

Beyond the Buzzword: An Exploratory View on Middle Managers' Influence in Digital Transformation in a Digital-Native Organization

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Abstract

Digital transformation, often discussed as a strategic imperative, struggles or fails, with less than 30% of initiatives achieving sustainable results. Recent research shows that the success of transformation depends more on people, culture, and organizational capabilities than on technology. Middle managers, positioned between top leadership and frontline employees, are often described in theory as implementers, change agents, and even sensemakers. However, there is limited understanding of how they actually experience digital transformation in practice and particularly in digital-native companies, where transformation is assumed to be natural. This paper presents findings from an exploratory abductive case study in a digital-native organization from the e-commerce and marketplace sector. Data was collected through four semi-structured interviews with middle managers at three hierarchical levels. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, yielding 295 minutes of recorded and transcribed material. The analysis followed the Gioia methodology, using also open and axial coding to develop themes. The results show that middle managers experience digital transformation less as radical disruption and more as "business as usual", a continuous adjustment of the operating model to business and technological needs. Artificial intelligence generated the strongest reactions, seen as both hype and pragmatic support, but also raising issues of unclear ownership and limited experimentation. Human aspects are important to managers: they emphasized trust-building, team support, and people development as central to their roles, especially during frequent reorganizations. HR Business Partners emerged as unexpected enablers of transformation, easing workload and facilitating change. The study contributes to the literature by offering insights from a digital-native context, demonstrating that even technologically advanced firms face challenges similar to those of incumbents. It also highlights the need to better connect academic concepts of middle management with their lived experiences in a continuous state of transformation.

Keywords

Digital Transformation; Middle Managers; Organisational Change; AI; Digital-Natives Organizations.

Introduction

Digital transformation (DT) is everywhere. Organizations worldwide spend billions each year on new technologies and processes, with budgets expected to reach \$3.9 trillion by 2027 (Deloitte, 2024). Still, most initiatives struggle and less than 30% lead to sustainable results (BCG, 2021; McKinsey, 2023). The main barriers, though, seem to come more from the human side of organizations - organizational culture, resistance to change, organizational capabilities, and leadership. In this context, middle managers (MMs) play a crucial role. They are positioned within organizations, between top management - who provide the strategic direction- and frontline employees - who actually deliver the work. They are expected to ensure business continuity, support employees, and bring strategic priorities into practice. The literature on MMs describes them as implementers, change agents and catalysts, emotional balancers, and sensemakers (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Huy, 2002; Balogun & Rouleau, 2011). However, not much is known about how they actually experience DT in their daily work.

This paper aims to put the foundation for exactly this: understanding how MMs in a digital-native company perceive and act in DT. One might assume that companies born digital do not face the same struggles as traditional organizations. Participants see DT as "buzzword", a "cover-it-all" term, that in practice leads to pragmatic, ongoing business improvements rather than radical disruption. At the same

time, artificial intelligence (AI) is raising new challenges similar to incumbent organizations, as the existing technological infrastructures are reaching their limits in the age of AI.

The study is based on four exploratory semi-structured interviews with MMs at different levels (CEO - 2, -3, -4) within the same company, creating the foundation of a future extended case study. Conversations lasted 60-90 minutes. The design follows an abductive case study approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), as the aim is to refine the existing understanding of how MMs in digital-native organizations enact their roles in DT.

Three main findings stand out. First, DT in a digital-native company is seen as usual business. However, AI brought stronger reactions, with more expectations and concerns. Second, MMs are strongly people-focused, and the closer they are to frontline employees, the more they see their role as supporting people in adapting to change and walking the talk of adopting technology. The MMs closer to senior leadership see their role is more about alignment and reporting, feeling less accountable for adoption. Finally, HR Business Partners (HRBPs) appeared as surprisingly important. They acted as enablers, helping managers and teams to cope with uncertainty, stress, and role changes during transformation. The insights highlight also highlight a gap between theory and practice. Academic research positions MMs as key drivers of change, but managers talk about solving daily problems, delivering on efficiency and revenue goals, keeping teams engaged, and adapting to constant change. Observing their lived experiences reveals how DT really unfolds within organizations.

