

The Role of Digital Transformation in the Implementation of Mineral and Freshwater Export Policy in Georgia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: digital transformation, digital economy, mineral water, fresh water, export policy

JEL classification:

Received: 25.05.2026

Revised: 25.06.2026

Accepted: 03.08.2026

ABSTRACT

The need for the digitalization of processes in all areas is growing with increasing intensity today. Digital transformation enables new interactions between system units and creates entirely new experiences and opportunities for users.

The study highlights that it is crucial for Georgia's development to thoroughly understand the significance of digital transformation, develop an appropriate strategy, and develop mechanisms for the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders in this process.

The study presents the role of digital transformation in the implementation of Georgia's mineral and freshwater export policy.

Mineral and freshwater production has long occupied an important position in the Georgian economy. This is due to the naturalness of the raw materials, their abundance, cheapness, stability, renewability, non-seasonality, high quality, competitiveness, and, above all, the short payback period. In this context, it must also be taken into account that Georgia is located in the middle of countries where there is an acute shortage of drinking water.

The study showed that the use of digital tools in mineral and freshwater companies has contributed to business efficiency. They have enabled the automation of routine tasks, reduced human errors, built databases, reduced costs and increased productivity, improved communication, optimized business processes, and much more. Digital platforms have made it possible for employees in certain positions to work from home, making work within the company more flexible.

Export policies have also become easier thanks to digital platforms. There are now many ways to communicate directly with customers and understand their personal needs.

O33, F13, L66

<https://doi.org/10.46361/2449-2604.13.2.2026.6-13>

ციფრული ტრანსფორმაციის როლი მინერალური და მტკნარი წყლების საექსპორტო პოლიტიკის განხორციელებაში საქართველოში

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ციფრული
ტრანსფორმაცია,
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წყლები,
მტკნარი წყლები,
საექსპორტო
პოლიტიკა

დღეს ყველა სფეროში პროცესების გაციფრულების საჭიროება ახალი სიმძაფრით დგას. ციფრული ტრანსფორმაცია აყალიბებს სისტემის სუბიექტებს შორის ახლებულ ურთიერთქმედებებს, ქმნის მომხმარებლისთვის სრულიად ახალ გამოცდილებებსა და შესაძლებლობებს. ნაშრომში აღნიშნულია, რომ საქართველოს განვითარებისთვის კრიტიკულად მნიშვნელოვანია სიღმისეულად იქნეს გააზრებული „ციფრული ტრანსფორმაციის“ მნიშვნელობა, სწორად იქნეს დასახული სტრატეგია ამ მიმართულებით და განვითარდეს ამ პროცესში ყველა დაინტერესებული მხარის ჩართულობის, თანამშრომლობის მექანიზმები.

ნაშრომში გადმოცემულია ციფრული ტრანსფორმაციის როლი საქართველოს მინერალური და მტკნარი წყლების საექსპორტო პოლიტიკის განხორციელებაში. მინერალური და მტკნარი წყლების წარმოება დიდი ხანია მნიშვნელოვან პოზიციას იკავებს საქართველოს ეკონომიკაში. ამას განაპირობებს: ნედლეულის ბუნებრიობა, სიუხვე, სიახვე, სტაბილურობა, განახლებადობა, არასეზონურობა, მაღალი ხარისხი, კონკურენტუნარიანობა და, რაც მთავარია დაბანდებული ინვესტიციის უკუგების მოკლე პერიოდი. ამ მხრივ ისიც გასათვალისწინებელია, რომ საქართველო მდებარეობს იმ ქვეყნების შუაგულში, რომლებიც სასმელი წყლის მწვავე დეფიციტს განიცდიან.

კვლევაში გვიჩვენა, რომ ციფრული ხელსაწყოების გამოყენებამ მინერალური და მტკნარი წყლების კომპანიებში ხელი შეუწყო ბიზნესოპერაციების ეფექტურობას. მათი მეშვეობით შესაძლებელი გახდა რუტინული ამოცანების ავტომატიზაცია, ადამიანური შეცდომების დაშვების შემცირება, მონაცემთა ბაზების შექმნა, რაც ხარჯებსაც ამცირებს და პროდუქტიულობასაც აუმაღლებს; უკეთესი კომუნიკაცია, ბიზნესპროცესების ოპტიმიზაცია და სხვა.

