

Exploring Leadership Evolution in Platform-Based Organizations: Toward a New Management Paradigm

Leila Mansouri^{1*}

1. Department of Business Management, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed to explore how leadership evolves in platform-based organizations and to develop a qualitative understanding of the emerging management paradigm required for digital platform environments. This qualitative study was conducted using an interpretive research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 21 senior managers, digital transformation specialists, product leaders, platform strategists, and human resource managers working in platform-based organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience with platform strategy, digital ecosystem governance, algorithmic coordination, and leadership transformation. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new concepts emerged from the final interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Coding moved from open coding to axial categorization and final theme development. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking, peer review, coding comparison, and an audit trail were used. The analysis generated four main categories: leadership as ecosystem orchestration, algorithmically mediated coordination, stakeholder trust and platform governance, and adaptive distributed leadership capability. The findings showed that leadership in platform-based organizations is moving away from hierarchical command and toward the orchestration of multi-sided actors, data-driven decision-making, modular coordination, and continuous strategic adaptation. Participants emphasized that platform leaders must manage not only employees but also users, complementors, developers, partners, regulators, and algorithmic systems. The study suggests that platform-based organizations require a new management paradigm in which leadership is relational, technological, ecosystemic, and adaptive. Effective platform leadership depends on the ability to balance scalability with trust, automation with human judgment, openness with control, and strategic direction with distributed participation.

Keywords: Platform-based organizations; digital leadership; platform leadership; ecosystem orchestration; algorithmic management; qualitative study; management paradigm.

✉ *CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S EMAIL

leila.mansouri.bus@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of platform-based organizations has transformed the basic assumptions of management, leadership, and organizational design. Traditional organizations were largely structured around linear value chains, formal hierarchies, internal resources, and managerial control over employees and assets. In contrast, platform-based organizations create value by enabling interactions among multiple groups of actors, including producers, consumers, developers, service providers, complementors, advertisers, regulators, and data infrastructures. This shift has changed the meaning of leadership. In platform environments, leaders are no longer responsible only for directing internal employees or optimizing internal processes; rather, they must design, govern, and continuously adapt interaction systems through which value is co-created across organizational boundaries. As platform competition increasingly shapes digital markets, a central question emerges: what kind



of leadership paradigm is required when organizations operate less as bounded firms and more as dynamic ecosystems?

The concept of platform leadership originally emerged from studies of technology firms that shaped industry-wide innovation by creating core technologies around which other firms could build complementary products. Gawer and Cusumano (2002) described platform leadership as the capacity of firms such as Intel, Microsoft, and Cisco to influence broader ecosystems through architectural decisions, interface standards, complementary innovation, and strategic coordination. This early view remains important because it shows that platform leadership is not merely internal managerial competence; it is a form of ecosystem influence. Later platform research expanded this perspective by showing that digital platforms differ from traditional pipeline businesses because they generate value through network effects, multi-sided markets, external innovation, and scalable interaction architectures (Eisenmann et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2016; Van Alstyne et al., 2016). These characteristics require leaders to think beyond organizational boundaries and to manage both participation and governance.

Platform-based organizations differ from conventional firms in the way they organize value creation. In pipeline organizations, value is typically produced through sequential stages: inputs are transformed into outputs and delivered to customers. In platform organizations, value emerges from interactions among participants. The organization's role is not simply to produce goods or services but to facilitate, regulate, and monetize exchanges. This distinction has deep implications for leadership. Leaders must design rules, incentives, interfaces, feedback systems, data flows, and trust mechanisms. They must also manage the paradox of openness and control: platforms must be sufficiently open to attract participants and stimulate innovation, yet sufficiently governed to maintain quality, trust, safety, and strategic coherence (Tiwana, 2014). Therefore, leadership evolves from supervision of internal labor toward orchestration of distributed agency.

The platform organization is also closely connected to the rise of digital ecosystems. Ecosystems emerge when interdependent actors coordinate without being fully integrated into a single hierarchy. Jacobides et al. (2018) argued that modularity enables ecosystem emergence because it allows distinct actors to contribute complementary activities while remaining organizationally independent. This condition is particularly visible in platform-based firms, where technical modularity, application programming interfaces, data standards, and governance rules shape the behavior of external actors. Leadership in this context requires ecosystem thinking. Leaders must understand how architectural choices influence strategic behavior, how complementors respond to governance changes, how users build trust, and how value is captured without destroying participation. The leadership challenge is therefore not only strategic but also relational and political.

