

Digital Leadership and Organizational Innovation in the Digital Economy: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technologies has transformed organizational processes, business strategies, and leadership practices, making digital leadership increasingly important for organizational transformation and innovation. This study aims to systematically review recent research on digital leadership and examine its relationship with digital transformation, organizational innovation, employee outcomes, and organizational performance. A systematic literature review was conducted using a structured search of academic literature published between 2020 and 2025. Relevant studies were identified from major academic databases and analyzed through thematic synthesis based on digital leadership competencies, digital transformation mechanisms, innovation and organizational outcomes, and emerging artificial intelligence dimensions. The findings indicate that digital leadership is a multidimensional capability involving digital literacy, strategic thinking, adaptability, change management, communication, employee empowerment, and learning orientation. Digital leadership contributes to organizational transformation through digital strategy, organizational agility, employee adaptation, and innovation capabilities. The review also identifies artificial intelligence as an emerging context that expands leadership requirements and creates new opportunities for innovation and organizational development. The study proposes an integrated perspective connecting digital leadership competencies, transformation mechanisms, innovation capabilities, and organizational outcomes.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Digital Leadership, Digital Transformation, Organizational Agility, Organizational Innovation.*

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1. | INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technologies has fundamentally changed how organizations operate, compete, and create value. Digital transformation is no longer limited to the adoption of information technologies but increasingly involves changes in organizational processes, capabilities, decision-making, business strategies, and leadership practices. In this context, leadership has become an important organizational mechanism for directing technological change and enabling organizations to respond to increasingly dynamic digital environments. Porfirio et al. (2021) demonstrate that leadership characteristics are closely associated with organizations' ability to undertake digital transformation, indicating that technological change requires not only technological resources but also appropriate leadership capabilities.

The emergence of digital leadership reflects this changing organizational context. Digital leadership refers to leadership capabilities that enable organizations to utilize digital technologies, develop digital strategies, facilitate organizational change, and mobilize employees toward digital objectives. Hensellek (2020) conceptualizes digital leadership as an important framework for successful leadership in the digital age, emphasizing the combination of technological understanding and leadership capabilities. Similarly, Klus and Müller (2021) argue that digital leaders must master a broader set of organizational challenges resulting from digitalization, including technological, organizational, and interpersonal demands. Thus, digital leadership extends beyond conventional leadership practices by requiring leaders to integrate digital competencies with strategic, social, and adaptive capabilities.

Digital leadership is also increasingly associated with organizational agility and digital strategy. AlNuaimi et al. (2022) identify leadership, agility, and digital strategy as interconnected elements in mastering digital transformation. This relationship suggests that digital transformation requires leaders who can establish strategic direction while simultaneously enabling organizations to adapt to changing technologies and market conditions. Türk (2023) similarly emphasizes the strategic role of digital leadership in developing business strategies that are suitable for digital transformation. Consequently, digital leadership can be understood not simply as the use of technology by leaders but as a broader organizational capability for directing and managing digital change.

The consequences of digital leadership extend to organizational innovation and employee behavior. Benitez et al. (2022) demonstrate that digital leadership capability can contribute to innovation performance through platform digitization capability. Weber et al. (2022) further show that complementary leadership behaviors can help employees navigate organizational change during digital transformation. At the employee level, Ahmed et al. (2024) find that perceived digital leadership is associated with innovative work behavior, with learning orientation and innovation capabilities playing important mediating roles. Chatterjee et al. (2023) also highlight the relationship between digital leadership capability, digital workplace development, and

organizational performance. These findings indicate that the effects of digital leadership can operate across multiple levels, from individual employee behavior to organizational innovation and performance.

Despite the growing body of research, the literature remains fragmented across different conceptualizations, contexts, leadership competencies, and organizational outcomes. Tigre et al. (2023) identify the growing and multidisciplinary nature of digital leadership research, while Müller et al. (2024) demonstrate that digital transformation leadership competencies may vary according to organizational contingencies. Tigre et al. (2025) further contribute to the development of digital leadership as an emerging construct. Meanwhile, recent developments in artificial intelligence introduce additional questions concerning how leaders can integrate AI into managerial decision-making and organizational transformation (Bevilacqua et al., 2025; Burhan & Fatima, 2025).

Previous systematic reviews have begun to consolidate this fragmented field. López-Figueroa et al. (2025), through a systematic literature review and science mapping of 74 Web of Science documents, identify digital transformation, digitalization, information and communication technologies, virtual teams, and creativity as important themes in digital leadership research. Lin (2025), based on 53 academic documents, further identifies digital strategic thinking, digital insight, digital change, and digital talent development as important dimensions of digital leadership, while highlighting its relationship with organizational change, innovation, team effectiveness, and employee creativity.