ციფრული პლატფორმების დახმარებით, გარკვეულ პოზიციებზე მყოფი ადამიანებისთვის შესაძლებელი გახდა დისტანციურად მუშაობა, რაც ამ კომპანიაში ყოფნას უფრო მოქნილს ხდის გუნდის წევრისთვის.

ციფრული პლატფორმების დახმარებით, გაადვილდა საექსპორტო პოლიტიკაც. ახლა ბევრი საშუალება არსებობს იმისთვის, რომ მომხმარებელთან პირდაპირი კომუნიკაცია დავამყაროთ და მისი პერსონალური მოთხოვნები შევიტყოთ.

JEL კლასიფიკაცია:

მიღებულია:

25.05.2026

რეცენზირებულია:

25.06.2026

დამტკიცებულია:

03.08.2026

O33, F13, L66

<https://doi.org/10.46361/2449-2604.13.2.2026.6-13>

Introduction

Digital transformation is a response to changes in the technology industry. Unsuccessful responses increase the risk of being left behind. Therefore, it is important to maximize all opportunities to advance technologically and make the leap from the development stage to the industrial stage.

Digital transformation offers companies new tools to work faster and more efficiently and make smarter decisions. These include software, smart devices, online platforms, and much more. These tools help renew the company's pre-transformation activities.

Since digital transformation requires change, the government must promote this change and play a key role in creating an innovative environment. This requires cooperation between the government and the private sector, as well as functions that must necessarily remain with the government: the development, definition, design, and monitoring of implementation of policies. The second type of function is more technical in nature. The essence of the model is that the government does not spend any resources on this, but rather private, authorized providers provide important services in this direction. Here, companies play an active role by creating new products and jobs and devoting resources to them. This increases competition, offering consumers more options.

Digital transformation is not just about technology, but also about redesigning business processes that enable a company to grow and achieve competitive advantage. A company that evolves in this direction thus lays a solid foundation for its future.

The success of digital transformation requires both digitally savvy leaders and the human capital needed to implement the changes brought about by digital transformation. Of course, companies must invest in developing fundamentally different skills and competencies for their employees or in hiring new talent, but without these measures, change is not possible. A crucial step for companies is developing clear working capital strategies to identify existing and future digital skills and competencies.

Refreshing the corporate culture. Since digital transformations require new ways of working and changes in corporate culture, employees must be empowered to work differently and keep pace with the faster pace of business. Adopting digital tools and process optimizations, as well as developing an optimized operating model, facilitates these changes.

Change old communication channels. Good communication has always been a key success factor in traditional change efforts and is also crucial in digital transformation. In the digital context, companies must use more creative channels to enable new, faster ways of working and the faster changes in thinking and behavior required by digital transformation. A shift away from traditional channels that only allow one-way communication (such as company-wide emails) and toward more interactive platforms (such as internal social media) that facilitate open dialogue within the organization.

Digital transformation is particularly important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as the use of digital technologies enables them to overcome resource constraints, grow, and develop innovative strategies (Rogers, 2016). Increasing globalization and the rapid development of digital technologies offer new opportunities for companies (European Commission, 2023).

For example, e-commerce platforms enable small and medium-sized enterprises to operate on a global level, thereby increasing their sales volume and competitiveness.

Internet marketing allows companies to not only identify customer segments but also build long-term relationships with them. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn offer companies the opportunity to run targeted advertising, thus increasing ROI (return on investment) (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Furthermore, email marketing helps companies maintain their existing customer base. This promotes the development of long-term relationships (European Commission, 2023). Search engine optimization (SEO) and its importance: SEO is a key element of digital marketing and contributes to increased visibility of company websites in search engines. An effective SEO strategy increases website traffic and provides companies with

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more potential customers (Porter, 2008). For example, more than 70% of companies in the European Union use SEO strategies, compared to only 30% in Georgia. A greater focus could be an important step for Georgian companies to increase their digital competitiveness.

Mineral and freshwater production has long occupied an important position in the Georgian economy. This is due to the naturalness of the raw materials, their abundance, cheapness, stability, renewability, non-seasonality, high quality, competitiveness, and, above all, the short payback period. In this context, it must also be taken into account that Georgia is located in the middle of countries where there is an acute shortage of drinking water. 30% of Georgia's water resources are groundwater of the highest quality.