Digital platforms also challenge older assumptions about managerial authority. Leadership in bureaucratic organizations has often been associated with formal position, administrative authority, planning, monitoring, and control. However, in platform-based organizations, authority is dispersed across human managers, digital infrastructures, algorithms, user communities, data dashboards, and market feedback loops. Algorithmic management has intensified this transformation by embedding managerial functions into technological systems. Algorithms may allocate work, rank participants, recommend actions, evaluate performance, detect risk, and trigger rewards or sanctions (Duggan et al., 2020; Jarrahi et al., 2021; Kellogg et al., 2020). Consequently, leadership becomes hybrid: it is exercised through both human judgment and machine-mediated coordination. This does not eliminate leadership; rather, it changes where leadership is located and how it is enacted.

The expansion of algorithmic systems creates new opportunities and risks for platform leaders. On the one hand, algorithmic coordination enables scale, speed, personalization, and operational efficiency. On the other hand, it may produce opacity, perceived unfairness, dependency, and resistance among participants. In platform-based organizations, leaders must therefore govern the relationship between human decision-making and algorithmic decision-making. They must decide which decisions should be automated, which should remain human, and how algorithmic outputs should be explained, contested, and corrected. This issue is especially important in platforms where workers, sellers, drivers, freelancers, or service providers depend on ratings, rankings, search visibility, and automated performance metrics. Leadership becomes ethically charged because platform rules can affect livelihoods, autonomy, and participation.

Digital transformation scholarship also shows that technology changes not only tools but also organizational identities, capabilities, structures, and value creation paths. Vial (2019) described digital transformation as a process in which digital technologies create disruptions that require strategic responses and organizational changes. Yoo et al. (2010) argued that digital innovation is characterized by layered modular architectures that change how organizations innovate and coordinate. Nambisan et al. (2017) further emphasized that digital innovation involves distributed agency, generativity, and reconfigurable boundaries. These insights suggest that platform leadership must be understood as an evolutionary phenomenon. It is not simply the application of old leadership models to new technologies; it is a transformation in the very conditions under which leadership occurs.

Leadership studies provide useful theoretical resources for understanding this transformation. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-intensive and adaptive systems must enable emergence, learning, and innovation rather than rely exclusively on top-down control (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Distributed and collective leadership perspectives similarly suggest that leadership is often practiced across multiple actors, roles, and situations rather than embodied in a single heroic individual (Denis et al., 2010). These perspectives are highly relevant to platform-based organizations because platforms depend on distributed participation, rapid adaptation, and multi-actor coordination. However, platform organizations introduce an additional layer: leadership is not only distributed among people but also mediated by digital architectures and algorithmic systems.

Despite growing research on digital platforms, platform ecosystems, and algorithmic management, there remains a need for deeper qualitative understanding of how managers themselves experience leadership evolution in platform-based organizations. Much of the existing literature explains platform strategy, governance, architecture, and ecosystem competition, but fewer studies examine how leaders reinterpret their roles, practices, and responsibilities when operating in platform environments. This gap is important because leadership transformation is not merely a technical or structural process; it is also interpretive. Managers must make sense of ambiguity, negotiate tensions, redefine authority, and develop new capabilities. Understanding these lived interpretations can help develop a more grounded theory of leadership evolution in platform-based organizations.

The Iranian and Tehran-based context provides a meaningful setting for such inquiry. Platform-based organizations in Tehran operate in dynamic, uncertain, and institutionally complex environments. They face rapid digital growth, regulatory ambiguity, infrastructure constraints, changing user expectations, and intense competition. These conditions make leadership adaptation especially visible. Managers in these organizations must balance local institutional realities with global platform logics such as scalability, datafication, ecosystem coordination, and algorithmic governance. Studying leaders in this context can therefore generate insights that are

relevant not only to local digital businesses but also to broader debates about the future of management in platform economies.

Accordingly, this study explores leadership evolution in platform-based organizations by examining the experiences of managers and digital leaders in Tehran. The study seeks to identify the main dimensions of the emerging leadership paradigm and to explain how platform-based organizing changes managerial roles, decision processes, authority relations, and governance responsibilities. The aim of this study was to explore how leadership evolves in platform-based organizations and to develop a qualitative model of the new management paradigm required for digital platform environments.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative interpretive design to explore leadership evolution in platform-based organizations. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to test predefined hypotheses but to understand how experienced organizational actors interpret, describe, and construct meaning around leadership transformation in platform environments. The research focused on platform-based organizations located in Tehran, including digital service platforms, e-commerce platforms, fintech platforms, online marketplace firms, platform-based logistics companies, and organizations that had shifted from traditional digital business models toward multi-sided platform models.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: at least five years of professional experience in management, digital transformation, platform strategy, product leadership, human resource management, ecosystem development, or organizational development; direct involvement in a platform-based organization; and willingness to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview. The final sample included 21 participants. The sample consisted of 7 senior managers, 5 product or platform managers, 4 digital transformation specialists, 3 human resource or organizational development managers, and 2 ecosystem partnership managers. Participants were recruited from Tehran-based organizations because Tehran is the major concentration point of digital businesses, technology start-ups, platform firms, and innovation ecosystems in Iran. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached after the nineteenth interview, when no substantially new themes emerged, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' experiences of leadership transformation in platform-based organizations. The main interview questions addressed the following topics: how leadership roles have changed in platform organizations; how decision-making differs from traditional organizations; how managers coordinate internal and external actors; how algorithms, dashboards, and data systems influence leadership; how platform governance affects trust and participation; what tensions leaders experience between control and openness; and what capabilities are necessary for future platform leaders. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, obtain examples, and explore contradictions in participants' responses.

