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# The Digital Leadership on Project Management in the Emerging Digital Era

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## Abstract

Digital leadership plays an important role in steering organizations toward growth. With the current and changing technological advancements in the business world, organizations are turning towards projects as the major driver of growth and development. Project managers are expected to have the desired level of digital leadership quality to benefit the organization. Managers are expected to use their teams, by example, instill collaboration, have a global vision of growth, be

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resourceful in matters concerning technology, and are ready to sustain their organizations during these disruptive times. This study aims to determine how different organizations have benefitted from digital leadership in terms of efficiency in project management. The study uses qualitative data from both primary interview sources and secondary sources such as past literature and growth records of the selected organizations. The study found that digital leadership impacted project management positively. However, digital leaders with different levels of desired attributes had different results, with those bearing transactional and transformational traits as the most successful ones. However, digital leaders faced challenges as their organizations aimed to survive through strong competition.

**Key Words:** Digital Leadership, Project Management, Disruptive Digital Era, Leadership, Organizational Transformation

## Introduction

The world is experiencing rapid changes in all industrial sectors as they progress towards digitization. The rapid changes have caused disruptions that businesses have felt globally and especially among project managers. Although business technological advancements have been happening over the past few decades, major effects have been highly felt in the past few years. The slow transitions in the business environment have recently cumulated enough to disrupt all processes in business. According to Wasono & Furinto (2018), technological advancements in the digital era impact businesses by innovating new roles for leaders, thus creating a new era of digital

leaders. These new roles enable businesses to remain competitive in the industry by incorporating digital tools to match the ever-advancing technologies. Businesses must generate a strong leadership strategy to transform business operations from manual to digital (Sow & Aborbie, 2018). Therefore, a digital leader plays a critical role in any organization managing disruptive technological changes and maintaining optimum productivity. A digital leader is prepared to learn through the transformation process and develop new skills that will aid in efficient project management. Project management has been one of the critical areas in which businesses achieve their specific objectives using the available resources. In the digital era, project management has transformed from traditional practices to more advanced and intricate processes. Implementing constantly changing technologies into projects means that managers must massively interact with employees at both personal and professional levels. Technology in project management also means that more sophisticated processes that require sophisticated management are introduced (Mihai & CRETU, 2019). Businesses must incorporate these new digital leadership functions in project management to remain relevant in the industry. This study acknowledges that the role of digital leadership will continue to evolve as disruptions occur in the digital era. The study, therefore, aims to derive the impact that the evolving roles will have on project management. The study uses past literature to form a qualitative argument and derive its final results and conclusions.

### **Literature Review**

Different scholars have researched the impact of digital leadership in the disruptive digital era. However, research in project management has been limited since such impacts on businesses are mostly at their primary stages. Zhu (2015), in the book "Digital Master: Debunk the Myths of Enterprise Digital Maturity," studied digital leadership mechanisms. In the study, Zhu explains that there are certain characteristics that a leader must exhibit to attain the title of a digital leader. One of the characteristics involves the ability to apply thought critically and be a thought leader in facilitating the relevance of the organization in times of massive competition. The second characteristic involves being a constant innovator who identifies gaps in the industry and can effectively and efficiently pounce on them. In this case, a digital leader must be innovative in spotting relevant technological advancements that will help generate a competitive advantage. The third characteristic involves a vision of the global perspective of management and growth. This characteristic means that a leader should be able to apply the changing global technologies to transform the organization's operations effectively. Fourthly, a digital leader must be interested in technological advancements and be ready to learn from such advancements. Lastly, a digital leader must be well-informed and resourceful in the organization's digital operations (Zhu, 2015).

Project management is a delicate process that requires coordination between teams, supervisors, and leaders. For efficient project completion, motivation must flow from the leadership positions and trickle down to employees. According to (Lubis et al., 2020), sustainable motivation is a key driver of learning in any organization. Employees motivated through various

measures and systems tend to be more productive. Motivation also affects innovation positively by building the capacity for employees to derive better ways of performing tasks and completing projects. Those are different dimensions of innovation (Wasono & Furinto, 2018). One type of innovation is referred to as product innovation, which involves creating new products and services. Organizations can also be innovative in their production processes and the context of introducing new products. It is believed that amicable relationships between members of a team help to mutual engagement in project teams, which in turn boosts the effectiveness of the team (Shamim. M. I, 2022). Lastly, innovation can be in the form of changes in organizational culture and attitudes toward work. Digital leaders are at the heart of the motivation process and facilitating the innovation process.

