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Reconceptualizing Leadership for Smart Organizations: A Review-Based Framework for the Next Generation of Management Systems

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a review-informed qualitative framework for reconceptualizing leadership in smart organizations and next-generation management systems. The study adopted an exploratory qualitative design grounded in prior literature on digital transformation, complexity leadership, dynamic capabilities, smart organizations, and digital leadership. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 experts, senior managers, digital transformation consultants, and organizational development specialists working in Tehran-based technology-intensive, knowledge-based, and digitally transforming organizations. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling based on their direct experience with smart management systems, artificial intelligence-enabled decision-making, digital transformation, or leadership development. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm conceptual adequacy. Data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Open coding, axial categorization, constant comparison, peer checking, and member validation were used to enhance analytical rigor. The analysis generated five main categories: intelligent strategic sensemaking, data-informed adaptive governance, human-centered digital capability orchestration, ecosystem and platform-based leadership, and ethical-resilient learning architecture. The findings indicated that leadership in smart organizations is not limited to individual influence, hierarchical authority, or digital literacy; rather, it functions as a distributed, data-sensitive, ethically grounded, and learning-oriented capability embedded across organizational systems. Participants emphasized that smart organizations require leaders who can translate algorithmic insight into strategic judgment, align human and machine intelligence, redesign governance routines for speed and accountability, and cultivate trust in digitally mediated work environments. The proposed framework suggests that next-generation leadership should be understood as an integrative management-system capability that connects intelligence, adaptability, human agency, ecosystem coordination, and ethical resilience. This reconceptualization contributes to leadership theory by shifting attention from leader traits toward systemic leadership functions required in smart organizations.

Keywords: smart organizations; digital leadership; management systems; artificial intelligence; qualitative research; leadership framework; adaptive governance.

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1. Introduction

The accelerated digitalization of organizations has generated a fundamental shift in how management systems are designed, coordinated, and governed. Contemporary organizations increasingly operate through interconnected digital infrastructures, algorithmic decision-support systems, platform-based processes, artificial intelligence applications, real-time analytics, and distributed knowledge networks. These developments have transformed the classical assumptions of management systems that were historically built around hierarchy, functional specialization, linear planning, stable control mechanisms, and leader-centered authority. In smart organizations, managerial work is no longer confined to supervising people and allocating resources within relatively predictable structures. Instead, management is increasingly concerned with orchestrating dynamic flows of data, knowledge, technology, human expertise, and ecosystem relationships. This transformation raises an

important theoretical and practical question: what kind of leadership is required for organizations whose intelligence is distributed across people, platforms, algorithms, and adaptive systems?

The concept of the smart organization has emerged from the broader evolution of digital transformation, Industry 4.0, organizational intelligence, and knowledge-based management. A smart organization may be understood as an organization capable of sensing environmental changes, processing internal and external data, learning from feedback, adapting structures and processes, and coordinating human and technological capabilities to produce timely and intelligent responses. Unlike traditional organizations, smart organizations depend not only on formal planning and managerial control but also on real-time information, digital platforms, cross-functional collaboration, analytics-based learning, and flexible decision architectures. The literature on digital transformation shows that transformation is not simply the adoption of digital tools but a deep reconfiguration of organizational value creation, structures, processes, and strategic responses (Vial, 2019). Therefore, leadership in smart organizations must be reconceptualized beyond the conventional language of charisma, authority, motivation, and supervision.

Digital transformation research has repeatedly emphasized that technology alone does not explain successful organizational transformation. Kane et al. (2015) argued that strategy, rather than technology itself, drives digital transformation. This insight is especially important for leadership studies because it suggests that the central challenge of smart organizations is not merely technical implementation but strategic interpretation, organizational alignment, and cultural adaptation. Similarly, Hanelt et al. (2021) framed digital transformation as a phenomenon that affects strategy and organizational change, indicating that digitalization reshapes the entire architecture through which organizations define goals, coordinate work, and develop capabilities. From this perspective, smart organizations require leadership that can connect digital infrastructure with organizational meaning, decision-making, learning, and long-term value creation.

Traditional leadership theories provide useful but incomplete explanations for this context. Transformational leadership highlights vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration; however, it often assumes that leadership influence flows primarily from identifiable leaders to followers. Transactional leadership explains control, incentives, and performance expectations but is less suited to environments characterized by ambiguity, distributed knowledge, and algorithmically mediated work. Strategic leadership focuses on top-management influence over organizational direction, yet smart organizations increasingly depend on distributed intelligence across multiple organizational levels. Complexity leadership theory offers a more appropriate starting point because it views leadership as an emergent process within complex adaptive systems rather than as the property of a single formal leader (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In smart organizations, leadership often emerges through interaction among people, technologies, routines, and networks, making complexity-oriented perspectives particularly relevant.

