FACING THE HARDEST CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL WORK: CROSS-SECTOR PRACTITIONER-MANAGERS' INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Sri Yusriani[1], Hendrian Hendrian[2], Viktor Peniel Sarimatondang Bancin[3], Prasetyo Harisandi[4], Shine Pintor Siolemba Patiro[5], Lamia Farha[6]

[1,6] Graduate School of Business, Universiti Sains Malaysia Jalan Universiti, 11700 Gelugor, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

[2,3,4,5] Department of Master Management Postgraduate School, Universitas Terbuka, Tangerang Selatan, 15437, Indonesia

Email; sriyusriani_syspsp@student.usm.my[1], ian@ecampus.ut.ac.id[2], 501322091@ecampus.ut.ac.id[3], prasetyoharisandi@upi.edu[4], shinepintor@ecampus.ut.ac.id[5], lamia.farha.bim@student.usm.my[6]

Abstract:

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped work dynamics, yet understanding the toughest challenges managers face in adapting to digital work remains underexplored across sectors. This study investigates the most pressing challenges perceived by practitioner-managers from academia, higher education, international trade, marketing, and technology industries. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with seven senior managers, all domain experts with substantial leadership experience. Data were thematically analyzed to extract cross-sector insights. Findings reveal that while technological readiness and digital skills gaps are common hurdles, sector-specific issues, such as resistance to change in higher education, cross-border digital compliance in food export businesses, cyber-communication overload in technology management, and balancing data-driven marketing with creativity, compound the challenges. Despite these obstacles, discussions highlight adaptive leadership, collaborative learning, and resilience as pivotal for navigating digital transformation. This research contributes to the understanding of managerial perspectives in digital work transitions and provides practical implications for leadership development and organizational strategy in the digital era.

Keywords: *Sector Insights, Digital Work, Managerial Challenges, Focus Group Discussions (FGDS), Practitioner-Managers*

INTRODUCTION

The digitalization of work has become a global imperative, transforming traditional management practices into technology-driven operations (Ali et al., 2023; Budhwar et al., 2022). In this rapidly evolving landscape, organizations across diverse sectors, academia, higher education, international trade, marketing, and technology, face unique and complex challenges. While previous research has extensively examined digital transformation strategies (Ciarli et al., 2021; Ha & Chuah, 2023), far less is known about the toughest obstacles faced by experienced managers who actively lead digital change in their respective domains.

The management literature has acknowledged the complexity of creating measurable business outcomes from digital transformation initiatives, especially

in sectors with rigid structures or legacy systems (Zareravasan & Alizadeh, 2021; Ha & Chuah, 2023). From a management field perspective, understanding how digital work environments reshape roles, leadership practices, and organizational structures is critically important. Digital workplaces demand new forms of coordination, agile decision-making, and adaptive leadership capable of steering human-technology interfaces (Gartner, 2023). The management discipline must grapple not only with technology adoption but with how work itself is reconfigured: the flow of information, the nature of collaboration, and how performance is measured in digitally mediated contexts (McRae et al., 2023). Moreover, as organisations invest heavily in digital tools and platforms, the human dimension, leadership, culture, skills, and change readiness, emerges as a decisive factor for success (Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2025; Yusriani & Patiro, 2024). For managers, this means leadership competencies must evolve: they must cultivate digital fluency, foster innovation, and manage the paradoxes of connectivity (e.g., overload, fragmentation) while driving performance. Furthermore, recent developments in digital customer service adoption illustrate the increasing necessity for fit between organizational tasks and technological capabilities, especially in leadership decision-making processes (Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2025).

