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## Digital leadership and the GIG Economy

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## **DIGITAL LEADERSHIP AND THE GIG ECONOMY**

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### **Abstract**

Digitalization refers to the fourth industrial revolution and gig economy is its latest advancement. Digitalization is fast, and ongoing and now arguably ubiquitous all over the world. The developed countries have embraced digitalization and are now reaping the benefits from it. The emerging economies, however, although have much potential, are far behind in this race and must embrace digitalization to compete with the growing demands of the fourth industrial revolution. We argue that a key requirement for such transformation is leadership that encourages digitalization. Most of the digital leadership draws on the Western settings with theoretical development being influenced by Western cultures. Theoretically, it is equally paramount to study digitalization using the context of developing nations such as Pakistan. Digital leadership encouraging development of digital skills can lead such transformations better and in a more advanced and efficient manner.

**Keywords:** Digitalization, Digital Leadership, Gig Economy, Pakistan

# DIGITAL LEADERSHIP AND THE GIG ECONOMY

## 1. Introduction

With the development of technologies today, the world view in all aspects of life has changed (Yusif, Hafeez-Baig, & Soar, 2020). Digitalization has become a global trend, and organizations today are increasingly seeking to adopt digitalization (Gupta, 2018). It is argued that digitalization is the future of this ever-changing world, and a requisite for every organization to move towards digital transformation. The two main streams which are changing the digital world are termed as Virtual Reality (VR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Brett, 2019). Digitalization has moved the business from basic industrialization to industry 4.0 which is governed by analogous technologies. This transformation is believed to enhance performance and capabilities through which firms can deliver a modified and an advanced utility service to its customers in a secure, quicker and in a more economical way.

As of 2021, the world, specifically advanced countries are moving from industrialization to digitalization. The technologies in digital age are Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence where big amount of data can be processed and analyzed easily and quickly using technology. The use of digital technologies has made the decision-making fast and accurate. Digitalization refers to conversion of objects to digital forms (Solis, Li, & Szymanski, 2014). In other words, it is the conversion of information from analogue to digital form making it understandable by the computer system. Digital change is fast albeit complex in nature (Nwaiwu, 2018).

As stated earlier, digital Transformation is omnipresent (Voß & Pawlowski, 2019). Companies such as Kodak, Blackberry and Nokia, which were once dominant companies in the industry, were soon replaced by companies such as Amazon, Uber, Netflix, and Google because the latter embraced newer technologies of the digitalization age (Baharuden, Isaac, & Ameen, 2019). To keep up with the changing external environment, it is important for firms to continuously upgrade their capabilities and embrace the emerging trends such as digitalization (Baharuden et al., 2019).

Digitalization of services has brought many advantages bringing ease in the work life. Several tasks once deemed as difficult have been taken over by the automatic machinery, which has significantly increased the production capacity (Heukamp, 2020). However, digitalization also comes with challenges and issues. These, for example, include downsizing or unemployment as variety of tasks which were performed once by man are now done by a machine. According to Mckinsey (2017), around 60% of current jobs and 50% work activities are automatable with the use of latest technology available. The second challenge is the loss of privacy and security of data as all data could be available online making access of private data to companies and individuals easier (Heukamp, 2020). Likewise, with regard to poverty reduction, digitalization impact is multifaceted. The impact of digitalization, for example, on 28 European Nations (Kwilinski, Vyshnevskiy, & Dzwigol, 2020) revealed that for the poorer part of EU, digitalization did not play much a role in lowering poverty. However, in case of wealthy nations, digitalization showed a negative link with poverty.

With regard to work vis-à-vis gig economy, majority of work is performed remotely, via home offices and/or independently as compared to work undertaken in

traditional settings. The communication between employees and leadership is impersonal through digital communication as it takes place mostly via emails. To compensate the real loss of face-to-face contacts, personal relationships are created through video link tools such as Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. However, despite their benefits, these techniques preclude developing relationships and motivation for the followers (Fest, Kvaloy, Nieken, & Schöttner, 2019). So, there are issues and challenges there – however, these are easily outweighed by the advantages of digitalization.

