

CHAPTER 6

Leadership in Digitised Workplaces

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Abstract Leadership represents an emerging theme in the field of digitised workplaces, yet the understanding of leadership dynamics and effectiveness in this context remains limited. The aim of this chapter is to (1) provide an overview of the existing academic literature at the intersection of leadership and the future of work and (2) propose an integrative framework of established and current research and emerging trends. We apply a holistic, systematic and comprehensive review of this literature based on objective measures of impact. We consider the main theoretical foundations within the literature and provide an overview of prominent research clusters including both current and emerging themes. Practical

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implications are related to leadership and digitalisation, leadership in virtual work, leading virtual teams and leadership in the context of the Future of Work and the gig economy.

Keywords Leadership • Digitised workplace literature review • Integrative framework

6.1 Introduction

Digitised workplaces, defined as workplaces in which digital technologies cause significant changes to a wide range of work processes and social relationships (Meske & Junglas, 2021), increasingly give rise to discussions around their possible implications for relationships, social ties, connectedness, communication and trust (Berg et al., 2018; Codagnone et al., 2016; Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018; Kittur et al., 2013). To cultivate a connected environment in digitised workplaces with reduced physical interactions, questions regarding the role of leadership arise (Banks et al., 2022). According to a recent bibliometric review on the future of work (Santana & Cobo, 2020), leadership in the digitised workplace is a prevalent research theme that is emerging on the topic. However, understanding about leadership dynamics and effectiveness in this context remains limited. This is unfortunate as leaders possess important qualities that can act as crucial elements within employees' social contexts by providing instruction and feedback, but also support, guidance and motivation. These in turn can foster beneficial outcomes such as engagement, performance and creativity (Bartsch et al., 2020; Busse & Weidner, 2020; Liang et al., 2021).

The aim of this chapter is to (1) provide an overview of the existing academic literature at the intersection of leadership and the future of work, and (2) propose an integrative framework of established and current research and emerging trends. To do so, we conduct a systematic and bibliometric review¹ of the academic literature at the intersection between leadership and the future of work.

¹Our systematic review leverages co-citation, co-word and bibliographic coupling analyses. For more details on bibliometric analysis and procedure and on the methodological background, see Zupic and Čater (2015) and van Eck and Waltman (2010), respectively. Detailed information on the literature search, applied thresholds and other methodological decisions, as well as results/clustering, is available from the authors upon request.

We identify the main theoretical foundations within this literature, current trends and emerging topics to propose a holistic review of prominent research clusters and their managerial implications. The chapter has a practical focus on the role of leadership, particularly in the context of digitally mediated work. Our selection of the most relevant areas is evidence-based and founded on objective measures of impact using bibliometric techniques. Our recommendations for practice refer to a range of leadership challenges and consider the ways in which these can be addressed in future work generally and in digitally mediated work specifically.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. The next section presents an integrative framework of leadership in digitised workplaces that stems from our review. The following section provides an integrative framework of leadership in digitised workplaces. This is followed by a summary of topics that are gaining momentum in the literature and corresponding avenues for future research. The final section provides some concluding remarks.

6.2 Integrative Framework of Leadership in Digitised Workplaces

The theoretical foundations of research on leadership in the changing workplace focus primarily on leadership styles and approaches, trust (and the establishment of psychological safety) in the digital context, digital leadership (styles and approaches best suited to be communicated via digital means), global and distributed teams and consequences of digital work.

The current state-of-the-art of the field, derived from authors' keywords, is represented by topics of leadership and digitalisation, and leadership of virtual work (both focusing on leader-follower computer-mediated communication), virtual/distributed teams, and the future of work and gig economy (including self-leadership, stress-management and creativity).

Popular trends include leading virtual (team)work (computer-mediated communication and synergy and group interdependence), leader-follower relationship management (trust, emotional labour and psychological empowerment) and leadership capabilities in relation to various aspects of the gig economy² (management of collective competencies, globalisation, flexibilisation, social distancing, isolation, occupational safety and

²See Chap. 4 for a more detailed discussion.

organisational health in precarious work and more recently in light of the Covid-19 pandemic).

