

Sustainable Leadership – Skills and Strategies for Responsible Management

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Abstract

In the current context of digital transformation and the challenges posed by the knowledge-based economy, sustainable leadership has become an essential component of responsible management. Based on a solid theoretical foundation, which addresses concepts such as digital leadership, employee involvement, and the specifics of organizations in the knowledge economy, the study explores relevant explanatory models and identifies mediating and moderating factors of the analyzed relationship.

The research is based on statistical methods to analyze data collected from a sample selected based on rigorous criteria. The results obtained highlight a significant correlation between digital leadership styles and employee engagement levels, while also emphasizing the role of contextual variables in strengthening this relationship. The article thus contributes both theoretically, to strengthening the conceptual framework regarding sustainable leadership, and practically, by offering relevant recommendations for leaders concerned with sustainable and responsible development.

Key words: sustainable leadership, knowledge-based economy, responsible management, digital transformation, leadership practices

J.E.L. classification: D83, L21, M12, M14, O15, Q01

1. Introduction

In the current context of digitalization, in the rapid pace of change, digital leadership has become an essential factor in organizational success. The knowledge-based economy requires leaders to develop their digital skills, encourage innovation, and maintain a work environment that supports employee involvement (Avolio, Kahai and Dodge, 2001, p. 615). Digital transformation doesn't have to represent just a technology change, but also a managerial one, affecting organizational culture, business models, and work structures (Westerman, Bonnet and McAfee, 2014, p. 37).

Employee engagement is a key element of organizational performance, having a direct impact on productivity and maintenance/retention personnel (Saks, 2006, p. 602). In knowledge-based organizations, where intellectual capital represents the main strategic resource, employee involvement is influenced by the leadership style practiced by managers (Yukl, 2013, p. 249). Digital leadership, characterized by flexibility, uses technology in making decisions and encouraging remote work, and plays an essential role in maintaining a motivated and engaged workforce that reaches objectives (Northouse, 2021, p. 315).

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement in knowledge-based organizations. In a dynamic and globalized business environment, leaders must adopt new technologies and manage geographically distributed teams while maintaining a high level of employee engagement (Bass and Avolio, 1994, p. 194).

The specific objectives of the research include:

- Identification features of digital leadership and the impact on employees
- Analysis of how digital leadership influences the motivation and professional satisfaction of employees
- Analysis of the differences between digital leadership styles and their effects on performance
- The proposal of certain managerial strategies to increase employee involvement in the knowledge economy.

Thus, the proposed research aims to answer a series of questions, such as:

1. What are the main characteristics of digital leadership, and how do they influence employee engagement?
2. Is there a significant correlation between digital leadership and the level of employee motivation and satisfaction?
3. How does digital leadership influence the collaboration and performance of virtual teams?

Based on a review of specialized literature, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

- H1: Digital leadership has a positive effect on employee engagement in knowledge-based organizations
- H2: Effective use of technology in team management influences positive professional satisfaction
- H3: There is a mediating relationship between digital leadership, organizational culture, and involvement of employees

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical models explain the relationship between digital leadership and employee involvement by analyzing the main theoretical concepts: notional advanced, economy, knowledge-based, digital leadership, and motivation of employees.

Digital leadership is a leadership style that uses technology to improve decision-making, foster collaboration, and support innovation in a business environment characterized by accelerated digitalization (Avolio, et al., 2014, p. 744). According to Northouse (2021, p. 320), digital leadership involves developing essential digital skills for managing virtual teams and facilitating interaction between employees through technological platforms.

An expanded definition is provided by Kane et al. (2019, p. 67), who emphasize that a digital leader is not just a user of technology but an agent of change who promotes digital culture and creates an environment conducive to innovation. In this sense, digital leadership is considered an essential factor in increasing the competitiveness of knowledge-based organizations (Westerman, Bonnet and McAfee, 2014, p. 41).

Employee engagement is defined as their level of enthusiasm, dedication, and emotional connection to the organization and their professional activities (Saks, 2006, p. 602). Involving employees has three main benefits:

- cognitive involvement, which reflects the degree to which employees are focused and motivated in their work (Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova, 2006, p. 715);
- emotional involvement, which includes the employee's loyalty and attachment to the organization (Kahn, 1990, p. 694);
- behavioral involvement, which refers to the level of extra effort that the employee is willing to make for the success of the organization (Rich, Lepine and Crawford, 2010, p. 617).