While digitalization today is largely a thing of the developed world, firms in the emerging markets are also trying to embrace it to meet their production targets and to compete in the world of digitalization. When it comes to emerging markets the typical ones are China, India and Brazil. However, several other emerging markets such as Nigeria and Pakistan also hold great potential (Birkinshaw, 2014; Raziq, 2019). Pakistan, for example, has a large services sector, which is increasingly adopting e-commerce, fintech, and e-government, albeit these technologies there are still in their infancy stage. The growth is slow, and according to WEF's Networked Readiness Index, Pakistan ranks 110th out of the 139 countries in terms of its readiness towards digitalization. This low ranking is mainly because of low adoption of digitalization in operations and processes.

Over the period of last 10 years scientific research on digitalization and its consequent influence on business models has been growing rapidly (Caputo, Pizzi, Pellegrini, & Dabić, 2021). Digitalization has gained increasing interest from academic researchers, research institutions and practitioners. Empirically, existing research on the digitalization, however, has been done mostly in the context of developed countries and developing countries like Pakistan are much ignored. The emerging economy of Pakistan

has great potential to grow in digitalization. As per report of McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), digital financial services alone can increase the GDP of Pakistan by 7 points approximately, US\$ 36 billion, with creation of new jobs of around 4 million till the year 2025. Likewise, theoretically, digitalization research is lacking in that the actions and roles of leaders and manager remain unclear. The past studies have been emphasizing the need for further empirical and theoretical studies on digitalization vis-à-vis leadership and management aspects (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009; Marler & Fisher, 2013).

To this end, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the digitalization, gig economy and digital leadership in the context of an emerging economy of Pakistan. The next sections of this chapter will discuss digitalization and gig economy and the role of digital leadership in the adoption of digitalization. Thereafter, we will discuss the impact of gig economy on the labor market and on the industrial relations. The last section of this chapter will present the case of Pakistan being an emerging market. Finally, the chapter is concluded with some recommendations.

## **2. The Gig Economy**

The on-demand services, on-demand economy and on-demand services of employees are the emerging trends of digital economy. The concept of long-term employees in the organizations is being removed from the economy and the workers are often referred to as self-employed. This new emerging business model is termed as “Gig Economy” which is characterized as outsourcing of services by the organization. The concept of gig economy started developing over the past forty years (Flanagan, 2019). The process of outsourcing

and selecting the right employee is made through online platforms where jobs are advertised by companies through their website or other online media outlets. Thus, the digital platform is a fundamental tool for the functioning of gig economy.

This technological disruption has changed the conventional ways of economic activities globally (Anwar & Graham, 2021). Gig is a hybrid model of doing business in the industry 4.0 (fourth industrial revolution). Gig business model is termed as hybrid because it is a mixture involving traditional hierarchical relationships among the top and lower management and a conduct of business through online platforms.

The worldwide revenue generated in the gig economy is \$82.4 billion with 67% annual growth, this worldwide increasing demand and usage shows a substantial development of the gig economy (Staffing Industry Analysts, 2018). The new major platform-based startups like Uber, Airbnb and Lyft (which are only a decade old) are some examples of the gig economy, having pool of workers digitally mediating economic transactions (Vallas & Schor, 2020). On these shared online platforms, the individuals can share their products and offer their services by offering apartments and homes for rent and cars for driving individuals to their destinations. These services are offered through an online platform by freelancers and businessmen. The turnover gained from the gig economy (B2C) from these three platforms altogether is 75% (Uber = 49%, Didi Chuxing = 23%, Lyft = 9%), while turnover from B2B services is concentrated to 42% (Upwork = 21%, GLG = 8.2%, Work Market = 5%, MBO Partners = 3.9%, Axiom = 3.1%) (Dazzi, 2019).

Employment in gig economy is defined as work without workers (Friedman, 2014), and from a jobless future to a bossless future (Daugareilh, Degryse, & Pochet, 2019). The



form of doing business in gig economy is different from the traditional forms, which involve sitting in office with a promised salary, vacations, bonuses, and retirement benefits. In the gig economy the employees work independently. There is no minimum pay, no vacations, no annual or sick leave, the employees act as contractors or freelancers where they must come up with their own tools and they are subject to provide their services on call (McCann & Murray, 2010). The examples are Uber and Careem services which have emerged recently.