A comprehensive integrative framework of leadership in digital work-places, derived from the bibliometric review, is portrayed in Fig. 6.1. It provides a synthesised summary of the clusters identified by the three bibliometric analyses, mirroring the split into three sections: fundamental, current and emerging themes. These serve as the basis for our discussion on the implications related to the best practice of leadership in the context of future work.

6.3 IMPLICATIONS: THE BEST PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP IN DIGITISED WORKPLACES

This section summarises some best practices for leaders in digitised workplaces that emerged from our review of the literature, specifically from the current themes identified in the studied field.

6.3.1 Leadership and Digitalisation

One of the most important leadership characteristics in the context of digitised workplaces is a leader's social presence, which refers to the psychological sense of being with others in the digital environment (Sivunen & Nordbäck, 2015). It represents an important variable that sheds light on leadership effectiveness in digitally mediated work. This presence consists of three dimensions: co-presence, behavioural engagement and psychological involvement (Biocca et al., 2001).

It is likely that different digital communication tools with various degrees of media richness can facilitate the different dimensions of leaders' social presence. Different communication technologies provide distinct degrees of informational value (Andres, 2002). In particular, text-based mass media with high convergence of information can, for instance, help to increase leaders' behavioural engagement. Richer media, such as video conferencing with highly synchronised communication, can help increase leaders' co-presence and psychological involvement by requiring more complex dialogue. As such, leaders should be mindful of the dynamics of various media to best utilise these tools to increase their social presence, which in turn will enable them to initiate and develop relationships and social connections in their organisations.

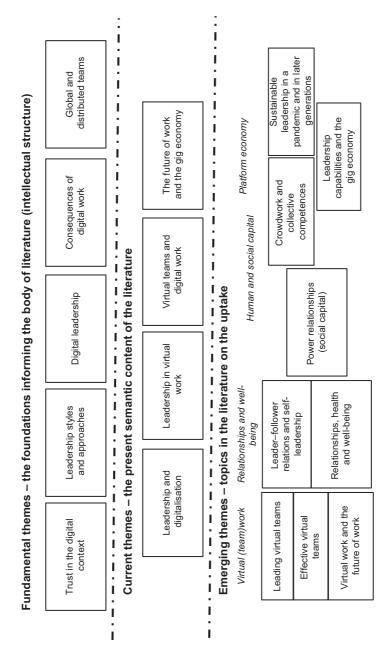


Fig. 6.1 Integrative framework of leadership in digitised workplaces

Trust represents a crucial outcome of high-quality work relationships. Building trust and psychological safety inside digital environments is more difficult because virtual teams tend to be more task-oriented and rely on already-established relationships (Liao, 2017). To develop relationships among virtual teams, which are the foundation of trust, leaders should establish early face-to-face meetings, as well as frequent meetings using media-rich communication channels (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). In addition, leadership that is aimed at fostering trust in digital environments should focus on creating clarity about team norms, managing team expectations and allowing members to connect through shared experiences on a regular basis. Given that some of the cues that help individuals appraise and make sense of their environment during face-to-face communication (i.e., non-verbal communication) are obscured during digital communication, virtual team members are particularly reliant on apparent transparency to build inter-team trust (Jarvenpaa et al., 1997).

6.3.2 Leadership in Virtual Work

A reduced sense of leaders' co-presence that is inherent in digital work-places can also affect certain leadership approaches. For instance, some evidence suggests that transformational leadership can be less effective in teams that are highly virtual (Wong & Berntzen, 2019). This would suggest that leadership influences can be filtered out in digitally mediated environments and certain leadership cues and communications may fail to be translated and/or adequately utilised via different digital media, especially when different forms of work (on-site, hybrid, off-site) are used interchangeably.

As the move towards more virtual work can be taxing on individuals' adaptability and mental health, it is not fully known how they can affect the well-being and functioning of the focal employee and the team (Nikolova et al., 2014). Leadership styles and behaviours (e.g., servant, engaging or ethical leadership, and leaders' adaptable capacities such as a need for structure) that are thought to promote well-being and adaptability in traditional office environments (Chughtai et al., 2015; Kaltiainen & Hakanen, 2020; Okpozo et al., 2017) might be helpful for employees coping with frequent and swift changes from non-digital to fully digital work (and vice versa).