Nevertheless, further synthesis is needed to connect digital leadership competencies with the mechanisms through which digital transformation and innovation are achieved, particularly in the context of contemporary business organizations and the emerging influence of artificial intelligence. Therefore, this systematic literature review aims to synthesize research published between 2020 and 2025 on digital leadership, with particular attention to leadership competencies, digital transformation, organizational innovation, employee outcomes, and emerging AI-related dimensions. The review addresses three research questions: (1) What digital leadership competencies are identified in the literature? (2) How does digital leadership contribute to digital transformation and organizational innovation? and (3) What organizational outcomes and research gaps emerge from existing studies?

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Leadership and Leadership Competencies

Digital leadership represents an evolving form of leadership that emerges from the increasing integration of digital technologies into organizational activities. Unlike traditional leadership, digital leadership requires leaders to combine conventional managerial capabilities with technological understanding, digital mindset, adaptability, and the ability to manage continuous change. Hensellek (2020) emphasizes that digitalization creates new leadership demands, particularly the need for leaders to

understand digital technologies while recognizing their organizational opportunities and challenges. Accordingly, digital leadership involves both technological competence and strategic leadership capabilities.

Klus and Müller (2021) further demonstrate that digital leaders require a diverse set of skills to cope with rapidly changing organizational environments. Their study highlights the importance of communication, organizational skills, subject-specific knowledge, IT-related competencies, and self-reflection. These competencies enable leaders to manage information complexity, technological change, and the tension between established practices and emerging digital approaches. Müller et al. (2024) extend this perspective by demonstrating that digital transformation leadership competencies are contingent upon organizational circumstances, suggesting that effective digital leadership cannot be reduced to a universal set of skills.

The conceptual development of digital leadership has also expanded beyond technological competencies. Tigre et al. (2025) identify digital leadership as an emerging construct that incorporates multiple dimensions of leadership capabilities. Similarly, Lin (2025) identifies digital strategic thinking, digital insight, digital change, and digital talent development as core dimensions of digital leadership. These perspectives indicate that digital leadership should be understood as a multidimensional organizational capability combining technological, strategic, adaptive, and human-centered competencies.

Digital Leadership and Digital Transformation

Digital transformation involves organizational changes that extend beyond technology adoption and affect strategies, processes, structures, capabilities, and employee practices. Within this process, leadership provides strategic direction and facilitates organizational adaptation. Porfirio et al. (2021) demonstrate that leadership characteristics are associated with digital transformation, indicating that leaders play an important role in shaping organizational responses to digital change. Similarly, AlNuaimi et al. (2022) conceptualize leadership, organizational agility, and digital strategy as interconnected elements in mastering digital transformation.

Türk (2023) further emphasizes the role of digital leadership in developing business strategies that support digital transformation. This perspective positions digital leaders as strategic actors who connect technological opportunities with organizational objectives. Weber et al. (2022) complement this view by demonstrating that leadership behaviors influence how employees respond to organizational change during digital transformation. Their findings suggest that successful transformation depends not only on strategic decisions but also on leaders' ability to guide and engage employees throughout the change process.

The relationship between digital leadership and transformation is therefore multidimensional. Leaders establish digital direction, develop organizational capabilities, facilitate employee adaptation, and align technological initiatives with business strategy. Chatterjee et al. (2023) further show that digital leadership capability can operate within the digital workplace and influence organizational performance. Consequently, digital leadership can be viewed as an organizational mechanism that connects digital strategy and technology adoption with broader organizational transformation.

Digital Leadership, Innovation, Organizational Outcomes, and Emerging AI

Digital leadership is increasingly associated with innovation and organizational outcomes. Benitez et al. (2022) demonstrate that digital leadership capability contributes to innovation performance through platform digitization capability, suggesting that leadership can strengthen the organizational capabilities required to convert digital technologies into innovation outcomes. Ahmed et al. (2024) similarly identify a relationship between digital leadership and innovative work behavior, with learning orientation and innovation capabilities providing important mechanisms through which leadership influences employee innovation.

At the organizational level, Chatterjee et al. (2023) associate digital leadership capability with digital workplace development and organizational performance. These findings indicate that the effects of digital leadership may occur at multiple levels, ranging from individual employee behavior to organizational innovation and performance. The systematic reviews of Tigre et al. (2023), Lin (2025), and López-Figueroa et al. (2025) reinforce this multidimensional perspective by identifying innovation, organizational change, employee creativity, digital transformation, virtual work, and organizational effectiveness as interconnected areas within the digital leadership literature.