The paper argues that even in digital-native contexts, where technology is central, transformation depends on people, culture, and enablement from organizational capabilities. From participants' perspective, DT is less about tools and more about how people give meaning and navigate the challenges of their daily work, as well as the business value these technologies bring.

Literature review

DT is documented in depth and addressed from a variety of angles that consider both its technological and human implications for companies today. While the field lacks conceptual clarity, all definitions share, on the one hand, a focus on transformation or change and, on the other, a focus on digital technologies, with the goal of improving a certain entity. However, the paradox in these and other academic definitions is that Riedl et al. (2024) found practitioners' understanding of DT to be very different and arguably more simplistic than the highly conceptualized definitions proposed by researchers. This will also become evident among the participants in the present study. It is worth mentioning that human-oriented definitions are also emerging, such as the one provided by Nadkarni and Prügl, who see DT as "an actor-driven organizational transformation triggered by the adoption of technology-driven digital disruption" (2021, pp. 240). This is also the definition that this paper will follow.

With the human side of DT rising, a particular employee segment stands out: MMs. Representing between 5-20% of the workforce (Deloitte, 2020), MMs are "typically the largest managerial group, and they play a key role in implementing firms' strategies" (Lucas & Goh, 2009, p. 49). The definition of MMs is rather unitary, reflecting their position within the organization. In this paper, we will consider two of those. The first one, hierarchy-based, used in the participant selection process, is defined as "any manager two levels below the CEO and one level above the frontline" (Huy, 2001, p. 73). However, the paper also considers beyond the hierarchical perspective, describing MMs as "managers with access to top management, coupled with a very good knowledge of operations" (Wooldridge et al., 2008, p. 1192).

Research suggests MMs have a positive impact on DT success. Firstly, their sensemaking, sensegiving, and issue selling support the introduction of innovation, including digital innovation (Funke et al., 2023). Putra et al. (2024) suggest that MMs are very important for implementing top management's strategy and for overcoming conflicting demands, while, as catalysts and navigators of hierarchies, they positively impact decision-making time (Christodoulou et al., 2022). This confirms Porck & Van Knippenberg's (2023) findings on MMs' contribution to intergroup effectiveness, as they

can compensate for the lack of structural coordination through boundary-spanning activities. Finally, Nadkarni and Prügl (2020) observe that considering the disruptive nature of technologies, organizations need to renew and redefine the key ideas of their business, so that they actually benefit from the potential of successful DTs.

So, according to the research, MMs cover a broad range of responsibilities in driving DT. However, there are still significant gaps. First, their own perspective and lived experiences in DT are underexplored. Second, their role appears not fully updated to the realities and needs of contemporary organizations, with fragmented insights (Koponen et al. 2023; Funke et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2024). Finally, there is a need for more practical insights, since Riedl et al. (2024) showed a clear difference between the conceptual frameworks developed by researchers and the simpler, practical understanding of practitioners. Recent empirical evidence confirms that DT reshapes organizational culture, leadership, and operating models (Guerra & Del Valle, 2024).

Furthermore, the study focuses on a digital-native organization, defined as a company founded in the digital era, with digital technologies embedded in its core business model and operations. Given the conceptual inconsistency of academic digital maturity frameworks (Teichert, 2019), digital maturity was assessed using the Boston Consulting Group model (2022). Empirical research examined DT across different organizational settings - SMEs, Industry 4.0 environments, and platform-based firms (e.g., Horváth & Szabó, 2019; Van Doorn et al., 2023; Ferraro et al., 2024). However, these studies examine incumbent organizations adapting to digital pressures. Digital-native companies may normalize transformation differently, and insights from remain largely absent, particularly regarding how MMs experience continuous technological evolution. Recent work offers a bibliometric perspective on the role of MMs in DT (Ionescu, 2024). However, there is limited empirical understanding of how MMs interpret and enact DT in practice, especially in digital-native contexts, and this gap is what this paper seeks to explore.