The jobs related to the Gig economy can be classified into three categories (Graham & Shaw, 2017). First are the on-demand jobs through Apps, through which the individuals can get themselves registered on the App and can perform the on-demand assigned tasks (e.g., Uber, Deliveroo). The second form of job in the gig economy is named as crowd work – in this job the freelancers, professionals, IT scientists work from home and offer their services online to different platforms (e.g., UpWork, Freelancer, Crowdfunder and others). The third form is known as Asset renting – the renting of properties using an online medium (e.g., Airbnb).

The contractors and freelancers working in the gig economy have choice to select the working hours as per their availability and they can offer their services to various online apps at the same time. Thus, it is emphasized in literature that persons doing business in gig economy are freelancers or independent contractors, but not employees (Bailey, 2016). Perhaps this division of the platform makes the gig economy most controversial. The benefits which gig economy provides to the organization are that it reduces the costs of companies by reducing direct employment to on demand employment (Healy, Nicholson, & Pekarek, 2017).

## **2.1. Gig Economy and Digital Leadership**

It is important to develop the workforce and their skills as eventually, it is the workforce, which leads and shapes the digitalization process of the organization (Elg, Birch-Jensen, Gremyr, Martin, & Melin, 2020). Once digitalization has been adopted in the organization, the roles of top-level management, as well as middle managers and employees change dramatically (Henriette, Feki, & Boughzala, 2016; Parviainen, Tihinen, Kääriäinen, & Teppola, 2017). The use of artificial intelligence technologies creates new opportunities but also pose complex challenges for the leadership responsible for digital transformation (Holmstrom, 2021). Hence, to make full use of digitalization, the organization needs to fill knowledge gaps among the workforces.

Much research has been undertaken in the past on the adoption and working of digitalization (Cocca, Marciano, Rossi, & Alberti, 2018; Dewa, Van Der Merwe, & Matope, 2018). However, there are still gaps regarding the role of senior management and middle managers in the process of digitalization (Gastaldi, Appio, Corso, and Pistorio 2018; Elg et al. 2020). Singh and Hess (2017) articulate the role of managers in the strategic change process of organizations and suggest that the characteristics of managers influence the organization transformation toward digitalization. Especially, the role of middle manager has been highlighted in the literature during the process of digitalization as they work as a bridge between the top management teams and the lower-level managers. Middle level managers are first to respond to the changes in technology in organization (Do & Nuth, 2020). Although, the middle level managers are not responsible for making strategies, they are ones who get these implemented in the organization. Middle level

managers develop the culture of workplace and communicate it among the different levels of organization and are the nucleus of digital transformation (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2020).

To achieve successful digital transformation, it is important to make changes at various levels of the organization and the core business (Karimi & Walter, 2015; Yeow, Soh, & Hansen, 2018), the exchange of resources and capabilities (Cha, Hwang, & Gregor, 2015; Yeow et al., 2018), the reconfiguration of processes and structures (Resca, Za, & Spagnoletti, 2013), adjustments in leadership (Hansen & Sia 2015) and the implementation of digital culture (Llopis, Gonzalez, & Gasco, 2004). It is argued that digital transformation causes changes in the leadership of the organization in terms of their roles and duties and the overall decision-making process (Mazzei & Noble, 2017), leadership skills (Sia, Soh, & Weill, 2016) and communication principles (Bennis, 2013).

In this new form of business termed as the gig economy, the role of middle managers become important and optimal also in terms of monitoring of organizations since this transformation expands their monitoring levels. The services are outsourced by the companies, but the needs for controlling and monitoring work of the outsourced companies are there. Thus, to lead this digital wave of gig economy there is need for a digital leader with specific skills to lead the digital economy. Mumford, Campion, and Morgeson (2007) identify these skills in terms of Cognitive, Interpersonal and Strategic skills required by the digital leadership.

According to Heukamp (2020), to survive the current digitalization wave, the digital leaders should know the basic AI models such as machine learning. Since, digitalization can transform the organization, a digital leader must have the appropriate knowledge, strong decision-making power, a vision to compete in the automatic world, a

judgement, and an ability to cope with uncertain situations. Apart from these decision-making skills the digital leader must possess analytical skills to enhance work performance and quality through the use of AI. Research suggests that although the gig economy has decreased dependency of the hierarchical roles of management due to the self-employed status of workers, the HR managers and digital leaders still have a critical role in the management of digital labors (Wong, Kost, & Fieseler, 2021).