More recently, artificial intelligence has introduced an additional dimension to digital leadership. Bevilacqua et al. (2025) examine how AI can enhance top managers' leadership and identify the growing importance of AI-related leadership capabilities. Burhan and Fatima (2025) further connect digital leadership with innovative work behavior through AI intentions and career resilience. These developments suggest that AI is becoming an emerging context in which digital leadership capabilities are applied. Therefore, contemporary digital leadership research increasingly requires an integrated perspective connecting leadership competencies, digital transformation, innovation, employee behavior, organizational outcomes, and AI-enabled management.

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, examine, and synthesize existing research on digital leadership and its relationship with digital transformation, organizational innovation, and organizational outcomes. A structured literature search and thematic synthesis approach was adopted to provide a transparent and focused review of recent research published between 2020 and 2025.

The literature search was conducted using three academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of management, organizational studies, information systems, business, and innovation research. The search strategy used combinations of keywords related to the main concepts of the study. The primary search string was: (“digital leadership” or “digital transformation leadership”) and (“organizational innovation” or “innovation performance” or “innovative work behavior”) and (“organization” OR “business” or “firm”). Additional keyword combinations involving digital transformation, organizational performance, employee performance, artificial intelligence, and innovation were also considered to capture relevant studies.

The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2020 and 2025 that examined digital leadership or leadership in the

context of digital transformation and addressed organizational, employee, innovation, transformation, or technology-related outcomes. Studies were excluded when they were conference papers, book chapters, editorials, duplicates, unrelated to organizational or business contexts, or did not provide sufficient information relevant to the research objectives.

The selection process involved reviewing the retrieved literature according to the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Titles and abstracts were initially examined for relevance, followed by assessment of the full text when necessary. Relevant studies were subsequently organized and coded according to publication year, research context, methodology, sample, digital leadership dimensions, digital transformation mechanisms, organizational or employee outcomes, and major findings.

The analysis employed thematic synthesis to identify recurring concepts, relationships, and research patterns across the selected studies. The synthesis focused on four interconnected themes: digital leadership competencies, digital transformation mechanisms, innovation and organizational outcomes, and emerging artificial intelligence dimensions. Thematic comparison was then used to identify areas of convergence, differences among studies, and gaps that can inform future research on digital leadership in the digital economy.

4. | RESULTS

The synthesis of the selected literature reveals that digital leadership has developed into a multidimensional organizational capability rather than a leadership approach limited to technological expertise. Across the reviewed studies, four interconnected patterns emerged: digital leadership competencies, digital transformation and organizational agility, innovation and organizational outcomes, and the emerging role of artificial intelligence. These themes demonstrate that digital leadership operates across individual, organizational, and strategic levels.

The first pattern concerns the competencies required by digital leaders. Hensellek (2020) conceptualizes digital leadership as requiring both technical knowledge and a digital mindset that enables leaders to recognize and respond to opportunities and challenges associated with digitalization. Klus and Müller (2021) similarly identify a broad range of competencies needed to address contemporary organizational challenges, indicating that digital leaders must combine technological knowledge with organizational and interpersonal capabilities. This multidimensional view is further supported by Müller et al. (2024), who identify different competency portfolios associated with different transformation drivers and organizational goals. Their findings indicate that digital transformation leadership requires combinations of technical, business-oriented, and people-oriented competencies rather than a single universal competency profile. Tigre et al. (2025) further reinforce the emerging construct of digital leadership by identifying a range of capabilities that enable leaders to operate effectively in digitally transformed environments. Lin (2025) synthesizes these developments and identifies digital strategic thinking, digital insight, digital change, and digital talent development as important dimensions of digital leadership. Thus, the literature indicates that technological literacy represents only one component of a broader leadership capability.

The second pattern concerns the relationship between digital leadership and digital transformation. Porfirio et al. (2021) find that leadership and management characteristics are important conditions for achieving more advanced stages of digital transformation, particularly when leadership behavior is coherent with organizational mission and strategy. AlNuaimi et al. (2022) provide further evidence that digital transformational leadership positively influences digital transformation and organizational agility, while agility mediates the relationship between leadership and transformation. Their findings highlight the importance of organizational adaptability as a mechanism through which leadership contributes to digital transformation. Türk (2023) similarly identifies a positive relationship between digital leadership and the development of business strategies appropriate for digital transformation. These findings suggest that leadership provides an important bridge between technological change and organizational strategy.