The interviews were conducted in a private and professional setting, either face-to-face or through secure online communication depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before each interview,

participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. To protect anonymity, all names of participants and organizations were replaced with codes. The interview guide was revised slightly after the first three interviews to improve clarity and encourage richer descriptions of platform-specific leadership practices.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed an iterative process. First, interview transcripts were read several times to gain familiarity with the data. Second, initial open codes were generated from meaningful units of text. These codes captured participants' descriptions of leadership roles, decision-making, platform governance, algorithmic coordination, user trust, ecosystem relationships, and adaptive capabilities. Third, related codes were compared and clustered into broader categories. Fourth, the emerging categories were reviewed against the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented the data. Fifth, final themes were defined and named.

NVivo was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, retrieve coded segments, and compare patterns across participants. The coding process moved from descriptive coding to interpretive categorization. Examples of initial codes included "leader as rule designer," "data replacing hierarchy," "algorithmic opacity," "external actors as part of organization," "trust as platform asset," "constant redesign," "distributed decision authority," and "balancing scale and human judgment." These codes were gradually organized into four main categories: leadership as ecosystem orchestration, algorithmically mediated coordination, stakeholder trust and platform governance, and adaptive distributed leadership capability. To enhance credibility, selected interpretations were returned to several participants for member checking. Peer review was also used to examine the coherence of the coding structure. Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting coding decisions, category revisions, and theme development.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants indicated a diverse group of platform-oriented professionals. Of the 21 participants, 14 were male and 7 were female. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 8 were between 36 and 40 years old, 6 were between 41 and 45 years old, and 2 were older than 45. Regarding educational level, 4 participants held a bachelor's degree, 13 held a master's degree, and 4 held a doctoral degree. In relation to organizational role, 7 participants were senior managers, 5 were product or platform managers, 4 were digital transformation specialists, 3 were human resource or organizational development managers, and 2 were ecosystem partnership managers. In terms of work experience, 6 participants had 5–8 years of relevant experience, 9 had 9–12 years, and 6 had more than 12 years. All participants were working in Tehran-based platform or platform-transitioning organizations.

Leadership as ecosystem orchestration. The first main category showed that leadership in platform-based organizations is evolving from internal supervision to ecosystem orchestration. Participants repeatedly emphasized that leaders can no longer define their responsibilities only in relation to employees, departments, and internal workflows. Instead, they must coordinate a wider system of users, sellers, service providers, developers, partners, regulators, payment systems, logistics actors, and data infrastructures. One participant stated, "In a traditional company, I could say my team is inside the building, but in a platform company, half of my real team is outside the organization." Another participant explained, "Leadership is now about designing the field where

others can play, not playing every role yourself.” This category suggests that platform leaders operate as architects of participation. Their core task is to create conditions under which different actors can interact productively, safely, and repeatedly. Leadership therefore becomes less about direct command and more about configuring rules, incentives, interfaces, standards, and relational expectations across a multi-sided ecosystem.

Algorithmically mediated coordination. The second main category indicated that leadership is increasingly mediated by algorithms, dashboards, data analytics, and automated decision systems. Participants described how platform organizations rely on digital systems to allocate tasks, recommend priorities, monitor performance, rank users or providers, detect fraud, personalize services, and support strategic decisions. However, they also emphasized that algorithmic coordination does not remove leadership; rather, it changes the leader’s responsibility. One participant noted, “The algorithm manages thousands of interactions every hour, but leadership decides what the algorithm should optimize for.” Another participant stated, “If we only follow dashboards, we may become fast but blind.” Participants argued that leaders must understand data logic, challenge algorithmic outputs, and prevent over-automation. This category shows that leadership in platform organizations becomes a hybrid practice in which human judgment and machine intelligence are intertwined. The leader’s role shifts from manually controlling operations to governing the assumptions, values, and consequences embedded in digital coordination systems.