The impact of digital technology advancements on an organization's normal operations in a given industry is referred to as digital disruption (Wasono & Furinto, 2018). One of the ways that industrial technological advancements disrupt businesses is through the redefinition of leadership roles. Leaders in the digital era must possess certain attributes that will ensure their organizations' successful transformation and survival in the industry. Technology also disrupts businesses through its integration into business operations such as project management. Other business disruptions include transitioning from the traditional to the digital workplace characterized by more efficient processes, stability, and sustainable growth. According to Dahlstrom et al. (2017), there are certain elements that an organization requires to support digital

transformation. Firstly, the organization must select qualified leaders who can effectively select the direction of the organization and steer it towards that direction. Secondly, organizations should be able to derive decision-making systems and funding sources (Dahlstrom et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a clear link between digital leadership, project management, and other disruptions in the digital era. However, past studies have failed to derive this relationship and its implications for businesses worldwide delicately.

### **Digital Leadership and Project Management**

The business world faces a fast-changing environment that requires a transformation of roles and processes. Organizations looking to transform their operations must demolish previous operations and build up new structures and systems that are more efficient, sustainable, and updated with technology. Digital transformation transforms roles, such as leadership, from traditional to digital ones. Project management is one of the major roles that is highly affected by the transformation. Among the new roles, project managers assumed in organizations include becoming team leaders, scrum masters, and product owners (Abelli & Howard, 2019). Most significantly, project management in the digital era involves deriving mechanisms to facilitate further transformation and being at the top of the implementation process. Organizations in the digital age depend on targeted mission-based teams for growth, innovation, and competitiveness. However, the issue of effectively creating and driving such teams in the disruptive era becomes a

challenge. The leadership capabilities of an organization's project managers become crucial to their survival.

One of the ways that digital leadership impacts project management is through the reshuffling of major project managers' roles. According to Zhu (2015), a digital leader must possess thought, leadership, innovation, global vision, quick learning, and resourcefulness. In a 2008 field survey report by the Project Management Institute (PMI), project management roles are said to evolve towards more executive roles. The report identifies the main qualities of a project executive as innovativeness, data management, legal and regulatory knowledge, data-driven decision making, and collaborative leadership skills. All these qualities of a digital project manager have specific implications on the project management process, and the changes in their roles and duties are the main driver of changes in project management in general. According to Mihardjo & Sasmoko (2019), the manager's qualities directly affect the general organization's performance. A new form of digital leadership is created when organizations successfully combine digital culture and digital competencies (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019).

Another way that digital leadership has impacted project management is by creating efficiency. Project leaders with the required qualities have been able to identify growth areas and apply their leadership capabilities to achieve organizational goals. For example, project managers who have taken advantage of digital cloud solutions in data management and successfully shifted from traditional storage methods have significantly reduced operating costs and helped their

organizations remain competitive. Project efficiency is not only impacted in terms of reduction of costs. There have also been significant improvements in project collaboration due to the creation of project-centered enterprises. Traditionally, top leaders and project managers had a command role on teams performing projects. However, creating a digital project leader means that command is no longer applicable, and organizations are incorporating flat models of supervision. In this form of supervision, communication flows fluidly between groups and their leaders (Daddey,2022).

Through digital leadership, project management is now possible on a global scale. One of the attributes of a global leader requires that they can manage change and make decisions from a global perspective. A digital project leader can build a collaboration of teams from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and language differences, among other differences in the specific traits outlined above. Additionally, technological advancements make it easier for organizations to collaborate with their teams globally (Richer, 2022). Managers can successfully apply digital tools such as video conferencing to facilitate supervision and constant communication between teams in different locations. Organizations can employ digital software to allocate tasks and keep track of project processes and possible diagnostics.