Employee adaptation represents another important mechanism in digital transformation. Weber et al. (2022), using an experimental design with 815 participants, demonstrate that people-oriented leadership can buffer potential negative responses to digital-transformation-oriented leadership. The findings indicate that technological or task-oriented leadership alone may not be sufficient to generate desirable employee responses to transformation. Leadership therefore needs to combine transformation-oriented direction with attention to employees' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. This finding complements Chatterjee et al. (2023), who demonstrate that digital workplace transformation is associated with employee and organizational outcomes and that digital leadership plays an important role in this transformation process.

The third pattern concerns innovation and organizational outcomes. Benitez et al. (2022) provide direct evidence that digital leadership capability contributes to innovation performance through platform digitization capability. Their mixed-method study involving European firms demonstrates that digital leadership and platform digitization function as important IT capabilities supporting innovation. Ahmed et al. (2024) similarly report that perceptions of digital leadership are associated with innovative work behavior. Their two-wave study involving 440 employees and managers indicates that learning orientation and innovation capabilities mediate this relationship, while leader-member exchange influences the relationship between digital leadership and learning orientation. These findings indicate that digital leadership contributes to innovation not only through direct managerial influence but also through organizational learning and capability development.

At the organizational level, Chatterjee et al. (2023) find that organizational dynamic capabilities support digital workplace transformation, which is subsequently associated with employee and organizational performance. Their study of 335 respondents also highlights the role of digital leadership in facilitating digital transformation of the workplace. This suggests that organizational outcomes emerge through interconnected capabilities rather than from leadership alone. The evidence therefore supports a broader pathway in which digital leadership enables organizational capabilities, those capabilities facilitate digital transformation and innovation, and these processes contribute to employee and organizational outcomes.

The fourth pattern concerns the development of digital leadership research itself. Tigre et al. (2023), through bibliometric analysis of 79 publications from 57 journals, demonstrate that digital leadership has developed into an expanding multidisciplinary research field. López-Figueroa et al. (2025), through a systematic literature review and science mapping of 74 Web of Science documents, similarly identify digital transformation, digitalization, information and communication technologies, virtual teams, and creativity as prominent themes. Their findings also emphasize that digital leadership requires both technological and human-centered competencies. Lin (2025), based on 53 academic documents, further identifies organizational change, innovation, team effectiveness, and employee creativity as important outcome areas. Collectively, these reviews indicate that the research field has moved from primarily conceptual discussions toward broader examination of leadership effectiveness across organizational, team, and individual levels.

Finally, the literature published in 2025 indicates that artificial intelligence is becoming an emerging dimension of digital leadership. Bevilacqua et al. (2025), based on a systematic review of 63 articles, identify three major clusters: AI-driven leadership skills, factors influencing top managers' AI adoption decisions, and the strategic use of AI. This suggests that digital leaders increasingly require capabilities for integrating AI into strategic decision-making rather than merely understanding digital technologies. Burhan and Fatima (2025) provide an employee-level perspective by showing that digital leadership can shape attitudes toward AI and strengthen career resilience, which subsequently contributes to innovative work behavior. The findings indicate that AI introduces new mechanisms linking leadership with employee adaptation and innovation.

The reviewed literature reveals an interconnected model of digital leadership. Digital leadership competencies provide the foundation; digital strategy, organizational agility, and employee engagement function as transformation mechanisms; innovation and organizational capabilities represent important intermediate outcomes; and employee and organizational performance emerge as broader consequences. The recent incorporation of AI adds a further layer by expanding the competencies required of digital leaders and creating new pathways through which leadership influences technology adoption and innovative behavior. At the same time, the literature remains fragmented across different contexts, competency frameworks, organizational levels, and outcomes, indicating the need for an integrated synthesis of how these dimensions interact within the digital economy.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that digital leadership has evolved from a technology-oriented concept into a multidimensional organizational capability that integrates technological, strategic, adaptive, and human-centered competencies. This finding is consistent with Hensellek (2020) and Klus and Müller (2021), who emphasize that digital leaders require more than technological knowledge to address the organizational challenges created by digitalization. Müller et al. (2024) further demonstrate that leadership competencies are contingent upon organizational circumstances, while Tigre et al. (2025) highlight the multidimensional nature of the emerging digital leadership construct. Therefore, digital leadership should be

understood as the ability to align digital technologies with organizational strategy, people, and continuous organizational change.

A second important finding is that digital leadership functions as a bridge between digital strategy and organizational transformation. The evidence from Porfirio et al. (2021), AlNuaimi et al. (2022), and Türk (2023) indicates that leadership influences transformation by establishing strategic direction and developing organizational adaptability. This relationship is particularly important because digital transformation involves changes in organizational processes, capabilities, and employee practices rather than technology adoption alone. The findings therefore suggest that organizational agility is an important mechanism through which digital leadership can translate technological opportunities into organizational change.