Stakeholder trust and platform governance. The third main category reflected the central importance of trust, fairness, transparency, and governance in platform leadership. Participants emphasized that platform organizations depend on the willingness of different actors to participate, share data, transact, contribute, and remain active. Trust was described not as a soft cultural value but as a strategic infrastructure. One participant said, “If users do not trust the rules, the platform becomes only an app, not an ecosystem.” Another participant explained, “Every governance decision has two sides: it solves one problem but may create distrust in another group.” Participants described tensions around commission rates, visibility rules, rating systems, complaint handling, data use, and sanctions. Leaders were expected to balance the interests of multiple stakeholder groups without allowing one side of the platform to dominate or abandon the system. This category suggests that platform leadership involves governance design. Leaders must make visible, legitimate, and adjustable rules that sustain participation while protecting the strategic integrity of the platform.

Adaptive distributed leadership capability. The fourth main category showed that platform-based organizations require adaptive and distributed leadership capability. Participants reported that platform environments are too complex and fast-moving for all decisions to be centralized. Market signals, user behavior, regulatory changes, technological updates, competitor moves, and partner responses create continuous pressure for adaptation. One participant stated, “By the time a decision reaches the top, the platform reality may have already changed.” Another participant argued, “The best platform leaders do not keep all authority; they distribute intelligence across product teams, data teams, support teams, and ecosystem partners.” Participants described effective leadership as the ability to create shared direction while allowing decentralized experimentation. This category indicates that platform leadership depends on agility, learning, cross-functional collaboration, and rapid feedback loops. Leaders must enable teams to sense changes, test solutions, and adjust rules without waiting for formal hierarchical approval. Thus, leadership becomes a system capability rather than only an individual competency.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how leadership evolves in platform-based organizations and to develop a qualitative understanding of the emerging management paradigm required for digital platform environments. The findings showed that leadership evolution in platform organizations can be understood through four main dimensions: ecosystem orchestration, algorithmically mediated coordination, stakeholder trust and governance, and adaptive distributed leadership capability. Together, these dimensions suggest that platform leadership is not simply a digital version of traditional leadership. It represents a deeper shift from managing internal organizational resources to governing dynamic systems of interaction, data, technology, and distributed actors.

The first finding showed that leadership in platform-based organizations evolves into ecosystem orchestration. Participants emphasized that leaders must coordinate actors who are not formally employed by the organization but are essential to its value creation logic. This finding aligns with platform leadership theory, which argues that platform leaders must mobilize complementary innovation and influence broader industry or ecosystem structures (Gawer & Cusumano, 2002). It also supports ecosystem theory, according to which value is produced through interdependent actors that coordinate without full hierarchical integration (Jacobides et al., 2018). In platform-based organizations, leadership therefore becomes boundary-spanning. Leaders must influence actors through architecture, rules, incentives, and trust rather than through formal employment contracts alone. This finding expands traditional leadership thinking by showing that the relevant unit of leadership is no longer the internal organization but the platform ecosystem.

The second finding showed that leadership is increasingly mediated by algorithmic coordination. Participants described algorithms and dashboards as central elements of decision-making, monitoring, ranking, matching, and resource allocation. This result is consistent with the literature on algorithmic management, which shows that digital systems increasingly perform managerial functions such as directing, evaluating, rewarding, and disciplining work (Duggan et al., 2020; Jarrahi et al., 2021; Kellogg et al., 2020). However, the findings also show that algorithmic systems do not make leadership irrelevant. Instead, they shift leadership to a higher level of design and governance. Leaders must decide what algorithms should optimize, how data should be interpreted, how exceptions should be handled, and how algorithmic decisions should be explained. This supports the view that digital transformation requires changes in organizational capabilities and managerial judgment rather than only technological adoption (Vial, 2019).

The third finding revealed that trust and governance are core leadership responsibilities in platform organizations. Participants described trust as essential for sustaining user participation, partner commitment, and ecosystem growth. This finding aligns with Tiwana's (2014) argument that platform governance is a central mechanism for aligning architecture, strategy, and participant behavior. It also reflects the broader platform literature showing that platform owners must balance openness and control to attract complementors while maintaining quality and strategic coherence (Parker et al., 2016; Van Alstyne et al., 2016). The present study adds that this balance is experienced by leaders as a continuous governance tension. Decisions about pricing, ratings, sanctions, visibility, access, and data use are not merely technical decisions; they are leadership decisions because they shape perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and belonging within the platform.