Digital transformation is an important source of increasing export opportunities for mineral and freshwater. Despite existing challenges, positive trends are evident: the use of digital technologies is steadily increasing. The experience of European countries shows that a strong digital infrastructure and integrated marketing strategies are essential for the success of digital transformation. Georgia should consider these experiences and invest more heavily in the digital ecosystem. The success of digital transformation depends on the readiness of companies, government policies, and cooperation with international partners. If these processes are well organized, the Georgian mineral and freshwater industry can be successful not only in the local but also in the international market.

Theoretical Foundation

Some researchers define digital transformation as the integration of digital technologies and business processes into the digital economy (Liu et al., 2011). In the broadest sense, digital transformation is perceived as a driving force for change in all contexts, especially in the business context, and influences the improvement of all aspects of business (Kraus et al., 2021). More specifically, digital transformation encompasses three organizational aspects: improving the user experience and changing its life cycle; optimizing business processes; and changing the organizational structure, ultimately leading to the creation of entirely new business models (Benlian et al., 2016).

Digital transformation is considered one of the greatest challenges across all industries. Although companies understand its fundamental importance, they still face numerous obstacles that make it difficult to embark on digital transformation, let alone realize its benefits. (Schuchmann & Seufert, 2015)

The increasing number of opportunities offered by information technology also puts pressure on companies to "identify new business opportunities early and systematically" (Kiel et al., 2016, p. 675) and requires managers to adapt one or more business models or even develop an entirely new one. In a recent survey on digital transformation, executives reported that their CEOs are "more involved than ever in digital transformation," but at the same time, they stated that "their companies must first address a number of organizational issues before digitalization can have a truly transformative impact on their businesses." In this context, it can be assumed that digital transformation de facto impacts all processes within a company, as it influences corporate strategies and leads to the revision and adaptation of existing business models (Linz et al., 2017). However, the introduction of digital technologies influences corporate activities and can lead to the development of innovative business models. However, it depends on the company's available resources and capabilities and takes time, so business models depend more on context than on technology. Therefore, it is interesting to understand the phases a company goes through during digital transformation and how these phases should be managed.

Research Method

The work uses general and specific methods, namely analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, scientific abstraction, comparative and statistical methods, and expert assessments. The theoretical basis of the research is the work of domestic and foreign scientists, as well as reports from mineral and freshwater companies. The information base is various laws and publications of the National Statistics Service of Georgia.

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Analysis and Results

Georgia is rich in mineral and fresh water. The country's geographical location and climatic diversity contribute to an abundance of natural water resources.

In Georgia, there are mineral waters of almost all existing classes and groups, whose unique properties have been known since ancient times. Local people used them to treat various diseases.

Today, more than 730 mineral waters of various names are known in Georgia, with a total daily flow of 130 million liters (Erkomaishvili, 2022). More than 300 of these are of great industrial and balneological importance. Georgia's medicinal waters vary considerably in their chemical composition and therapeutic properties. These waters are rich in minerals and gases, each of which has distinct healing properties. Some mineral waters, such as Borjomi, Nabeglavi, Sairme, Lugela, Utsera, and others, are unique in the world in terms of their ionic composition and healing properties.

Currently, more than 30 companies are represented on the Georgian mineral water market, including six large companies producing 17 bottled water brands, including 12 mineral waters (www.geostat.ge). These companies are: "Idies Borjomi Georgia" LLC (producing Borjomi and Likani mineral waters), Joint Stock Company "Tskal Margebeli" (producing Nabeglavi mineral water), "Akva Geo" LLC (producing Kobi mineral water), "Sairme Mineral Water" LLC (producing Sairme and Sairme Premium mineral waters), Joint Stock Company "Coca-Cola Bottlers Georgia" (producing Mountain Water mineral water), and "Water Land" LLC (producing Gudauri mineral water) ([geostat.ge](http://www.geostat.ge)).

Unlike mineral water (late 19th century), bottling of fresh water began a century later, in the 1990s. Water is produced both for the domestic market and for export (e.g., to Arab countries, Armenia, and Kazakhstan).

Fresh water is produced by the following companies: Aqua Geo LLC, Ideas Borjomi Georgia LLC, Ideas Borjomi Beverage Company Georgia Branch, JSC Tskaliki Margebeli, Supta Tskaliki LLC, Tsaghveri LLC, Shairme Mineral Chater LLC, Health Chater LLC, Sno LLC, and others.