Digital leadership has also transformed the nature of projects into becoming more innovation-driven. Leaders drive innovation focused on inspiring their teams by leading by example and creating a shared vision (Holten & Brenner, 2015). These leaders who lead, by example, are called transactional leaders, while those who motivate others to change are referred



to as transformational. An organization looking to maximize growth in the market and remain competitive should employ a balance of both types of leaders in their project management processes. Transactional leadership entails a certain type of exchange between the leader and the follower. Digital project managers with transactional attributes can build close teams committed to the organization's goals and work together to achieve them. On the other hand, project managers possessing transformational attributes can inspire their teams towards better performances with minimum supervision (Shamim, 2017). The combination of both attributes leads to the facilitation of innovation, creativity, and commitment to the organization (Aarons, 2006).

### **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative data collection approach in various industries and specifically applied interviews to evaluate digital leaders and project management teams. The study chose to apply qualitative interviews since they offer a primary source of the perceptions of leaders and teams on the nature of digital leadership in the digital era. The selection criteria for the organizations to be interviewed were based on the level at which they had applied technological advancements in their processes, especially in project management. The researcher selected the interview questions after thoroughly researching previous literature on digital leadership and

project management (Shamim, 2022). Separate interview questions were prepared for project teams and leaders but were the same for all selected organizations. The teams' interviews aimed to understand in detail how teams perceived leadership quality as a determinant of the success and failure of different projects. On the other hand, interviews with project leaders aimed to understand the qualities required to steer an organization to grow in the digital era and the challenges that the leaders face during the process. In addition to the interviews, the researchers also observed and made notes on the real situation in the different organizations selected using secondary data regarding growth and transformation. The collected data were important in concluding the impact of digital leadership in project management in the disruptive digital era.

### **Findings**

The data collected in the research methodology indicated a direct relationship between digital leadership and project management in any particular organization. The study also found out that different levels of skill and knowledge regarding technological advancements by the project leaders led to different project results. One of the main leadership attributes that the interviews revealed were transactional and transformational leadership traits that most organizations emphasized in their leadership posts. The two desired leadership traits were important in project management and aided the company in the initial stages of digital transformation. Other attributes that stood out included change management, resourcefulness, awareness of the external environment, and global visionary traits. The study also found that teams felt more coerced by

each other and the organization when they had a leader with the above traits. There was also increased efficiency in project completion, cost reductions, and overall growth for companies that had embraced technology and digital leadership. Leaders indicated that they faced challenges in the transformation process. Among the major challenges faced include major budget team cuts to reduce costs and maintain high productivity levels, especially when competition is at the very top. Technical challenges involved in technological advancements and reluctance to change from some teams.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The results and findings of this report clearly show that digital leadership impacts project management in different ways. Rapid digital transformation requires that organizations be prepared to undergo a complete reshuffle of their project processes. Organizations can improve efficiency and facilitate growth by employing digital leadership in project management and collaboration with technology. Organizations now depend on projects to achieve their goals and visions and gain more ground in the market. However, digital leadership is a complicated function as it requires specific personal attributes from the leader. A combination of important and relevant attributes of leadership will directly affect workers' motivation, enhancing creativity and innovation and promoting commitment to achieving the organization's goals. Projects, therefore, become a significant part of driving the organization's goals and vision, and it is now based on the innovative capabilities of the managers and their teams. Digital leaders are also responsible for

building and sustaining collaboration between teams. The availability of technological advancements and the sharpness of the digital leader in their application to various projects determines the level of commitment. In this case, communication becomes critical in building collaboration where projects are centered on teams.

This study recommends that organizations uphold the new role of the digital manager in project management. Organizations can create new recruitment and hiring processes through the human resource function that employs managers based on leadership qualifications. The study also recommends that the digital leader should be able to learn about new technologies to be applied in projects constantly. Therefore, organizations should provide training and development opportunities to ensure that they take advantage of the capabilities of the digital leader. Organizations must fully reinvent project management and be prepared to do so regularly as new technologies are invented and introduced into business operations to incorporate the digital project manager in current arrangements. Organizations are responsible for providing digital managers with resources and tools to create sustainability and growth. However, Different organizations require different approaches to managing projects according to their structures. Therefore, the study recommends that further research be performed in specific industries to determine the applications of digital leadership and their resultant impact on project management.

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