The fourth finding showed that leadership in platform-based organizations is increasingly adaptive and distributed. Participants argued that fast-changing platform environments require decentralized intelligence, rapid experimentation, and cross-functional collaboration. This finding is consistent with complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes adaptive capacity, emergence, learning, and network-based problem-solving in complex systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It also corresponds with distributed leadership perspectives that define leadership as a collective and situated practice rather than merely the behavior of formal leaders (Denis et al., 2010). In platform organizations, this distributed quality becomes even more important because decisions must respond to continuous data flows, user feedback, ecosystem reactions, and technological changes. The leader's role is therefore not to centralize all decisions but to create the conditions for intelligent decentralization.

The findings also suggest that platform leadership contains several paradoxes. The first paradox is openness versus control. Platforms must attract external participants, but uncontrolled participation can reduce quality, safety, and trust. The second paradox is automation versus human judgment. Algorithmic systems enable scale, but overreliance on automation can produce opacity and unfairness. The third paradox is decentralization versus strategic coherence. Distributed teams need autonomy, but platform organizations still require shared direction and integrated governance. The fourth paradox is growth versus legitimacy. Rapid platform scaling can increase market power, but it may also intensify stakeholder concerns regarding fairness, dependency, and accountability. Effective platform leaders are those who can hold these tensions productively rather than resolve them simplistically.

A major implication of the study is that leadership in platform-based organizations should be understood as a design-oriented practice. Leaders design interaction rules, governance mechanisms, algorithmic priorities, data infrastructures, feedback loops, participation incentives, and trust systems. This differs from conventional leadership models that focus primarily on motivation, communication, supervision, or strategic vision inside the firm. Platform leaders must still motivate and communicate, but these actions are insufficient unless they are embedded in scalable systems that structure the behavior of thousands or millions of participants. Therefore, the emerging leadership paradigm is architectural as well as interpersonal.

Another implication is that platform leadership requires technological literacy without technological determinism. Participants did not describe effective leaders as technical experts only. Rather, they described them as leaders who can understand the strategic and ethical consequences of technology. This distinction is important. A platform leader does not need to write the algorithm, but must understand what the algorithm does, what assumptions it contains, what behaviors it incentivizes, and what harms it might produce. This finding supports recent debates in algorithmic management, where scholars warn that algorithmic systems reshape control, autonomy, and power relations in organizations (Kellogg et al., 2020). Platform leadership therefore requires critical data literacy, ethical awareness, and the ability to govern human–technology relations.

The study also contributes to management theory by suggesting that platform-based organizations require a new management paradigm. The traditional management paradigm was built around planning, hierarchy, resource ownership, internal efficiency, and control. The platform management paradigm is built around orchestration, modularity, ecosystem governance, algorithmic coordination, distributed intelligence, and adaptive learning. This does not mean that hierarchy disappears completely. Formal authority still exists, especially in strategic decisions, risk management, legal accountability, and resource allocation. However, hierarchy is no longer sufficient as the

main coordination mechanism. It must be combined with digital architectures, platform rules, participatory governance, and decentralized decision systems.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that organizations transitioning toward platform models must redesign leadership development. Leadership development should not focus only on personal traits, communication skills, or team supervision. It should include platform strategy, ecosystem governance, data ethics, algorithmic accountability, stakeholder trust, digital architecture, and adaptive experimentation. Leaders must learn how to manage relationships among actors who may not share the same interests but whose participation is mutually necessary. They must also learn to evaluate platform health through indicators such as engagement quality, participant trust, complementor satisfaction, governance fairness, and ecosystem resilience, not only through revenue or growth metrics.

The findings further show that platform leadership is context-sensitive. The Tehran-based participants described platform leadership in an environment characterized by regulatory uncertainty, economic volatility, infrastructure challenges, and rapid digital adoption. These contextual conditions intensified the need for adaptive leadership. In more stable institutional environments, platform leaders may focus more on scaling and innovation; in more uncertain environments, they must also focus on resilience, legitimacy, and improvisation. Therefore, leadership evolution in platform organizations should not be treated as a universal and context-free process. Local institutional conditions shape how platform leadership is practiced and what capabilities become most important.

Overall, the study supports and extends existing literature by showing that platform leadership is an ecosystemic, algorithmic, governance-oriented, and adaptive form of leadership. It is ecosystemic because leaders coordinate multiple actors beyond the firm. It is algorithmic because leadership is mediated by digital systems and data infrastructures. It is governance-oriented because trust, fairness, and rule design are central to platform survival. It is adaptive because platform environments require continuous learning and distributed problem-solving. These four dimensions together form the basis of a new management paradigm for platform-based organizations.

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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