The dynamic capabilities perspective also offers a powerful theoretical foundation for reconceptualizing leadership in smart organizations. Teece (2007) conceptualized dynamic capabilities in terms of sensing opportunities and threats, seizing opportunities, and reconfiguring organizational assets. These processes are highly relevant to smart organizations because digital infrastructures expand the organization's ability to sense changes, but sensing alone does not guarantee effective action. Leaders must interpret data, prioritize opportunities, mobilize resources, and reconfigure capabilities in response to changing conditions. In this sense, leadership becomes a meta-capability that enables organizations to transform digital potential into adaptive

organizational performance. Smart leadership is therefore not equivalent to technical expertise; it involves the ability to connect technological affordances with strategic judgment, organizational learning, and human commitment.

A growing body of digital leadership literature supports this shift. Avolio et al. (2000) introduced e-leadership as a form of leadership mediated by advanced information technologies, while later work has expanded the concept toward digital leadership, platform leadership, and AI-enabled leadership. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) concluded that leaders are central to creating digital culture, supporting collaboration, and managing relationships in digitally mediated environments. Benitez et al. (2022) showed that digital leadership capability can enhance innovation performance through platform digitization capability, suggesting that leadership contributes to innovation not merely through personal influence but through the development of digital organizational infrastructures. More recently, Schiuma et al. (2024) emphasized transformative leadership competencies for organizational digital transformation and highlighted the human-centered role of leaders in allocating resources, developing mindsets, and creating conditions for transformation.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented. Some studies emphasize technological competence, others focus on digital culture, strategic agility, human-machine collaboration, innovation performance, or ethical governance. However, fewer studies integrate these dimensions into a coherent framework for leadership in smart organizations as next-generation management systems. This gap is theoretically important because smart organizations differ from merely digitized organizations. A digitized organization may use digital tools, but a smart organization integrates digital intelligence into its strategic, operational, cultural, and governance systems. Therefore, the leadership question is not only "How should leaders use technology?" but "How should leadership itself be redesigned when organizations become intelligent, adaptive, connected, and algorithmically augmented?"

The ethical and human dimensions of this issue are equally significant. Artificial intelligence and advanced analytics introduce new opportunities for decision quality, prediction, personalization, automation, and coordination, yet they also create risks related to surveillance, bias, accountability, explainability, deskilling, dependency, and loss of trust. Glikson and Woolley (2020) emphasized that trust in artificial intelligence is a central condition for effective AI integration in organizations. Davenport and Ronanki (2018) similarly argued that artificial intelligence applications require managerial judgment about where, how, and why automation should be applied. Thus, leadership in smart organizations must protect human agency while benefiting from machine intelligence. Leaders must ensure that data-driven systems enhance rather than replace ethical judgment, employee participation, and organizational responsibility.

Another challenge concerns the ecosystemic nature of smart organizations. Smart organizations rarely operate as isolated entities. They are embedded in digital platforms, supply chains, innovation ecosystems, customer communities, regulatory systems, and interorganizational data networks. Adner (2017) conceptualized ecosystems as structures of interdependent actors whose alignment affects value creation. In this context, leadership involves boundary-spanning coordination, platform governance, partnership development, and the management of interdependence across organizational borders. Smart leadership must therefore operate simultaneously inside and outside the organization, aligning internal capabilities with external technological and market ecosystems.

Given these theoretical developments, there is a need for a framework that reconceptualizes leadership for smart organizations not as a narrow style or individual competence but as a systemic capability embedded in next-

generation management systems. Such a framework should clarify the key leadership functions required to connect digital intelligence, adaptive governance, human capability development, ecosystem coordination, and ethical resilience. This study addresses this need through a review-informed qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with experts and managers in Tehran-based organizations engaged in digital transformation. By integrating insights from existing literature and qualitative field data, the study aims to develop a conceptual framework for understanding leadership in smart organizations as an adaptive, distributed, ethical, and intelligence-based management-system capability.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to develop a review-informed framework for reconceptualizing leadership in smart organizations. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation is complex, emergent, context-dependent, and insufficiently captured by existing measurement scales. The purpose was not to test predefined hypotheses but to generate a conceptual understanding of how leadership is interpreted, practiced, and redesigned in organizations moving toward smart management systems. The study was informed by the literature on digital transformation, dynamic capabilities, complexity leadership, digital leadership, platform organizations, and human-AI collaboration. These theoretical streams served as sensitizing concepts rather than rigid coding categories, allowing the analysis to remain open to meanings emerging from participants' lived professional experiences.