The review also demonstrates that employee-related mechanisms are central to successful digital transformation. Weber et al. (2022) show that complementary leadership behaviors can influence employee responses to transformation, while Ahmed et al. (2024) identify learning orientation and innovation capabilities as mechanisms connecting digital leadership with innovative work behavior. These findings suggest that digital transformation cannot be sustained exclusively through top-down strategic direction. Leaders must simultaneously create conditions that support employee learning, engagement, adaptation, and innovation. This provides a human-centered dimension to digital leadership that complements its technological and strategic dimensions.

Another important implication concerns innovation and organizational performance. Benitez et al. (2022) show that digital leadership capability contributes to innovation performance through platform digitization capability, while Chatterjee et al. (2023) demonstrate relationships among digital workplace transformation, organizational capabilities, and performance. Taken together, these findings suggest that digital leadership does not necessarily produce organizational outcomes through a simple direct relationship. Instead, its effects appear to operate through intermediate capabilities such as digital platforms, organizational agility, learning orientation, innovation capability, and digital workplace development. This provides a more comprehensive explanation of how leadership contributes to organizational outcomes in digital environments.

The emergence of artificial intelligence further expands the scope of digital leadership. Bevilacqua et al. (2025) indicate that AI requires new leadership skills and strategic capabilities, while Burhan and Fatima (2025) demonstrate connections between digital leadership, AI intentions, career resilience, and innovative work behavior. These findings suggest that AI is not merely another technological tool but an emerging organizational context that may reshape leadership practices, employee adaptation, and innovation. Consequently, future research should examine how digital leadership competencies evolve as organizations increasingly integrate AI into decision-making and business processes.

Finally, the findings of Tigre et al. (2023), López-Figueroa et al. (2025), and Lin (2025) indicate that digital leadership remains a developing and multidisciplinary research field. Existing studies differ in conceptualizations, research contexts, competency dimensions, and organizational outcomes. A major research opportunity therefore lies in developing integrative models that connect digital leadership

competencies → digital transformation mechanisms → innovation capabilities → organizational and employee outcomes, while incorporating AI as an emerging contextual factor. Such an integrated perspective can strengthen theoretical understanding of digital leadership and provide a clearer foundation for future empirical research in the digital economy.

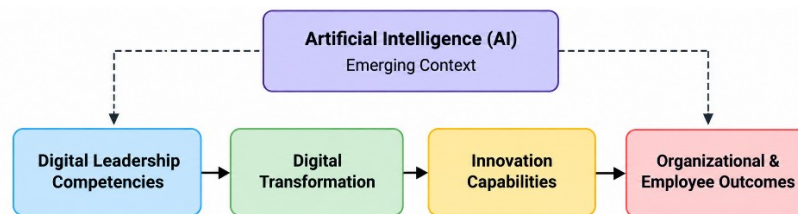


Figure 1. Integrated Framework of Digital Leadership, Digital Transformation, and Organizational Outcomes

6. | CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined the development of digital leadership and its relationship with digital transformation, organizational innovation, and organizational outcomes in the digital economy. The synthesis indicates that digital leadership is a multidimensional organizational capability that extends beyond technological knowledge. It encompasses digital literacy, strategic thinking, adaptive capability, change management, communication, employee empowerment, learning orientation, and the ability to align digital technologies with organizational objectives. The findings further indicate that digital leadership contributes to digital transformation by connecting digital strategy with organizational agility and employee adaptation. Rather than producing organizational outcomes through a simple direct relationship, digital leadership operates through several interconnected mechanisms, including digital capabilities, organizational learning, innovation capabilities, digital workplace development, and employee innovative behavior. These mechanisms enable organizations to transform technological opportunities into innovation and broader organizational outcomes.

The review also highlights artificial intelligence as an emerging context for digital leadership. The increasing integration of AI into organizational decision-making and business processes creates new requirements for leaders, particularly in relation to AI adoption, strategic integration, employee adaptation, and innovation. This development suggests that the concept of digital leadership will continue to evolve as organizations adopt increasingly advanced digital technologies. The principal contribution of this review is the integration of fragmented findings into a conceptual pathway connecting digital leadership competencies, digital transformation mechanisms, innovation capabilities, and organizational outcomes, with AI positioned as an emerging contextual factor. Future research should further examine these relationships through longitudinal and cross-industry empirical studies and investigate how digital leadership competencies evolve as AI and other emerging technologies become increasingly embedded in organizational processes. Such research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership and organizational transformation in the evolving digital economy.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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