Methodology

This study examines how MMs experience DT in a digital-native organization in the e-commerce and marketplace sector. Most of the literature is focused on incumbent organizations, where the need and pressure look higher. However, this can serve both as an example for less advanced organizations and as a demonstration that technology's constant evolution and disruptive effects impact all organizations continuously, regardless of their technological state, and that DT needs to be internalized as a never-ending change until it becomes business as usual.

In this exploratory stage of the research, the aim is to develop an initial understanding of MMs' perceptions and to compare them with existing theoretical perspectives and the extended literature review that led to this research. The design follows an abductive case study approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The goal is to confront theory with empirical data and to deep-dive into the existing understanding of how MMs enact their role in DT, using the case of a digital-native organization.

Data collection. Participants were MMs positioned between strategic and operational levels (Wooldridge et al., 2008). By including three organizational levels - CEO -2, -3, and -4 - the study aimed to capture variations in role enactment during transformation, depending on distance from strategy. The company, a digital-native organization, was selected to examine whether and how transformation is understood differently from an incumbent organization.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four MMs from the same organization. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, for a total recording time of 295 minutes. The interviews were held on Zoom, in English. The data was transcribed using Zoom capabilities, checked for accuracy, and anonymized.

The interview guide was developed following Castillo-Montoya's (2016) principles, starting from the research questions and testing the survey in advance to ensure questions were clear and relevant. An

important element was the application of abductive logic. The questions were adapted during and after each conversation to explore new or surprising themes in more depth, seeking a situational fit between theory and participants' statements (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Data analysis. The transcripts were analyzed using the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). In the first stage, open coding was used to capture participants' own words and expressions and organize them into 1st-order concepts. These were then grouped into broader categories, with relationships and patterns identified, following the logic of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, 2nd order themes were developed to connect the emerging categories to existing theoretical knowledge and to the research questions. However, the process did not go further into aggregated dimensions, given the limited sample. Interestingly, some of the most valuable insights did not cluster neatly under a single theme but appeared across several of them. This confirmed the need to combine approaches, ensuring that transversal and nuanced perspectives were not lost in the analysis.

Results and discussion

Before looking into each research question, it is worth examining several transversal themes emerging into an overall story about being an MM in a digital-native organization. Participants described their roles as increasingly complex, often covering multiple geographies and functions. Administrative work takes up to 40%, yet is seen as low priority, especially by comparison with building trust, supporting teamwork, and developing people. Changes occur on average every 1.5 years and are considered time-consuming but intended to achieve efficiency and revenue goals. DT is described as business as usual, a "buzzword" (MM2-01) and a "fantastic, catchy, cover-it-all phrase" (MM3-02) that, in reality, is just an ongoing adaptation of the operating model. Technology is not introduced for the sake of technology, but as a way to be more efficient and contribute to revenue goals. This indicates a pragmatic mindset, coming from the fact that transformation is not a one-off project, but a continuous state.

AI generated the strongest reactions when thinking about DT. Managers considered it both hype and useful support for repetitive tasks, while noting that it was not transformative on its own. Ownership of AI initiatives was mentioned as unclear, with tensions between top-down decision-making and bottom-up expertise. Despite frequent use, most managers saw themselves as not very advanced in AI, suggesting that skills gaps persist even in a digital-native context.

HR Business Partners (HRBPs) emerged as an unexpected source of support. Their involvement, so close to operations and daily challenges, reduces workload and gives managers space to focus on other aspects of work. Direct managers also play a role, especially for those further from senior leadership. However, influence on major organizational decisions remained limited.

Finally, in terms of motivations and pressure, managers found meaning in achievements and people development, as well as in financial rewards, while culture and respect for employees are mentioned as strengths of the organization. At the same time, they felt a constant pressure to justify their business value, perceiving themselves as a cost.

Relevance to research questions. Before going into the DT-MM research questions, it is important to note that MMs did not associate themselves with a clear DT initiative, though AI did elicit a strong reaction. In general, though, the way they see technology is more as a constant force that is shaping the organization, along with business opportunities and global changes. Such forces have a cumulative impact, leading to continuous changes in the operating model or the organization's structures.