The determinants of employee engagement include leadership style, organizational culture, performance recognition, and professional development opportunities (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008, p. 212). Digital leadership can have a significant impact on employee engagement, as technology facilitates better communication, collaboration, and autonomy at work (Hendrickson et al., 2020, p. 155).

Knowledge-based economy is an economic model in which innovation, technology, and intellectual capital are the main sources of value and competitive advantage (Powell and Snellman, 2004, p. 201). It is characterized by:

- Technology dependence – organizations must adopt digital solutions to remain competitive (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p. 89).
- Importance of human capital – Humans are essential for INNOVATION and organizational success (Drucker, 1993, p. 12).
- dynamism and volatility – fast changes in the economy require adaptability and agility in organizations (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014, p. 55).

One of the main challenges of the knowledge-based economy is managing the workforce in a digitalized environment. Leaders must create a culture of continuous learning among human resources and ensure employee engagement, even in remote work contexts (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p. 136).

There are many theoretical models that can explain the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement. Among the many Helpful models are listed:

a) Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985). Digital leadership shares many characteristics of transformational leadership, as it involves vision, innovation, and the ability to motivate employees to embrace change (Bass and Avolio, 1994, p. 198). Digital leaders can use technology to inspire employees and increase their level of engagement through effective communication and performance recognition.

b) The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). This model assumes that resources and Organizational factors, such as technology and managerial support, contribute to increasing employee engagement. Digital leadership can reduce stressful working conditions and can offer us human resources advancements such as enhanced autonomy and professional development opportunities (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014, p. 49).

c) Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). This theory suggests that the quality of the leader-employee relationship can directly influence engagement in reaching objectives. In a digital environment, constant interaction through technological platforms can strengthen trusting relationships and increase employee engagement (Erdogan and Bauer, 2015, p. 103).

3. Research methodology

Research pursues an empirical approach by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to get an understanding of the phenomenon studied. The research model is an explanatory and correlational type, aiming to identify causal relationships between digital leadership and employee engagement. In this context, the research will use a cross-sectional design to collect data from a relevant sample of employees in knowledge-based organizations.

According to Bryman (2015, p. 78), the cross-sectional design is suitable for studies that analyze relationships between variables at a specific point in time. The choice of an explanatory design is justified by the need to understand the mechanisms by which digital leadership influences employee engagement, using already validated theoretical models (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). Thus, the hypotheses formulated in the previous chapter will be tested through rigorous statistical methods, using regression models and mediator analysis to highlight the factors that influence the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement.

In our research, to ensure the validity and reliability of the analyzed data, we will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including standardized questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

- a) A standardized questionnaire, which will include sections relating to:
- demographic features (age, gender, position in organization, etc.)
 - Digital leadership – measured by the E-Leadership Scale (Van Wart et al., 2017, p. 456)
 - Employee engagement level – evaluated by Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003, p. 25)
 - mediators and moderators – includes factors such as employee autonomy, digital organizational culture, and the level of digitalization of the organization

b) Semi-structured interviews with leaders and employees from participating companies with the aim of getting a deeper understanding of the digital leadership impact on employees. The questions are built based on specialized literature and aim at:

- Leader perception on the importance of digital competencies in leadership teams
- How digitalization influences collaboration and communication in a team
- Factors that contribute to the growth or decrease of employee engagement in a digitized environment

The data obtained from the interviews are analyzed thematically to identify significant patterns and relationships, according to the method proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 83).

Data collection will be analyzed using the SPSS and AMOS statistical packages, applying the following techniques:

a) Descriptive analysis – is used to examine distribution and to identify any extreme values or anomalies (Field, 2013, p. 145)

b) Correlational analysis - The Pearson Correlation will be used to measure the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement (Hair et al., 2010, p. 211)

c) Multiple linear regression - will be applied to determine the extent to which digital leadership predicts employee engagement, controlling for demographic and contextual variables (Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken, 2013, p. 92)

d) Mediator and moderator analysis

e) Mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1173) will be used to test whether variables such as digital organizational culture mediate the relationship between digital leadership and the involvement of employees.

f) Moderator analysis (Hayes, 2017, p. 289) will examine whether the effect of digital leadership is stronger in certain contexts, for example, in organizations with a high degree of digital transformation.

The study sample includes 300 employees and 50 leaders from knowledge-based organizations, selected through a combination of stratified and convenience sampling (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016, p. 3).

The criteria for inclusion in the sample are:

1. Active employees in organizations with a high degree of digitalization
2. leaders with at least two years of experience managing digital teams
3. companies in knowledge-based sectors, such as IT, education, consulting, and research and development.