### **3. Gig Economy and the Labor Market**

Empirical evidence suggests that gig economy has an overall positive impact on the employment and productivity of organizations but has a negative (but negligible) impact on the wages of the workers. The self-employed workers have the capacity to earn more by increasing their working hours as per their availability and it helps in making employees less dependent on their bosses (Hathaway & Muro, 2016). However, as stated earlier, the gig economy is arguably destroying the established structures, norms, and employment relationships (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). The gig economy platforms use digital technology to track the demands for services and provides the services through an online digital platform. These platforms work through developing innovative matching algorithms (Schwellnus, Geva, Pak, & Veiel, 2019).

Two main issues because of the gig economy have been realized: legal issues and policy. The legal issues are concerned with the traditional legal status of employees and whether the new status of employees is still valid with the new way of doing business. The policy issues are concerned with whether the existing legal laws, regulations, and rules for

protection of labor rights are still valid in the gig economy or is there a need for the development of new labor laws and policies. In this regard it is argued that a new legal protection system of labor is needed for the gig economy (Todolí-Signes, 2017).

Previously, the policies and laws for the labor were well defined but the changing work environment of gig economy has changed the status of workers to self-employed workers for which there are no such rules and regulations with regard to the protection of labor rights. Some low-cost companies, such as Ryanair, employees all its pilots as subcontractors and through this they deprive the pilots to form a labor union or become members of collective bargaining bodies – hence, following a modern time slavery model. The pilots are paid by an hour flown rule with no insurance, no holidays, and no retirement benefits. Barroso (2005) stresses new forms of control while controlling and monitoring for work quality remain same. In the traditional form of working, the work quality, working expectations from employees and certain specific restrictions were well defined to the workers in advance – whereas the gig economy is opposite in that the control and monitoring of work are still there but in new forms. The platform of gig economy offers a proper network through which the performance evaluation of its workers is done. As argued by Barroso (2005) that this platform does not give specific instructions for quality assurance while it allows the client to evaluate their performance and take the decisions accordingly - but in reality, those who do follow the pre-specified rules by the companies can lower down their ratings in the case of non-compliance for working protocols (Aloisi, 2015). Thus, the monitoring of workers' performance is under constant surveillance. There is, hence, a need to develop certain rules and regulations for the protection of legal rights of workers.

### **3.1. Gig Economy and Industrial Relations**

The impact of gig economy on the industrial relations depends upon digital platforms through which individuals manage the supply and demand of products. With regard to asset platforms the efficiency of the network is critical for successful transaction between two parties – the efficient workforce ensures that the transaction is effective and successful. In work dimension as well as online transactions this hierarchical relationship between the organizations and market also involves the legal formalities and legal status of the organization. Thus, in the digital world of gig economy this hierarchical relation involves costs and organizations are required to make flexible arrangements for the cost optimization for this hybrid system (Dazzi, 2019). The industrial relations in gig economy, therefore, face challenges in the new phase of digital world – the fourth industrial revolution. The new strategies, development of ICT as well as to build the digital economic system require huge capital investment and digital knowledge to lead better and to create better products and services.

Apart from the costs and digital skills requirements to survive in the gig economy, the challenge in the industrial relations between organizations and labor market relates to the trade-union matters. The contract of these unions with the organizations will either be less valid or will require new strategies for the protection of labor rights as well as laws. Thus, in the gig economy the labor laws and rights are at great risk. Additionally, the issue of development of industrial relations in the sharing economies, such as gig economy, would need to be addressed.

The industrial relations of the negotiating parties of the contracts that use digital platforms would change dramatically, and hence, there would be a need to develop

strategies to survive and secure the relationships between negotiating parties transacting in the digital world. Gig economy platforms are highly popular in the services industry such as transport and personal services involving food items delivery. The existing organizations thus may be lacking in technological advancement that is needed and there would be high entry barriers and tight rules to operate in the gig economy. Therefore, the application of product market rules will be quite different in the gig economy as compared to the traditional economy.