RQ1: What is the role of MMs in DT, and how does this role contribute to the success of digital initiatives?

Participants described their contribution in terms of revenue, efficiency, and people leadership. They all see themselves as directly accountable for business outcomes - revenue and efficiency. As one manager noted, "What is extremely important nowadays... efficiency. How to maximize results with

the most efficient resources." (MM2-1). They also highlighted taking care of people as a core part of their role: "My major impact as I see it is the one related to growing people" (MM4-1). This aspect of the role comes in the context of frequent reorganization: "Every one and a half year, there is something important from the perspective of scope, responsibilities, or different countries" (MM2-1). Their role has two sides: ensuring revenue and efficiency, which continuously fuel growth and future investments, while navigating constant structural change and sustaining their teams.

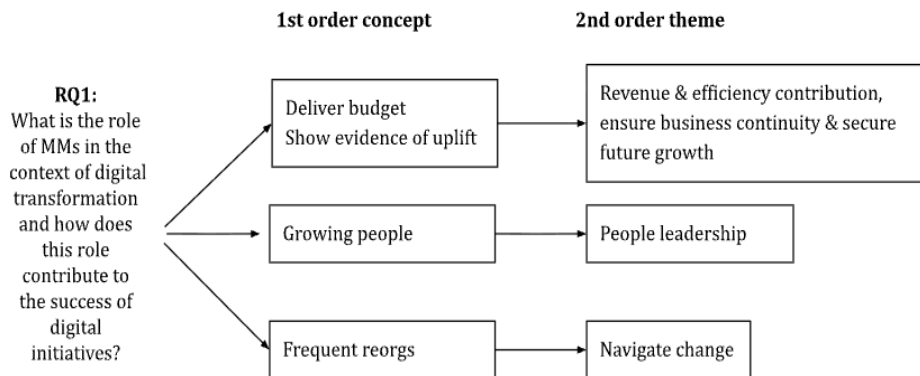


Figure 1. RQ1 data structure

RQ2: How do MMs navigate the balance between driving DT and maintaining classic managerial responsibilities?

Managers consistently described a tension between people's priorities, navigating changes, and delivery pressures. Admin work was seen as low priority compared to team management: "I try my best to have people as my priority, with 1-to-1s and country meetings" (MM4-1). The focus on people creates tension with delivering on the goals: "I find it challenging to balance helping people grow with delivering on time" (MM4-1). To cope, managers find their own ways to adapt and play to their strengths: "whenever it comes to a more strategic approach... It doesn't happen at work. It happens outside of working hours." (MM3-2).

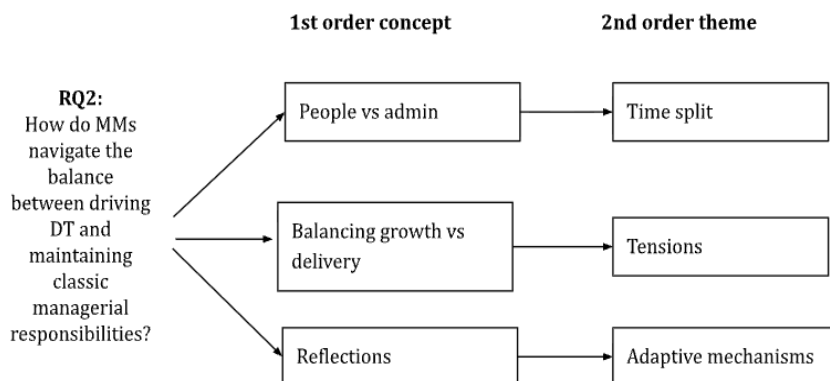


Figure 2. RQ2 data structure

RQ3: What challenges do MMs experience during DT?