Despite the recognised importance of digital leadership and digital work, existing literature reveals several key gaps. First, the majority of studies concentrate on high-level strategic issues of digital transformation (e.g., technology adoption, business model innovation) but pay relatively little attention to the managerial experiences of practitioner-managers who lead digital work on the ground (Vial, 2021; Wrede et al., 2020). Second, much of the research is sector-specific, focusing on one domain such as education, manufacturing or IT, thereby limiting cross-industry generalisability (Senyucel & Yurttadur, 2022; Ciampi et al., 2022). Third, although digital skills gaps, resistance to change, and misalignment between digital tools and organisational climate are acknowledged barriers (Venugopal et al., 2024; Talukder & Galang, 2021; Maley & Kramar, 2021), the way these barriers interact and compound across sectors, particularly from a manager's vantage point, remains underexplored. Finally, there is limited qualitative research capturing rich, lived managerial narratives of digital work transitions, especially discussions that compare challenges across sectors.

This study addresses those gaps by leveraging Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to collect in-depth qualitative insights from seven senior practitioner-managers with extensive leadership experience in digital environments. Through thematic analysis of FGD transcripts, we aim to answer the central research question: *"What are the hardest challenges that managers face in leading digital work transformations across different sectors?"* In doing so, the study contributes threefold to management scholarship: (1) capturing cross-sector managerial experiences in digital adaptation; (2) revealing both sector-specific and common challenges that hinder digital work implementation; and (3) providing actionable insights for leadership development and strategic planning in digitally transforming organisations.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the complex challenges faced by practitioner-managers in leading digital work transformations across various sectors. Given the multifaceted nature of digitalization and the human-centered focus of this study, qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for capturing the richness of managerial experiences

that often elude standard quantitative instruments (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In particular, the use of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) allowed for dynamic exchanges between participants, facilitating deeper exploration of sector-specific and cross-sectoral insights.

Research Design and Approach, FGDs were chosen as the primary method of data collection because they create a collaborative environment that encourages participants to articulate and refine their perspectives through group dialogue. This approach enables researchers to surface shared concerns, highlight points of divergence, and trace the emergence of collective meanings (Basnet, 2018). The method aligns with interpretive qualitative paradigms, which prioritize understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their lived experiences rather than testing pre-established hypotheses. This perspective is increasingly relevant in sustainable management research, where context and sense-making are central to shaping leadership strategies and innovation practices (Yusriani & Patiro, 2024).

The participants in this study consisted of seven senior practitioner-managers with substantial leadership experience in managing digital work environments. Each participant represented a different sector, including academia, higher education, international trade, marketing, technology, healthcare technology, and logistics. They were purposefully selected using criterion-based sampling to ensure diverse yet information-rich cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The participants' profiles ranged from a globally active academic based in Denmark to a technology strategist in Southeast Asia, reflecting broad geographical and functional diversity. All participants were involved in digital transformation projects within their respective organizations, making their insights highly relevant to the study's aim.

Data collection was conducted over two virtual FGD sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. A semi-structured discussion guide was used to balance consistency with flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on themes such as barriers to digital adoption, organizational resistance, and leadership strategies under digital pressure. Questions were designed to probe both general and sector-specific experiences, enabling a layered understanding of managerial challenges. All sessions were conducted in English, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Care was taken to establish rapport and psychological safety, which are critical for eliciting authentic reflections in group settings (Basnet, 2018).

Data Analysis, Thematic analysis was used to systematically analyze the qualitative data, following the six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as cited in Creswell and Creswell (2017). Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the lead authors' affiliated university. All participants were informed about the study's aims, procedures, and their rights as research subjects, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to the FGDs, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Pseudonyms (R1 to R7) were used to protect the identities of participants, and all digital data were securely stored in encrypted formats accessible only to the research team. To enhance credibility and traceability, qualitative data were manually coded through iterative reading and reflexive team discussions, enabling transparency in theme development without reliance on software. This approach facilitated the identification of both shared and sector-specific nuances in the managers' digital work experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
RESULTS

The analysis of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with five practitioner-managers from diverse sectors revealed

Seven senior practitioner-managers participated in this study, each representing a different sector with extensive leadership experience in digitally driven organizations.