6.3.3 Leading Virtual Teams and Digital Work

Similar concerns are also imposed on virtual team coordination. Recent research from the perspective of Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) suggests that teams can communicate effectively or poorly regardless of the media used (e.g., Hassell & Limayem, 2017). MST suggests an orchestrated use of media where team members' ways of communicating and coordinating correspond with each other (Dennis et al., 2008). Indeed, the team's ability to coordinate might be influenced more by the harmonised use of media among team members than by the richness of the media used. In virtual work, however, opportunities for physical social contact are limited, which can negatively influence a team's ability to coordinate effectively (Kreijns et al., 2007).

A shared understanding of how communication should be carried out is therefore especially crucial to the coordination of virtual teams (e.g., Müller & Antoni, 2020). This parallels with more recent research on digital communication, where the way in which these different media are being used in teams matters (Gilson et al., 2015). This may include providing digital workers with charismatic video messages which can help in conveying leadership tactics (Nieken, 2022) though leaders need to be careful not to send messages that are too simple or too subtle and therefore not explicit enough (Fest et al., 2021).

6.3.4 Leadership in the Context of the Future of Work and Gig Economy

Besides more traditional types of employment, new forms of labour, such as platform gig work, have emerged in the 'digital economy' and have increasingly replaced fixed employer–employee relationships with new, flexible structures (Gandini, 2018; Prassl & Risak, 2016). The precarious working environments of platform or gig workers are well recognised and are characterised by high levels of job insecurity and a lack of job and career development (Wong et al., 2021).

Recent studies point to the importance of workers' resilience and proactivity to gig workers' active improvement of better job security and working conditions. To stimulate these attributes, leaders can assist gig workers in identifying opportunities, planning and pursuing goals, providing training on building self-confidence, self-regulation and self-efficacy (Bateman & Crant, 1999). Leaders can also encourage gig workers to be

more proactive and resilient by shaping the work environment to provide more social support (Ghitulescu, 2012; Thomas Hendricks & Albright, 2018). In the context of gig work, the availability of communication channels influences followers' expectations about appropriate leader communication, meaning that the lack of non-verbal cues might not matter too much in a pure online setting (Fest et al., 2021).

6.4 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FUTURE OF WORK

Based on the topics that are emerging in the literature, we have identified several avenues that would benefit from additional research.

6.4.1 Virtual Work and Virtual Teamwork

Communication technologies that enable digital work designs, such as virtual teams, are disrupting organisation design and work processes (Gilson et al., 2015) and will continue to do so in the future. Research consistently shows that virtual teams can be more challenging to lead than face-to-face teams, creating new demands for leaders (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). Due to teams' reduced physical presence, relationship development and the establishment of social connections is considered one of the most important competencies required for leaders to reinforce and maintain effective team processes (Liao, 2017). The importance of this leadership skill is not new (Cropanzano et al., 2017). What is new and in much need of future research, however, is how leaders can build relationships and social connections via digital means.

Communication processes act as links between individuals, whose collaborative interactions create a shared social identity (Jeong & Chi, 2007; Kane et al., 2005). It is, however, unclear how team dynamics in terms of using different media affect the shared understanding of the task and the team, and thus the team's virtual coordination. Future research into the effects of media configuration within teams could therefore be fruitful.

6.4.2 Leader-Follower Relationships, Health and Well-being

Another topic that has attracted research attention in the past and is still worth further exploration concerns leadership approaches to fostering

trust and managing stress in the digital environment. With advances in information technology and—due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic—restrictions on traditional office work, many leaders have been faced with the question of how to lead virtual teams, to build or maintain a team's trust (in its leader or among employees), and to manage the increase in stress and strain among employees. Compared to traditional face-to-face leadership, digital leadership—like team dynamics—is more challenging in digital settings (Carte et al., 2006).