The main challenges are around workload, role conflict, and skill gaps. Participants frequently mentioned larger and larger scopes, covering multiple geographies, while these reorgs usually involve standardization and automation goals: "Started as a manager only for one market... merged with three other countries... then another one joined" (MM3-2). This expanded scope is seen as time-consuming, both to manage the change as well as to stay up-to-date with everything that is happening across the operations, and makes managers feel more like implementers rather than strategists: "Goals are set based on pre-work on lower levels... final decision is coming from top management... then consequences go down." (MM2-1).

They also mention some skills gaps, particularly around AI: "I need more advanced AI skills to do my job better" (MM4-1). While the participants mentioned rather advanced AI skills, this applies to any type of company and confirms that the learning journey is never-ending in DT.

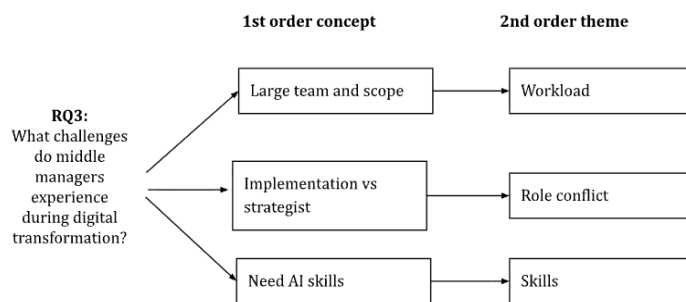


Figure 3. RQ3 data structure

RQ4: How do MMs enact their role as change agents and sensemakers?

Participants highlighted their role in helping teams adapt to change. For example, one manager said: "I asked them what tasks bring them joy and explained that change is about growth opportunities" (MM4-1). They also mentioned resistance, in unexpected forms: "Some people froze, others panicked, others saw it as an opportunity" (MM4-1). To address this, managers use different instruments to build trust and team cohesion, such as co-creation workshops: "It was really helpful when I put them at the same table, used post-its and built ideas together" (MM4-1). This sensemaking role, though in academia sounds aspirational, was not recognized by managers directly, revealing itself as a subtle, yet very present and frequent process that MMs are undergoing.

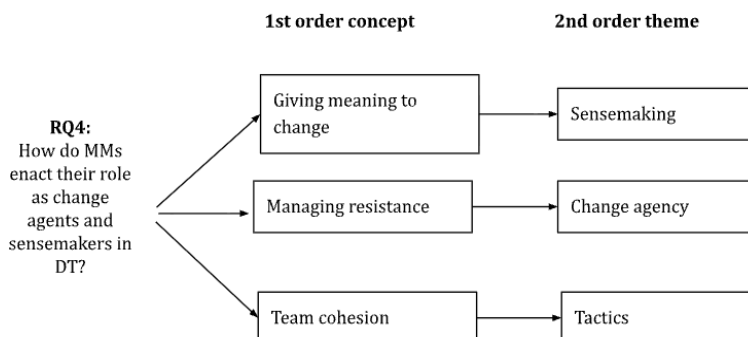


Figure 4. RQ4 data structure

RQ5: To what extent do MMs influence the strategic direction of DT?

The findings show a limited influence. Upward influence is possible when managers build strong cases: "If we build a business case, we will be listened to and taken into account" (MM4-1). At the same time, they see themselves as responsible for translating strategy downwards: "I help my team adapt to organizational changes and give meaning to them" (MM3-2). However, many decisions are strictly top-down. One manager recalled: "I got the decision about closing operations from a team without much input" (MM2-1). This mix is the perfect reflection of the sandwiched position of MMs, being both influencers and implementers with limited power to say no, and a catalyst of information and change. Managers also expressed a desire for greater autonomy and for engaging in entrepreneurial activities.