R1 is a global academic and researcher based in Denmark (40 years old, female, married); R2 is a higher education professional with over a decade of experience in university administration (38 years old, male, unmarried); R3 is an international food export entrepreneur managing cross-border supply chains (55 years old, male, married); R4 is a marketing manager from a national Indonesian company (56 years old, male, married); R5 is a technology manager from a large enterprise in Bangladesh (49 years old, female, married); R6 is a digital strategist in healthcare technology (45 years old, male, married); and R7 is an HR manager in a logistics firm (43 years old, male, married).

Participants were purposively selected based on their expertise in managing digital transformation initiatives within their respective industries. This purposive sampling ensured diverse, information-rich perspectives that reflect the global and cross-sectoral nature of digital leadership challenges.

The analysis of the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) revealed four overarching themes that encapsulate the hardest challenges faced by managers in leading digital work transformations.

Theme 1: Digital Skills and Capability Gaps

Across all sectors, participants emphasized the persistent shortage of digital competencies among employees and even among leaders. Both traditional industries, such as food exports, and knowledge-intensive domains, such as academia and higher education, face challenges in keeping pace with technological advancements. Managers noted that the speed of innovation often surpasses organizational capacity to upskill the workforce, creating uneven digital literacy and performance disparities. The findings suggest that digital capability building remains the most fundamental yet under-addressed prerequisite for sustainable transformation.

Theme 2: Resistance to Change and Organizational Climate

Participants from the education and marketing sectors reported high resistance to digitalization, especially in organizations with rigid hierarchies and conventional work cultures. In these contexts, employees often perceive digital tools as threats to job security or professional identity. This resistance is further exacerbated by weak internal communication and a lack of psychological safety. The data underscore that fostering openness and trust is essential for digital readiness, echoing the call for human-centered leadership approaches that address emotional and cultural barriers to change.

Theme 3: Cross-Border and Regulatory Challenges

Respondents from international trade and logistics highlighted regulatory complexity as a critical obstacle. R3, for instance, described difficulties in meeting varying cybersecurity, data protection, and e-commerce compliance standards across countries. These inconsistencies hindered efficient digital operations, especially in markets where legal frameworks remain underdeveloped. Similarly, R7 emphasized the burden of integrating global HR digital systems under divergent local regulations. This theme illustrates the need for strategic alignment between digital transformation and international governance

mechanisms.

Theme 4: Information Overload and Communication Complexity

Participants from technology and healthcare sectors (R5 and R6) discussed the paradox of hyper-connectivity. While digital tools have enhanced collaboration, they have also introduced excessive communication channels, leading to information overload, fragmented workflows, and employee burnout. Managers expressed concern that without structured communication policies and digital mindfulness practices, technological abundance can decrease focus and well-being. This reinforces the idea that digital transformation must be complemented by human-centered strategies to prevent cognitive fatigue and sustain performance.

Despite these challenges, participants also shared adaptive strategies such as collaborative learning networks, peer mentoring, and cross-sector knowledge sharing. Several respondents noted that resilience, empathy, and openness to experimentation are key attributes of successful digital leaders. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that digital transformation is less a technological shift and more a continuous human and organizational learning process.

DISCUSSION

This study advances the understanding of managerial challenges in digital transformation by capturing cross-sectoral insights that remain underrepresented in existing research. While previous studies have acknowledged digital skills shortages and resistance to change (Budhwar et al., 2022; Maley & Kramar, 2021), our findings offer deeper, context-specific perspectives that reveal how these barriers interact across diverse industries.

The identification of digital capability gaps supports earlier work suggesting that the success of digital transformation depends not only on technological readiness but also on sustained investment in human capital (Ali et al., 2023; Venugopal et al., 2024). Participants emphasized that the acceleration of automation and AI has outpaced conventional training models, leaving employees overwhelmed and organizations vulnerable to performance inconsistency. This aligns with the argument that digital maturity requires an integrative approach to continuous learning and leadership development.