Until 1990, 18 types of mineral water, with a total volume of 520–530 million half-liter bottles, were bottled annually in Georgia. Subsequently, production declined sharply; by 1995, the figure had fallen to just 9.4 million bottles. The product range also shrank. By 1995, virtually only one type of mineral water, "Borjomi," was bottled. There were several reasons for this decline: energy shortages, disrupted economic and transport links, an acute crime situation, and the improper implementation of the privatization process ([geostat.ge](http://www.geostat.ge)).

Mineral water production in Georgia began to grow in 1996. In 2002, 134.5 million bottles of water were bottled, 16.7 times more than in 1995. Mineral water production has increased in recent years. Freshwater production and exports are also increasing annually ([geostat.ge](http://www.geostat.ge)).

Georgian mineral waters enjoy high demand both domestically and abroad. Despite periodic downturns, an analysis of the export dynamics of Georgian mineral waters shows an upward trend in recent years. In 2013, exports to Russia resumed, and exports to Lithuania and Kazakhstan increased, leading to an overall increase in exports. The economic crisis in the region in 2015/16 led to a sharp decline in exports of Georgian mineral waters to our neighboring countries. Since 2017, exports of Georgian mineral waters have increased significantly ([geostat.ge](http://www.geostat.ge)).

In 2020, exports of mineral and fresh water amounted to 192 million liters. In 2021, exports increased 1.3-fold compared to 2020, reaching 257.1 million liters. Russia led the way with 42.8%, followed by Ukraine, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, the United States, Azerbaijan, and Israel (www.geostat.ge).

In 2022, this figure decreased to 203 million liters. Of this, 201 million liters were mineral water and 2 million liters were fresh water ([geostat.ge](http://www.geostat.ge)).

According to 2024 data, this figure was 254.2 million liters, exceeding the 2023 volume by 23.8%. Mineral and fresh water ranked sixth among the largest export goods, accounting for 2.5% (www.geostat.ge).

In recent years, mineral and fresh water production has increased, but entering new markets remains challenging. Global competition is fierce, and Georgian entrepreneurs struggle to enter new markets. Thanks to the quality and production culture of mineral and fresh water, it is possible to penetrate more competitive markets.

In 2024, Russia will be the most important export market for Georgian mineral and fresh water, accounting for 56% of total exports. Mineral waters are also exported to Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, Uzbekistan, the United States, Azerbaijan, Israel, Canada, China, Japan, France, Austria, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Germany, and other countries. The largest share of mineral water exports comes from Borjomi (92%) and Nabeglavi (6%), with the remaining 2%, including 0.5% from Sairme (www.geostat.ge).

The problems caused by the pandemic have also affected the water industry. The biggest challenges have been identified in three areas (Lobzhanidze, 2021).

- Obstacles in water consumption and water supply;
- Delays in the work of companies supplying raw materials, equipment, and technologies for the water industry;
- Conservativeness of private companies in the water industry. The mineral and freshwater market is currently one of the most important and fastest-growing markets in the world. Its development requires maximum support for producing companies, ensuring fair competition, protecting the market from counterfeit products, promoting the healing properties of mineral water through large-scale advertising, and providing tax incentives. In France, for example, mineral water producers pay a reduced VAT rate. This means that while the VAT rate in France is 19%, it is 7% for water producers (Erkomaishvili, 2024).

Currently, the freshwater that is so abundant in Georgia is also successfully sold in many other countries. According to experts, the market distribution could change in favor of freshwater in the near future.

IDS Borjomi Georgia is the undisputed leader in the Georgian mineral water market, both in terms of the volume of mineral water produced and in terms of technological innovations in production.

With the world-renowned "Borjomi" brand, the company currently exports to over 40 countries worldwide (Borjomi.com). IDS Borjomi Georgia produces natural, healthy water for the market.

IDS Borjomi Georgia is part of the international company IDS Borjomi International, the largest producer of natural mineral water.

At the Zenith Global Water Drinks Awards 2024, an international awards ceremony in Frankfurt, Germany, Borjomi mineral water was named the best canned drink.