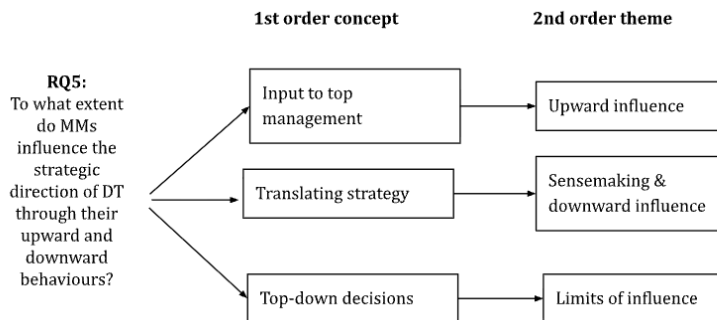


Figure 5. RQ5 data structure

RQ6: What factors enable or block MMs' effectiveness in DT initiatives?

Enablers include HR and direct manager support: "HR helped with recruitment processes and organizational changes" (MM4-1), while another participants shares how "A good HRBP is gold... suddenly you don't have to think about 50% of things" (MM3-2). At the same time, blockers are structural, particularly ownership and prioritization of technology: "I need technology but somebody else owns it and I need to convince them to help me" (MM2-1). Culture is also a key. Even in difficult situations such as lay-offs, participants noted a respectful approach: "Even if I need to leave, I am treated with respect, also with severance" (MM2-1). These cultural practices help soften the disruptive effects of transformation, helping managers stay engaged even when they know that some technological implementation might lead to further layoffs.

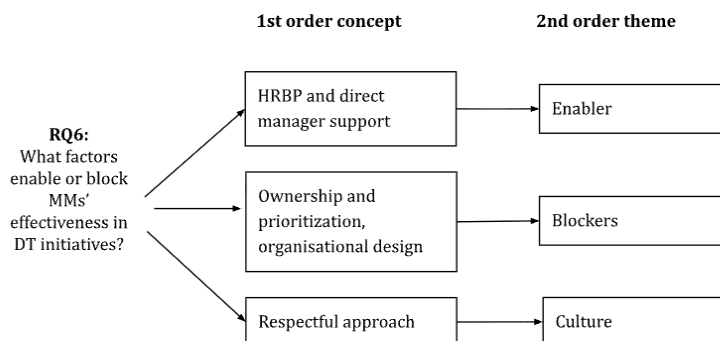


Figure 6. RQ6 data structure

RQ7: How do MMs perceive organizational support for DT?

Perceptions of support are mixed. On the positive side, managers appreciated workshops and tools: "We have events with workshops showing how we use AI successfully, and we are empowered to use it" (MM4-1). Nevertheless, they also pointed to training mismatches: "I expected AI training to improve my skills, but it was about ideation workshops, and nothing happened after" (MM2-1). They mentioned the need for more analytical resources: "I believe we could be faster if we had more resources in analytics" (MM2-1). This suggests that support exists but is not fully aligned with on-the-ground needs.

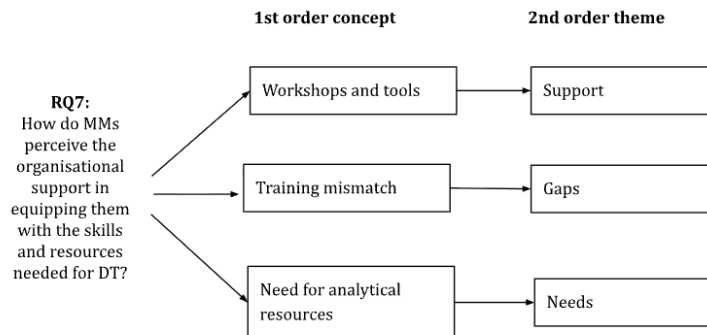


Figure 7. RQ7 data structure

Discussion

This exploratory study, which shows an organization through the eyes of a critical employee segment - MMs - is proof that, even in a digital-native company where technology is embedded in the business model and people's habits, the human aspects and daily practicalities are what organizations focus on. Although MMs occasionally mentioned customer experience as a more aspirational goal, MMs described DT more as business as usual, a continuous revisiting of the operating model. It is a pragmatic view that aligns with recent findings indicating that DT success depends more on organizational capabilities, leadership, and people than on technology (BCG, 2021; McKinsey, 2023; Ionescu, 2025). The results confirm that while digital-native companies may be more technologically advanced, the human side of DT or any transformation is critical. Especially with the introduction of AI, MMs in digital-native organizations also face role overload and unclear AI ownership; however, they also show faster acceptance of continuous changes. Across interviews, managers did not recall structured reskilling plans or formal change management programs, in line with the change cadences they experienced.