The exclusion criteria are:

- employees from traditional organizations, with a low degree of digitalization
- leaders without managerial experience in the digital environment
- respondents who do not fully complete the questionnaire.

The sample size is determined using the G. Power method to ensure adequate statistical power (Faul et al., 2009, p. 179). With an effect size average ($f^2 = 0.15$) and a test power of 0.80, a minimum of 200 respondents is required for the regression analysis, which justifies choosing a larger sample.

4. Results and discussions

The interpretation of results will start with a descriptive analysis of the variables, continuing then with the examination of the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement, and finally, with the identification of mediating and moderating factors. Discussions will be focused on analyzing implications in managerial practice, highlighting recommendations for improving digital leadership in knowledge-based organizations.

Before testing the research hypotheses, we conducted a descriptive analysis of the variables, including mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. Table 1 presents Descriptive results for the main variables studied:

Table no. 1: Descriptive values results

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Asymmetry	Kurtosis
Digital leadership	4.21	0.76	-0.43	-0.12
Involvement employee	3.89	0.81	-0.27	-0.08
Autonomy in work	4.10	0.85	-0.51	-0.18
Organizational culture digital	4.35	0.79	-0.62	-0.21

Source: Own elaboration

The data indicates that respondents perceive digital leadership and the organization's digital culture positively, with high average scores. The variables have a normal distribution (skew and kurtosis fall within the recommended range of ± 1 , according to Hair et al., 2010, p. 213), which allows the use of advanced statistical techniques, such as regression and mediator analysis.

To test H1 ("Digital leadership has a positive effect on employee engagement"), we used multiple linear regressions. The results indicate a significant relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), which confirms our hypothesis.

Correlational analysis shows that digital leadership is positively associated with employee engagement ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that leaders who use digital technologies for communication, collaboration, and motivation manage to maintain a higher level of engagement in their teams. The results confirm the conclusions of previous studies, such as those conducted by Van Wart et al. (2017, p. 458), which emphasize that the use of technology in leadership facilitates transparency, autonomy, and effective interaction among employees.

Factor mediators and relationship moderators were studied.

To explore H2 ("Employees Autonomy mediates the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement"), we used mediator analysis (Hayes, 2017, p. 310). The results indicate that:

- Digital leadership is positively associated with employee autonomy ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$).
- Employee autonomy is positively associated with employee engagement ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$).
- After inclusion of autonomy as a mediating variable, the direct effect of digital leadership on engagement decreases ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$), indicating a partial mediation effect.

This confirms that digital leadership positively influences employee engagement by increasing their level of autonomy, which is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 233).

With regard to H3 ("A digital organizational culture moderates the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement"), we used a moderator analysis. The results show that the interaction between digital leadership and digital culture is significant ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the effect of digital leadership is stronger in organizations with a developed digital culture.

These results support the idea that digital leadership is more effective when implemented in an organizational environment that supports digitalization and innovation (Westerman et al., 2014, p. 46).

The results of this study have important implications for managerial practice, for leaders and organizations that want to improve employee engagement through digital leadership. Among recommendation Key recommendations include:

Communication-based digital leadership style, transparency, and use technology collaborative by using digital platforms (e.g., Slack, Microsoft Teams) for communication and continuous interaction, creating an inclusive digital environment that supports autonomy and innovation.

2. Developing a digital organizational culture to support employee engagement by implementing digital training programs to grow the technological skills of employees, creating policies that encourage the use of technology for collaboration and decision-making.

3. Increasing employee autonomy through digitalization by allowing them to work flexibly and make decisions based on their specific skills, using technology to reduce rigid control and stimulate employee proactivity.

These measures can help improve employee engagement and increase the competitiveness of organizations in the knowledge-based economy.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This section summarizes the main findings of the study, highlighting the theoretical and practical contributions of research on digital leadership and employee engagement in the knowledge economy. We also discuss the limitations of the study and propose future research directions to deepen this emerging field.

The research investigated the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement in the knowledge-based economy, exploring the mediating and moderating factors of this relationship.

The empirical analysis led to the following main findings:

1. Digital leadership has a significant positive impact on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), confirming Hypothesis H1. This result shows that leaders who use digital technologies for coordination, communication, and motivation can improve the level of commitment of their team.

2. Employee autonomy mediates the relationship between digital leadership and employee engagement ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), which confirms Hypothesis H2. Digital leadership increases autonomy, giving employees more flexibility and control over their tasks, which leads to greater engagement.