The participants consisted of 24 experts and senior professionals working in Tehran. The sample included senior managers, digital transformation consultants, organizational development specialists, IT managers, human resource development managers, innovation managers, and academics with consulting experience in smart or digitally transforming organizations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study required information-rich cases with direct experience of leadership, digital transformation, and management-system redesign. Snowball sampling was also used after initial participants recommended other qualified experts. Inclusion criteria were at least five years of professional experience in management, digital transformation, organizational development, innovation, information systems, or leadership development; direct involvement in at least one digital transformation or smart-organization project; and willingness to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview. Participants without relevant organizational experience or those unable to provide reflective accounts of leadership transformation were excluded.

The final sample included 24 participants. Fourteen participants were male and ten were female. In terms of age, four participants were between 30 and 35 years old, seven were between 36 and 40, eight were between 41 and 45, and five were older than 45. Regarding educational level, six participants held a bachelor's degree, twelve held a master's degree, and six held a doctoral degree. In terms of professional role, seven were senior organizational managers, five were digital transformation or IT managers, four were organizational development and human resource managers, four were consultants, and four were university faculty members or researcher-consultants. Professional experience ranged from 6 to 24 years, with nine participants having 6–10 years of experience, eight having 11–15 years, and seven having more than 15 years of experience.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about participants' understanding of smart organizations, the limitations of traditional leadership models, the role

of data and artificial intelligence in managerial decision-making, changes in authority and control systems, employee capability requirements, ethical challenges, and the leadership competencies needed for next-generation management systems. Examples of interview questions included: "How does leadership change when organizations become more data-driven and digitally connected?", "What leadership capabilities are most important in smart organizations?", "How should leaders balance algorithmic insight and human judgment?", and "What ethical or cultural risks emerge in smart management systems?" Follow-up questions were used to deepen responses, clarify meanings, and obtain concrete organizational examples.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new categories emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the emerging framework. This procedure strengthened confidence that the final categories were conceptually rich and sufficiently grounded in participants' accounts.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed the general logic of familiarization, initial coding, category development, theme refinement, and framework construction (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Second, meaningful statements related to leadership, smart systems, decision-making, digital culture, governance, and ethical challenges were coded line by line. Third, similar codes were grouped into subcategories through constant comparison. Fourth, subcategories were integrated into higher-order categories that represented the core leadership functions required in smart organizations. Finally, relationships among the categories were examined to develop the proposed review-based framework.

To improve trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with selected participants, and peer review of the coding structure. Transferability was supported by providing detailed information about the research context, participants, and analytical procedures. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of interview questions, coding decisions, category revisions, and analytical memos. Confirmability was addressed by using reflexive notes to identify possible researcher assumptions and by comparing interpretations with direct participant quotations. The study also followed principles of qualitative rigor associated with inductive concept development and transparent data structuring (Gioia et al., 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Names of participants and organizations were removed from transcripts and replaced with codes such as P1, P2, and P3. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used only for research purposes. Because the study focused on professional experiences rather than sensitive personal information, risks to participants were minimal.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the study included a diverse group of experts with substantial experience in digital transformation and organizational leadership. Of the 24 participants, 14 were male and 10 were female. Four participants were aged 30–35, seven were aged 36–40, eight were aged 41–45,

and five were older than 45. Six participants held bachelor's degrees, twelve held master's degrees, and six held doctoral degrees. In terms of occupational position, seven were senior managers, five were digital transformation or IT managers, four were organizational development and human resource managers, four were consultants, and four were academic specialists with consulting experience. Nine participants had 6–10 years of professional experience, eight had 11–15 years, and seven had more than 15 years of experience. This composition provided a broad range of perspectives on leadership transformation in smart organizations.

Intelligent strategic sensemaking. The first main category was intelligent strategic sensemaking, which refers to the leader's ability to interpret complex signals generated by markets, technologies, employees, customers, competitors, and algorithmic systems. Participants emphasized that smart organizations generate large volumes of data, but data do not automatically produce strategic understanding. Leaders must be able to transform fragmented information into meaningful priorities. One participant stated, "In our company, dashboards are everywhere, but leadership starts when someone asks what these numbers mean for our future, not only what happened yesterday" (P6). Another participant explained, "A smart organization can sense weak signals earlier, but if the leadership team does not have strategic interpretation, the system only becomes faster, not wiser" (P11). This category included the subthemes of environmental scanning, data interpretation, strategic foresight, pattern recognition, and translation of digital signals into organizational direction.