The organizational climate dimension echoes the notion that transformation is fundamentally a cultural process. As Senyucel and Yurttadur (2022) assert, sustainable HRM in the digital era depends on psychological safety, inclusive communication, and adaptive leadership. Findings from R2 and R4 reveal that in rigid institutions, digital tools are often viewed as intrusive rather than empowering, underscoring the importance of emotional intelligence in managerial roles.

The cross-border compliance challenge resonates with research by Ha and Chuah (2023), who highlight the uneven pace of digital regulation in Southeast Asia. Our participants' experiences suggest that digital transformation cannot be fully realized without addressing governance alignment, especially for organizations operating in transnational contexts. A noteworthy insight is the adaptive strategies managers employed to counter these challenges. Collaborative digital learning initiatives, cross-sector knowledge exchange, and resilient leadership practices emerged as key enablers for transformation. These approaches resonate with recommendations from transformative AI research and sustainable HRM literature (Venugopal et al., 2024; Senyucel & Yurttadur, 2022), which highlight the need for human-centered digital transformation strategies.

Finally, the information overload theme contributes to the growing body of

literature on "digital fatigue" and cognitive overload (Shi et al., 2024). The study found that the ubiquity of virtual platforms, though intended to enhance coordination, often leads to reduced focus and decision-making efficiency. This paradox highlights a critical managerial insight: more technology does not automatically equate to better productivity. Instead, effective digital work requires balance, intentionality, and disciplined leadership. These findings resonate with previous studies that highlight how digital leadership is effective when aligned with both stimulus–organism–response (SOR) frameworks and task-technology fit principles, ensuring contextual relevance in dynamic environments (Vafaei-Zadeh et al., 2025).

Overall, this study demonstrates that the hardest challenges in digital work are not purely technical but deeply human. By integrating perspectives from seven sectors, it provides a holistic understanding of how managers perceive and respond to transformation pressures. The findings reinforce the argument that digital leadership must evolve beyond competence in tools, it must embody empathy, resilience, and adaptive learning. These insights contribute meaningfully to management research and practice, offering actionable implications for leadership development, organizational climate and culture, and policy alignment in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the hardest challenges faced by managers across sectors in navigating digital transformation, drawing insights from seven senior practitioner-managers representing diverse industries and geographies. The findings revealed four interconnected themes: (1) digital skills and capability gaps, (2) resistance to change and unsupportive organizational climates, (3) cross-border regulatory complexities, and (4) communication overload in digitally saturated environments. These challenges demonstrate that digital transformation is far more than a technological undertaking, it is a deeply human and organizational process that demands empathy, resilience, and inclusive leadership.

From a managerial perspective, the results underscore the urgent need for organizations to invest in continuous digital capability development, cultivate adaptive and psychologically safe cultures, and implement strategic policies that address both global and local regulatory frameworks. Leaders must also learn to navigate the paradox of digital abundance by fostering mindful communication practices and designing workflows that support employee well-being and productivity.

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital leadership by centering the voices of experienced managers from varied sectors, highlighting the universal and sector-specific nature of digital work challenges. Unlike many existing studies that focus narrowly on technological adoption, this study reveals the nuanced, emotional, and ethical dimensions of digital transformation that are often overlooked in policy and practice.

Future research should expand the sample size to include middle-level managers and frontline employees to gain a more comprehensive understanding of digital transition dynamics. Longitudinal studies could also examine how leadership responses to these challenges evolve over time. Moreover, further investigation into the role of inclusive and trauma-informed leadership in digital transitions could yield valuable strategies for sustainable change, particularly in post-pandemic work contexts.

In conclusion, succeeding in the digital era requires more than tools or

platforms, it requires human-centered leadership, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and the courage to embrace complexity. As this study shows, it is only by understanding and addressing the hardest challenges that organizations can build truly transformative and resilient futures.