3. Digital organizational culture moderates this relationship, showing that the effect of digital leadership is stronger in companies that have adopted a strong digital culture ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), confirming hypothesis H3. This emphasizes the importance of the organizational environment in the effectiveness of digital leadership.

4. The analysis of semi-structured interviews highlighted that leaders who promote the use of digital technologies and agile practices contribute to greater employee engagement, as they facilitate collaboration and reduce organizational barriers.

These findings are consistent with existing literature (Van Wart et al., 2017; Saks, 2006), reinforcing the idea that digital leadership is a key factor in the success of knowledge-based organizations.

Research may make several important contributions to the specialized literature regarding the correlation between digital leadership and management of employees, through:

- Integration of digital leadership in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, demonstrating that it functions as a "job resource" that reduces professional stress and grows commitment
- The expansion of the transformational leadership theory (Bass and Avolio, 1994) by highlighting the role of autonomy and digital culture in maximizing the impact leaders have on employees
- Validation of empirical analysis of theoretical models in the context of the knowledge-based economy, supporting the importance of contextual factors in the effectiveness of digital leadership

The results studied offer valuable implications for leaders and organizations looking to improve employee engagement through digital leadership:

1. The adoption of an active digital leadership style – managers need to use technology to maintain open and effective communication with their employees
2. Employee autonomy growth through technology – providing flexibility in making decisions may grow motivation and involvement
3. Investments in a digital organizational culture – companies need to support training leaders in digital skills and create policies that encourage digital innovation
4. Use collaborative platforms – applications like Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Trello can improve work efficiency in virtual teams and contribute to employee engagement.

Although the study provides relevant insights into digital leadership, certain limitations must be considered:

1. Cross-sectional design. Because the data were collected at a single point in time, we cannot establish definitive causal relationships between variables. Research the future. It could use a longitudinal design to examine the long-term effects of digital leadership
2. The sample is limited to certain economies/fields. Most respondents come from fields such as IT, education, and consulting. Extending the research to other sectors, such as manufacturing or healthcare, could provide a more complete picture fill on digital leadership

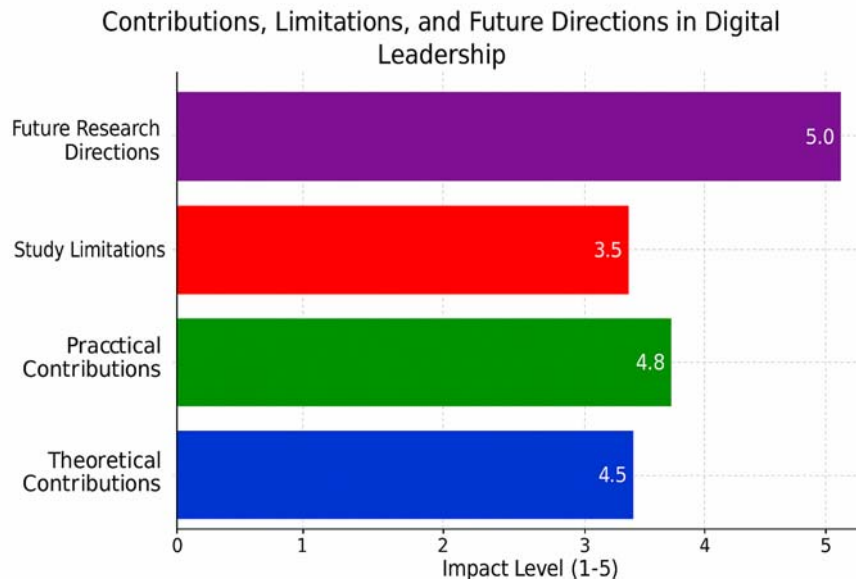
3. Self-assessment as a data collection method. Considering the fact that respondents completed the questionnaires alone, there may be a social desirability bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future studies could use mixed methods, including direct observations and objective data regarding employee performance

4. Cultural and Geographical. Organizational culture digital can vary significantly between regions. Therefore, future research should analyze the impact of digital leadership in various international contexts.

Future research directions, to deepen this field, may target:

- exploring digital leadership in the context of hybrid work by studying how leaders manage mixed teams (physical-virtual)
- analyzing the relationship between digital leadership and organizational innovation by investigating how digital leaders stimulate creativity and the development of new products or services
- Integration of artificial intelligence in digital leadership through impact research using AI for decision making and employee engagement
- comparison of digital leadership with other leadership styles, such as traditional or servant leadership in relation to organizational performance

Figure no. 1



Source: Own elaboration

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