Data-informed adaptive governance. The second main category was data-informed adaptive governance. Participants argued that smart organizations require governance systems that are faster, more transparent, and more flexible than traditional bureaucratic structures. However, they also warned that speed without accountability can create confusion and risk. Adaptive governance was described as the capacity to redesign decision rights, reporting mechanisms, control systems, and feedback loops in response to changing conditions. One participant noted, "The old approval chain cannot work when customer behavior changes every week. We need governance that is controlled but not paralyzed" (P3). Another stated, "In smart management, control is not removed; it becomes more real-time, more distributed, and more evidence-based" (P17). This category included agile decision-making, distributed authority, real-time monitoring, algorithmic accountability, and flexible coordination mechanisms.

Human-centered digital capability orchestration. The third main category was human-centered digital capability orchestration. Participants consistently emphasized that smart organizations fail when digital transformation is treated as a technology project rather than a human and organizational capability-building process. Leaders must orchestrate technical skills, digital mindsets, collaborative behaviors, psychological safety, and continuous learning. One participant said, "The biggest barrier is not software. It is the fear that software will expose people, replace them, or make their experience useless" (P9). Another participant explained, "A smart organization needs people who can work with technology, question technology, and improve technology. Leadership must create this confidence" (P14). This category included digital literacy, employee empowerment, human-AI collaboration, learning culture, psychological safety, and capability development.

Ecosystem and platform-based leadership. The fourth main category was ecosystem and platform-based leadership. Participants explained that smart organizations increasingly depend on external partners, customers, suppliers, digital platforms, regulatory actors, and innovation networks. As a result, leadership must extend beyond internal coordination and include ecosystem alignment. One participant stated, "The leader of a smart organization is not only managing departments; he or she is managing connections between platforms, partners,

and users" (P2). Another participant observed, "Many digital projects fail because each partner optimizes its own system. Smart leadership means creating shared rules for shared value" (P20). This category included boundary spanning, platform governance, partner coordination, open innovation, customer co-creation, and interorganizational trust.

Ethical-resilient learning architecture. The fifth main category was ethical-resilient learning architecture. Participants stressed that smart organizations face serious ethical and resilience challenges, including data misuse, algorithmic bias, overdependence on automation, privacy concerns, cybersecurity threats, and employee resistance. Leaders must institutionalize ethical reflection, transparency, responsible data use, and continuous learning. One participant stated, "If employees feel that artificial intelligence is watching them instead of helping them, the smart organization becomes a surveillance organization" (P5). Another participant said, "Resilience means that the organization can learn from digital errors before they become strategic failures" (P22). This category included ethical governance, trust-building, privacy protection, responsible AI, organizational resilience, and learning from failure.

Taken together, the findings suggest that leadership in smart organizations is not adequately explained by conventional leader-centered models. The five categories form an integrated framework in which leaders sense and interpret digital signals, redesign governance systems, orchestrate human and technological capabilities, coordinate ecosystems, and protect ethical and learning conditions. The resulting framework defines next-generation leadership as a distributed and systemic capability that enables organizations to convert digital intelligence into adaptive, responsible, and sustainable management practice.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that intelligent strategic sensemaking is a central leadership requirement in smart organizations. This result aligns with the literature on digital transformation, which argues that digital technologies create disruptions that require strategic responses rather than merely technical implementation (Vial, 2019). Participants repeatedly emphasized that dashboards, analytics, and artificial intelligence systems do not automatically create strategic wisdom. Instead, leaders must interpret signals, identify patterns, and connect data to organizational purpose. This finding is consistent with Kane et al. (2015), who argued that digital transformation is driven by strategy rather than technology. It also extends the dynamic capabilities view by showing that sensing opportunities and threats in smart organizations is increasingly mediated by digital systems, but the interpretation and prioritization of these signals remain leadership functions (Teece, 2007). Therefore, leadership for smart organizations should be understood as interpretive and cognitive as much as technological. Leaders must not only access data but also construct meaning from data under uncertainty.

The second finding identified data-informed adaptive governance as another major dimension of leadership in smart organizations. This finding supports complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes the need to balance formal administrative structures with adaptive and emergent processes in complex systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Participants did not advocate the elimination of hierarchy or control; rather, they described the need for governance systems that are faster, more distributed, and more evidence-based. This is consistent with Hanelt et al. (2021), who indicated that digital transformation reshapes strategy and organizational change. In smart organizations, governance must evolve from static command-and-control routines toward dynamic coordination

mechanisms. This finding also contributes to digital leadership literature by suggesting that digital leaders must redesign decision rights, accountability structures, and feedback loops. Leadership is therefore not merely about motivating employees to adopt technology but about reconstructing the management system through which decisions are made and evaluated.