The winning companies were announced at the gala evening of the 21st International Water Congress. The international jury selected 15 winners from 120 applicants in various nominations, including the new packaging for the Borjomi can. Zenith Global has been evaluating products in the beverage and food industry based on various criteria for 30 years and announces several awards annually. This year, Borjomi won the Zenith Global Award for the third time. Borjomi's success at such an international awards ceremony, which also included Coca-Cola, Danone, Gerolsteiner, and Icelandic Glacial Water, is remarkable (Borjomi.com).

Discussion

To implement state regulation in the production and sale of mineral and fresh water, two laws were passed ("On Mineral Resources" in 1996 and "On Water" in 1997). These laws comprehensively cover and regulate the entire technological cycle, from water extraction and treatment to water treatment. Both laws are based on international standards. A concept for the development of mineral water production has been developed, which envisages both the industrial utilization of the full potential of already extracted mineral waters and the introduction of new, low-mineralized drinking water types into production.

Georgia actively participates in programs for the protection and use of water resources and participates in international meetings and conferences of international water management organizations. As part of the harmonization with the European Union, issues of water production and trade, market competition, exports, and sanitary and hygienic conditions in Georgia are regulated on the basis of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) (Free Trade with the EU).

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In addition to general international regulations, Georgia has non-tariff obligations with a number of countries as a prerequisite for importing mineral water into their countries (macmap.org). The countries with the highest number of regulations are: the United Arab Emirates with 171 regulatory principles, China – 168, Qatar – 123, Saudi Arabia – 114, Kyrgyzstan – 106, Russia – 102, and Kazakhstan – 81. Despite their non-tariff regulations, these countries represent our country's leading export markets. Relatively fewer regulations are subject to: the USA – 49, Lithuania, Latvia, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Austria, which impose 33 regulations each on their import partners, including Georgia. We have eliminated non-tariff barriers to trade with the following countries: Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Turkey, Korea, and Iraq.

In order to survive in international markets and to develop new ones, it is necessary to take into account the regulations and demand characteristics of potential partner countries.

In Georgia, the digital transformation of mineral and freshwater production focuses primarily on social media platforms, which contribute to increasing brand awareness. However, search engine optimization and other integrated digital tools are relatively underused, preventing their full potential from being realized. The experience of European countries clearly shows that the success of digital transformation requires the implementation of multifaceted digital marketing strategies and investments in digital systems (Porter, 2008). The introduction of these approaches to Georgian companies will significantly strengthen their competitiveness. In European countries, especially in Scandinavia, small and medium-sized enterprises actively use digital technologies (European Commission, 2023). In Denmark and Sweden, for example, over 80% of SMEs use ERP and CRM systems, which improves operational efficiency and customer service (Rogers, 2016). In contrast, Georgian companies focus more on the use of social media than on integrated digital systems. This suggests that the digital transformation strategy of Georgian SMEs needs to become more comprehensive and complex.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Studies show that digital technologies have recently been actively used in mineral and freshwater production. This contributes to the automation of routine tasks, the reduction of human errors, and the creation of databases, which in turn reduces costs and increases productivity. Furthermore, it enables communication and optimizes business processes.

Thanks to digital platforms, employees in certain positions have become able to work from home, increasing the flexibility of team members within the company.

Digital platforms simplify export policies. Their use facilitates direct communication with customers and the consideration of their individual needs.

However, it should be noted that they primarily focus on the use of social media rather than integrated digital systems. The digital transformation strategy for mineral and freshwater production and export should become more comprehensive and complex.

Recommendations:

The government should promote the development of digital infrastructure in mineral and freshwater companies.

It is important to develop a strategy for entering international markets and build a broad marketing network.

To gain and maintain a competitive advantage, it is necessary to continuously offer high-quality products with modern designs, open distribution networks to enter new markets, comprehensively expand promotional activities, and organize e-commerce.

A prerequisite for the success of the mineral water business is well-developed land, air, and sea communications, as most companies are located far from the nearest railway stations and ports.

Investors need a stable legal environment that provides solid guarantees for the protection of their property.

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Georgia can supply the entire world with mineral and freshwater. The water problem is of particular concern worldwide today. The largest revenues can be generated from the water business.

Digital transformation is an important source of increasing export opportunities for mineral and freshwater. Despite existing challenges, positive trends are evident: the use of digital technologies is steadily increasing. The success of digital transformation depends on the readiness of companies, government policy, and cooperation with international partners. If these processes are well organized, the Georgian mineral and freshwater industry can be successful not only in the local but also in the international market.

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