#### **4. Case of Pakistan**

Pakistan is an emerging economy and relatively less advanced with regard to digitalization compared to the developed countries. The ICT development in Pakistan started in the 1990's and there is steady growth in this sector since the last three decades. Pakistan is facing severe challenges when it comes to digitalization. According to WEF's Networked Readiness Index, Pakistan ranks 110th out of the 139 countries in terms of readiness towards digitalization. Existing research on the digitalization has mostly been done in developed countries and developing countries such as Pakistan are mostly ignored. The emerging economy of Pakistan, however, has great potential in digitalization. As per report of McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), digital financial services alone can increase the GDP of Pakistan by 7 points, which approximately accounts to US\$ 36 billion, creating new jobs of upto 4 million till the year 2025. Digitalization requires huge investments in ICT. Knowing the current economic and financial situation in Pakistan it might be a major hurdle.

Digitalization – gig economy- is an emerging area. The theoretical foundations, for studying the adoption of digitalization, are in their initial phases of development. Similarly, the role of managers remains under-researched. To understand the phenomenon the researchers have been emphasizing the need for further theoretical and empirical studies (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009; Marler & Fisher, 2013) in the context of Pakistan (Birkinshaw, 2014; Raziq, 2019). Several studies have been undertaken in the past on the adoption and working of digitalization (Carlsson, 2018; Christiansson, Svidt, & Sørensen, 2009; Cocca, Marciano, Rossi, & Alberti, 2018; Dewa, Van Der Merwe, & Matope, 2018) but according to Gastaldi, Appio, Corso, and Pistorio (2018) and Elg, Birch-Jensen, Gremyr, Martin, and Melin (2020) there is a gap in literature regarding the role of senior and middle management teams in the process of digitalization. With regard to digital leadership, the leadership literature in general has been studied and developed mainly based on individualistic Western contexts – looking at the context of Pakistan being a collectivistic society, may offer alternate perspectives and insights to the leadership research (Raziq, Borini, Malik, Ahmad, & Shabaz, 2018).

Although, services industry (i.e., e-commerce, fintech, e-government) in Pakistan is moving towards digitalization and the gig economy, the pace is rather slow. According to State Bank of Pakistan annual report 2017-18, the Pakistan's industries are supporting IT related activities by nurturing new enterprises in the digital field. This shows that, while Pakistan's gig economy is still in its initial phase of development, there is a great potential of growth in digitalization there. The global giants of gig economy such as Airbnb, Uber, Careem etc. are successfully operating in Pakistan. Some local outlets, in food delivery segment, have also emerged successfully such as Foodpanda and Cheetah.



The gig economy platforms which consist of self-employed workers may affect the tax collection system because individuals are working independently through an online platform. The self-employed workers typically less contribute towards the tax system as their revenue remain below the bottom line required to pay taxes. Pakistan is already facing chronic challenges in enhancing its taxation revenues, control tax evasion and to control the corruption in the taxation system (Razzaq, Nazir, & Adil, 2020). The gig economy platforms may have implications for the tax system and may highly impact the already burdened tax revenue system of Pakistan.

Owing to young, educated and cheap workforce, gig economy can flourish in Pakistan in the ICT and software industry sectors. However, policies and strategies including laws to regulate gig economy need to be developed to encourage and promote skill development for successful advancement of innovation and technologies (Javed, 2020).

## **5. Conclusion**

The world is rapidly moving towards digitalization – digitalization is the future of the world. Technologically advanced or developed countries are reaching to the next levels of digitalization with the advancement of services. The developing countries such as Pakistan are in a dire need to reshape the working environment and to compete in the fast-growing trend of digitalization. The modern “platform of capitalism” has emerged and is moving fast. There are advantages and of course disadvantages of the gig economy. It is a complete change and disruption of business as usual. However, it is important for the organizations

to recognize the opportunities offered by gig economy. It is imperative to realize the role of top management and middle level managers in the digitalization process and to instill digitalization culture and prepare the work environment as per the requirements of the modern world. There is a strong need for digital leadership to lead the digitalization of organizations.

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## **Declaration of Interest**

There are no competing interests to declare