The third finding emphasized human-centered digital capability orchestration. This finding is strongly aligned with studies that identify the human side of digital transformation as a critical success factor. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) argued that leaders play a key role in creating digital culture and building relationships in digitalized environments. Schiuma et al. (2024) similarly emphasized that leaders must create conditions for digital transformation by developing competencies, mindsets, and organizational resources. The present findings support these studies but add that human-centered leadership in smart organizations requires balancing automation with empowerment. Participants expressed concern that employees may perceive smart systems as threats if leaders fail to build trust, psychological safety, and learning capacity. This finding also resonates with Glikson and Woolley's (2020) work on trust in artificial intelligence. In smart organizations, employees must trust not only leaders but also the technological systems that increasingly shape their work. Leadership therefore involves mediating the relationship between human agency and machine intelligence.

The fourth finding showed that ecosystem and platform-based leadership is essential for smart organizations. This finding aligns with ecosystem theory, particularly Adner's (2017) argument that value creation increasingly depends on the alignment of interdependent actors. Smart organizations are not closed bureaucratic systems; they are connected to platforms, customers, suppliers, regulators, data providers, and innovation communities. This finding also supports Nambisan et al. (2017), who argued that digital innovation changes the nature of innovation processes by making them more distributed, generative, and platform-based. Participants' accounts indicated that leadership must move beyond internal coordination toward ecosystem orchestration. This means that leaders must manage interdependencies, develop shared standards, coordinate platform rules, and build trust among actors who may have different interests. Therefore, the leadership of smart organizations is partly an external and relational capability, not only an internal managerial function.

The fifth finding identified ethical-resilient learning architecture as a foundational leadership dimension. This finding is consistent with concerns in the literature regarding the risks of artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision-making, privacy, and trust. Davenport and Ronanki (2018) noted that AI implementation requires managerial judgment and careful alignment with organizational processes. Glikson and Woolley (2020) showed that trust is central to the organizational use of artificial intelligence. The present findings extend this literature by showing that ethics and resilience are not peripheral issues; they are structural dimensions of smart leadership. Participants warned that smart systems may become surveillance systems if leaders fail to establish transparency, responsible data governance, and employee participation. This result suggests that smart leadership must include ethical reflexivity, privacy awareness, cybersecurity sensitivity, and mechanisms for learning from digital errors. Resilience in smart organizations therefore depends not only on technological backup systems but also on the organization's capacity to detect, discuss, and correct failures.

Overall, the findings suggest that leadership in smart organizations should be reconceptualized as a systemic management capability rather than an individual behavioral style. Traditional leadership theories remain useful, but they are insufficient unless integrated with theories of digital transformation, complexity, dynamic capabilities, and ecosystem governance. The proposed framework shows that smart leadership consists of five

interdependent functions: making sense of digital intelligence, governing adaptively, developing human-digital capabilities, orchestrating ecosystems, and institutionalizing ethical learning. This framework contributes to leadership theory by shifting the analytical focus from "who the leader is" to "what leadership enables within intelligent and adaptive management systems." It also contributes to management systems research by showing that leadership is not an external influence on smart systems but an internal design principle of those systems.

The findings also have implications for the study of digital leadership. Much of the digital leadership literature focuses on leaders' digital skills, openness to innovation, or ability to support technology adoption. While these elements are important, the present framework suggests that next-generation digital leadership must be broader. It must include strategic interpretation, governance design, human-AI collaboration, platform coordination, and ethical resilience. This supports Benitez et al. (2022), who showed that digital leadership capability can affect innovation through platform digitization capability, but it also suggests that innovation performance is only one outcome of smart leadership. Other outcomes include trust, adaptability, accountability, learning, and ecosystem alignment. Therefore, future models of digital leadership should include both performance-oriented and responsibility-oriented dimensions.

The study further shows that smart organizations require a new balance between human judgment and algorithmic intelligence. Participants did not reject artificial intelligence or analytics; instead, they emphasized that leaders must prevent data-driven systems from narrowing managerial judgment. This finding is important because smart organizations may become overly dependent on quantifiable indicators while ignoring tacit knowledge, ethical concerns, employee experience, and long-term consequences. Leadership must therefore preserve interpretive plurality. Data can reveal patterns, but leaders must ask whether the patterns are meaningful, fair, strategically relevant, and socially acceptable. In this sense, leadership in smart organizations is not replaced by artificial intelligence; it becomes more responsible because leaders must govern the conditions under which artificial intelligence influences organizational decisions.

Ethical Considerations

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

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Conflict of Interest

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