REFERENCES

Ali, O., Krsteska, K., Said, D., & Momin, M. (2023). Advanced technologies enabled human resources functions: Benefits, challenges, and functionalities: A systematic review. *Cogent Business & Management*, *10*(2), 2216430. doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2216430

Basnet, H. B. (2018). Focus group discussion: a tool for qualitative inquiry. *Researcher: A Research Journal of Culture and Society*, *3*(3), 81-88. DOI: 10.3126/researcher.v3i3.21553

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. http://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Budhwar, P., Malik, A., De Silva, M. T., & Thevisuthan, P. (2022). Artificial intelligence–challenges and opportunities for international HRM: a review and research agenda. *The InTernaTIonal Journal of human resource managemenT*, *33*(6), 1065-1097. doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2022.2035161

Ciampi, F., Faraoni, M., Ballerini, J., & Meli, F. (2022). The co-evolutionary relationship between digitalization and organizational agility: Ongoing debates, theoretical developments and future research perspectives. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *176*, 121383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.121383

Ciarli, T., Kenney, M., Massini, S., & Piscitello, L. (2021). Digital technologies, innovation, and skills: Emerging trajectories and challenges. *Research Policy*, *50*(7), 104289. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2021.104289

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.

Ha, H., & Chuah, C. K. (2023). Digital economy in Southeast Asia: challenges, opportunities and future development. *Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, *23*(1), 19-35. https://doi.org/10.1108/SEAMJ-02-2023-0023

He, W., Zhang, Z. J., & Li, W. (2021). Information technology solutions, challenges, and suggestions for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Information Management, 57*, 102287. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102287

Maley, J., & Kramar, R. (2021). Digital era HRM: Can HRM develop new capabilities? *European Management Journal, 39*(3), 317–329. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.02.005

McRae, E. R., Aykens, P., Lowmaster, K., & Shepp, J. (2023). 9 Trends that will shape work in 2023 and beyond. *Harvard Business Review January*. https://www.nswleaders.com.au/media/website_pages/media-and-pr/9-trends-that-will-shape-work-in-2025-and-beyond/H08LFG-PDF-ENG.pdf

Senyucel, Z., & Yurttadur, M. (2022). Digital transformation and sustainable HR management: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Business Research, 139*, 39–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.09.019

Shi, F., Ning, H., Zhang, X., Li, R., Tian, Q., Zhang, S., ... & Daneshmand, M. (2024). A new technology perspective of the Metaverse: Its essence, framework and challenges. *Digital Communications and Networks*, *10*(6), 1653-1665. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcan.2023.02.017

Talukder, A. K. M. M. H., & Galang, M. C. (2021). Supervisor Support for

Employee Performance in Australia: Mediating Role of Work-Life Balance, Job, and Life Attitude. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, *58*(1), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12154

Vafaei-Zadeh, A., Nikbin, D., Wong, S. L., & Hanifah, H. (2025). Investigating factors influencing AI customer service adoption: An integrated model of stimulus–organism–response (SOR) and task-technology fit (TTF) theory. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *37*(6), 1465-1502. https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-05-2024-0570

Venugopal, M., Madhavan, V., Prasad, R., & Raman, R. (2024). Transformative AI in human resource management: enhancing workforce planning with topic modeling. *Cogent Business & Management*, *11*(1), 2432550. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2432550

Vial, G. (2021). Understanding digital transformation: A review and a research agenda. *Managing digital transformation*, 13-66.

Wrede, M., Velamuri, V. K., & Dauth, T. (2020). Top managers in the digital age: Exploring the role and practices of top managers in firms' digital transformation. *Managerial and Decision Economics*, *41*(8), 1549-1567. https://doi.org/10.1002/mde.3202

Yusriani, S., & Patiro, S. P. S. (2024). The Role of Digitalization, Self-Efficacy, and Family Support in Shaping Perceived Work-Life Balance Among Public Sector Employees in Indonesia. https://ieomsociety.org/proceedings/2024tokyo/277.pdf

Zareravasan, A., & Alizadeh, R. (2021). Challenges in creating business value from health information systems (HIS): A hybrid fuzzy approach. *Journal of Information Technology Management*, *13*(2), 51-74. Doi: 10.22059/jitm.2021.312543.2644