasingly involves the orchestration of socio-technical systems. This result is consistent with Vial’s (2019) argument that digital transformation creates structural changes and organizational barriers that must be managed strategically. It also supports Avolio et al.’s (2000) early claim that leadership and advanced information technologies mutually influence one another. In digitally transforming

organizations, leaders must align human actors, technological infrastructures, data systems, and organizational routines. Therefore, leadership becomes a system-design function rather than merely a behavioral influence function.

The second finding shows that digital transformation changes decision-making by increasing reliance on data, analytics, dashboards, and algorithmic recommendations. Participants emphasized that data improves speed and visibility but does not eliminate the need for judgment. This finding aligns with the broader digital transformation literature, which suggests that digital technologies alter strategic responses and value creation processes but require organizational interpretation and capability development (Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019). The implication is that digital leadership is not equivalent to technocratic decision-making. Rather, effective digital leaders must combine analytical literacy with contextual intelligence, ethical reflection, and strategic sensemaking. This finding also extends e-leadership theory by showing that technology does not simply transmit leadership influence; it actively shapes the informational environment in which leadership decisions are made.

The third finding indicates that leadership authority becomes more distributed and platform-based during digital transformation. Participants reported that digital platforms reduce information asymmetry, accelerate communication, and allow expertise to emerge outside formal hierarchy. This finding is consistent with Yoo et al.'s (2010) argument that digital innovation creates new organizing logics through layered modular architectures. It also corresponds with complexity leadership theory, which views leadership as an enabling process that supports learning, creativity, and adaptation in complex systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In digital organizations, authority is not abolished, but it becomes more fluid, knowledge-based, and situational. Leaders must therefore shift from controlling information to designing conditions for responsible participation.

The fourth finding highlights digital culture and capability building as central to leadership system transformation. Participants emphasized that digital transformation cannot succeed through technology acquisition alone. This result aligns with Cortellazzo et al. (2019), who found that leaders are key actors in developing digital culture and enabling collaborative processes in complex digital settings. It also supports Shin et al. (2023), who found that digital culture and employees' digital capabilities mediate the relationship between digital leadership and sustainable organizational performance. The present findings suggest that digital leadership should be understood as a cultural capability-building process. Leaders must create learning-oriented environments in which employees can experiment, develop digital literacy, collaborate across functions, and reinterpret their roles in relation to emerging technologies.

The fifth finding concerns ethical governance. Participants described privacy, surveillance, algorithmic bias, autonomy, and trust as major issues in digital leadership. This finding is consistent with Cortellazzo et al.'s (2019) emphasis on ethical concerns in digitalized leadership contexts. It also expands current discussions by showing that ethical leadership in digital transformation is not limited to moral behavior at the individual level. It involves governance of data practices, algorithmic systems, performance monitoring, and human–technology boundaries. As organizations adopt analytics and artificial intelligence, leadership systems must include accountability mechanisms that protect employee dignity, transparency, fairness, and trust.

Taken together, the findings suggest that digital transformation reshapes leadership at three levels. At the micro level, leaders require new competencies, including digital literacy, adaptive sensemaking, ethical judgment, and the ability to lead hybrid teams. At the meso level, organizations must redesign structures, communication routines, decision processes, and cultural norms to support distributed leadership. At the macro level, leadership

must be understood within digital ecosystems that include platforms, customers, regulators, partners, and technological infrastructures. This multi-level interpretation contributes to the literature by moving beyond individualistic definitions of digital leadership and toward a systems-based understanding of leadership transformation.

The findings also provide a future research roadmap. First, future studies should examine how leadership authority is redistributed in platform-based organizations. Second, scholars should investigate the relationship between algorithmic decision systems and human leadership judgment. Third, more research is needed on digital leadership in emerging economies, where infrastructural constraints, institutional conditions, and cultural expectations may produce different transformation patterns. Fourth, longitudinal studies should examine how leadership systems evolve across different stages of digital transformation. Fifth, future research should develop measurement models for leadership system maturity, including socio-technical alignment, distributed authority, ethical governance, and digital learning culture.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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