To sum up, while digital-native firms are often assumed to be better equipped to manage DT, the findings suggest that technological maturity does not resolve human and organizational tensions: heavy workloads, expanding scope, limited influence over top-down decisions, and constant pressure to justify value. What stands out as a differentiator, though, is an ingrained mindset of continuous change, the acceptance that change will not end, and that constant need for adaptation is routine. This reflects what Huy (2001) and Wooldridge et al. (2008) describe as the dual role of MMs: balancing operational delivery with emotional and relational work in times of transformation.

Conclusions

This study explored how MMs in a digital-native company understand and experience DT, with particular focus on their roles, influence, and challenges, as key themes identified in the MM and DT literature review. The findings confirm that humans are central even in digital-native organizations and that, beyond the technological hype, technology also needs to eventually prove its value. The way

MMs in the study experience DT is not as a one-off, transformative change, but as a continuous adjustment of the organization to evolving business needs, triggered by technology, but not only. Three observations stand out.

1. DT as usual business. DT is described by participants as a "buzzword" in this company, a catch-all term that covers initiatives that are actually considered continuous revisits of the operating model, ensuring the company stays in business in the long run. Technology was never introduced for its own sake but always linked to efficiency or revenue goals: "For sure technology is not deployed just for the sake of technology... it's always about a business goal." (MM3-1). A similar finding appears in Riedl et al. (2024), whose participants, practitioners across several industries, had a more simplistic understanding of DT.

2. HR Business Partners (HRBPs) as enablers. HRBPs appeared as unexpected enablers of transformation, showing how overlooked roles can make or break success in an organization. Managers mentioned HRBP support as decisive for handling change: "A good HRBP is gold... suddenly you don't have to think about 50% of things." (MM3-2). To the author's knowledge, the support for organizational changes provided by HRBPs in close partnership with MM is underexplored.

3. Discreet sensemaker. While MMs are not aware of academic theories and consider some of their activities as part of their role - sensemaking, boundary spanning, issue selling, or change agency - in real life, they are doing such actions. Here is what one manager says: "Even if you clarify today, you will need to have a similar conversation in a week. People internalize differently, with different rhythms." (MM3-1). This shows that managers actively help teams interpret and cope with change, confirming the sensemaking and change-agent roles described in theory (Balogun & Rouleau, 2011; Huy, 2002). It also reveals a gap between research and real-world awareness, since managers did not consciously connect their practice to such academic concepts.

Finally, the interviews suggest DT is operationalized as continuous improvement of the operating model, in contrast with the rather radical academic definitions. These practical views should be seen as a way to normalize DT, maybe, and to put it into practice less under the pressure of a fundamental change, more with the openness of an ongoing adaptation.

Limitations

The exploratory design and limited sample size - four interviews in one organization - limit statistical generalization, so this paper will not claim a generalized understanding of all MMs within the organization or in digital-native organizations. The study prioritized depth, deep-diving into the lived experiences across hierarchical layers. However, it does create a good foundation for more in-depth interviews, based on areas that appeared strongly positive and unexpected surprises, such as the role of an HRBP, while lowering understanding of the relationship with top management, which was surprisingly absent in terms of expectations. Also, since this is looking at a specific industry and culture, results might differ if any of these conditions change. Finally, by having an abductive approach, some interview questions evolved along the process or disappeared altogether. While this enriched the data or confirmed new paths, it also risked introducing inconsistencies in how some topics were covered.

However, even at this early point, the study shows that digital-native companies have their struggles, that MMs are key, that DT is a mindset that needs to prove its value, like any MM out there.

Future research should expand to a full case study within the same company, using a multi-level approach, gathering perspectives from more MMs across different functions, senior management, HR, and individual contributors, so that it can extrapolate insights to the company level or even the industry level.

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