While the accumulated knowledge thus far provides some insight into which tools and approaches leaders can use to nurture trusting relationships with and among team members in virtual settings, an apparent gap in the literature is the lack of understanding of how leaders should act in a dynamic environment, where the degree of team virtuality changes frequently. Early face-to-face meetings among team members are advisable for building trust in a new team, but there is a lack of evidence on how to achieve this when a new team has no opportunity for face-to-face interactions or when new members join a team, but face-to-face meetings are no longer an option. Successful integration of such newcomers and building their trust is crucial to their well-being and functioning, as well as to that of their team. Further research is needed to guide leaders in helping newcomers develop trusting relationships with their teams in dynamic virtual settings.

In response to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, considerable research attention has been directed at exploring the effect of digital work on work stress (Bregenzer & Jimenez, 2021; González-Anta et al., 2021). Despite initial evidence on leadership behaviours (e.g., health-promoting leadership) that can buffer the harmful effects of digital work on employees' well-being, it is necessary to accumulate more knowledge on leaders' behaviours and their approaches to leading teams in contexts with fluctuating degrees of virtuality (from highly physical to highly virtual).

6.4.3 Human Capital, Social Capital and Leadership of Networks

Differences in the choice of communication media might be a function of individual needs and regulatory mechanisms such as the need for connectedness (Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011). During the first two years of the pandemic, restrictions for many digital workers meant an increase in

isolation and loneliness (Andel et al., 2021).³ In general, digital workers have limited opportunities to have spontaneous interactions with colleagues (e.g., small talk by the coffee machine), which might mean that some individuals, in order to cope with loneliness and isolation (especially as their social contacts outside of work are also limited), might prefer using media-rich communication channels with colleagues, and especially supervisors. Future studies might explore social networks (e.g., friendly, helping, formal and informal work connections) and individual connectedness (e.g., network position, status, centrality) as a predictor of media channel preference, and the role of leaders in constructing and maintaining the structure of those networks.

In addition to team process characteristics, leadership styles and personal differences, cultural differences might play a role in employees' choice and use of communication media. Prior research has shown that cultural diversity plays a role in the selection of communication media (Shachaf, 2008). The results of an exploratory, interview-based study (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013) suggest that in addition to the types of knowledge that need to be shared, the cultural and linguistic variations between the communicating parties (i.e., leaders and followers) influence the choice of media. Future studies might conduct a cross-cultural comparative analysis investigating how communication media channels are used by leaders across cultures and how cultural differences might affect communication effectiveness and team coordination in virtual settings.

6.4.4 Leadership in the Platform-Mediated Economy

With the increase in popularity of digital platforms, it is important to recognise that platform organisations can foster more supportive and collaborative platform environments to help gig workers connect and find support. A fruitful future research avenue would be the investigation of the role of platform interface and algorithmic design in facilitating collaborative online communities to enhance gig worker participation. Leaders have a limited role on gig platforms due to the lack of social interactions, but the elements of leadership, such as framing requests and providing appropriate feedback (Wong et al., 2021) or motivating 'nudges' (Fest et al., 2021), need to be carefully incorporated into algorithmic communication to develop gig workers' performance.

³ See Chap. 2 for a more detailed discussion.

Another form of leadership that might be emerging and that could play a key role to the platform-mediated team interactions is machine or Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based leadership. Despite initial evidence regarding its wide applicability and usefulness, as well as the limitations of such AI leadership or AI coaching (Parent-Rocheleau & Parker, 2021), using AI as a servant leader or moderator in online communities, as well as determining which leadership styles would be best suited (for AI-based leadership) to apply in different situations, remains an uncharted territory. Future studies might also focus on testing the link between AI situational and adaptable leadership reflecting the ability of AI to adapt its leadership style depending on the situation and the individual characteristics of the employee.

6.5 Conclusion

It is apparent that digital technologies have had, and will continue to have, substantial impact on how business is (and will be) operated and how work is (and will be) carried out. Constant and often drastic changes require high levels of adaptability from organisations and their leaders. In such a fast-paced, ever-changing environment, trust and psychological safety consistently stand out as crucial for employees to adapt and thrive in the change process. To foster sustainable digital work environments and leadership, it is recommended that organisations and leaders pay attention to not only what digital technologies should be used but also how these are used to achieve their goals.

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