

Leadership Competencies in Remote and Hybrid Work Environments: A Narrative Review and Integrated Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the leadership competencies required for effective management in remote and hybrid work environments in the post-pandemic period. It responds to the growing need to reconcile technological transformation with employee well-being, trust, flexibility, and organizational performance. Using a narrative literature review and conceptual synthesis, the article integrates recent academic studies and reports published primarily between 2020 and 2025. The analysis focuses on digital leadership, virtual team management, digital empathy, artificial intelligence literacy, organizational resilience, and results-oriented performance systems.

The review identifies three interrelated groups of competencies that shape leadership effectiveness in digitally mediated work settings. The first group comprises technological competencies, including digital literacy, AI fluency, strategic awareness of digital transformation, and the ethical use of data-driven tools. The second includes human-centered competencies such as digital empathy, emotional intelligence, transparent communication, participative leadership, and the creation of psychological safety. The third consists of organizational competencies, including change management, learning agility, strategic adaptability, resilience-building, and the coordinated use of OKR and KPI frameworks.

Based on these findings, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework linking leadership competencies with employee trust, engagement, well-being, team cohesion, organizational resilience, and performance. It also highlights the relevance of balancing stability and agility in remote and hybrid work through clear goals, predictable communication, and supportive leadership practices. The article contributes to the literature by combining previously fragmented research streams into a unified perspective and offers practical recommendations for leadership development programs, especially in organizations and transition economies undergoing digital transformation. The proposed framework may support future empirical research and the design of more effective leadership practices in distributed teams.

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აბსტრაქტი

ნაშრომში შესწავლილია ლიდერული კომპეტენციები, რომლებიც აუცილებელია დისტანციურ და ჰიბრიდულ სამუშაო გარემოში ეფექტიანი მართვისთვის პოსტანდემიურ პერიოდში. იგი პასუხობს მზარდ საჭიროებას, ტექნოლოგიური ტრანსფორმაცია დაბალანსდეს თანამშრომელთა კეთილდღეობასთან, ნდობასთან, მოქნილობასთან და ორგანიზაციულ ეფექტანობასთან. სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურის მიმოხილვისა და კონცეპტუალური სინთეზის გამოყენებით, სტატია აერთიანებს უახლეს აკადემიურ კვლევებსა და ანგარიშებს, რომლებიც ძირითადად 2020–2025 წლებში გამოქვეყნდა. ანალიზი ფოკუსირებულია ციფრულ ლიდერობაზე, ვირტუალური გუნდების მართვაზე, ციფრულ ემპათიაზე, ხელოვნური ინტელექტის ცოდნაზე (AI literacy), ორგანიზაციულ მდგრადობასა და შედეგებზე ორიენტირებულ საქმიანობის შეფასების სისტემებზე.

ნაშრომში გამოყოფილია სამი ურთიერთდაკავშირებული კომპეტენციითა და ჯგუფი, რომლებიც განსაზღვრავენ ლიდერობის ეფექტიანობას ციფრულად შუამავლობით განხორციელებულ სამუშაო გარემოში. პირველი ჯგუფი მოიცავს ტექნოლოგიურ კომპეტენციებს, მათ შორის ციფრულ წიგნიერებას, ხელოვნური ინტელექტის ცოდნას, ციფრული ტრანსფორმაციის სტრატეგიულ გააზრებასა და მონაცემებზე დაფუძნებული ინსტრუმენტების ეთიკურ გამოყენებას. მეორე ჯგუფი მოიცავს ადამიანზე ორიენტირებულ კომპეტენციებს, როგორცაა ციფრული ემპათია, ემოციური ინტელექტი, გამჭვირვალე კომუნიკაცია, მონაწილეობითი ლიდერობა და ფსიქოლოგიური უსაფრთხოების შექმნა. მესამე ჯგუფი აერთიანებს ორგანიზაციულ კომპეტენციებს, მათ შორის ცვლილებების მართვას, სწავლის მოქნილობას, სტრატეგიულ ადაპტირებადობას, ორგანიზაციული მდგრადობის გაძლიერებას და OKR-ისა და KPI-ის ჩარჩოების კოორდინირებულ გამოყენებას. ამ შედეგებზე დაყრდნობით, კვლევაში შემოთავაზებულია ინტეგრირებული კონცეპტუალური ჩარჩო, რომელიც აკავშირებს ლიდერულ კომპეტენციებს თანამშრომელთა ნდობასთან, ჩართულობასთან, კეთილდღეობასთან, გუნდურ ერთიანობასთან, ორგანიზაციულ მდგრადობასთან და საქმიანობის შედეგებთან. ასევე ხაზგასმულია დისტანციურ და ჰიბრიდულ სამუშაო გარემოში სტაბილურობისა და მოქნილობის დაბალანსების მნიშვნელობა

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1. Introduction and review of literature

The global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 acted as a catalyst for one of the largest socio-organizational experiments in modern history, forcing millions of employees to shift to remote work arrangements. While remote work was previously considered a temporary coping mechanism, by 2025 it had evolved into a stable strategic model shaping organizational competitiveness in the global market. The current state of the field is characterized by a shift from the extensive adoption of digital technologies toward a deeper rethinking of the nature of leadership influence. Leadership is now exercised under conditions of increased virtual distance, asynchrony, and digital mediation (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; Penn LPS Online 2025; Kurayan 2025; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a).

The relevance of this study is driven by the emergence of critical gaps between traditional management approaches and the new requirements of the digital environment. By 2025, it has become evident that the simple transfer of offline practices into online settings is insufficient to ensure long-term effectiveness and employee well-being. Leadership in the context of “boundaryless boundaries” requires not only technical competence but also the development of fundamentally new capabilities, such as digital empathy, management under uncertainty (stagility), and fluency in artificial intelligence-driven environments (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Deloitte 2025a; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

The relevance of this issue is particularly significant for South East European and transition economies, where organizations often face the simultaneous pressures of digital transformation, institutional adaptation, talent mobility, and the modernization of managerial practices. In these contexts, remote and hybrid work arrangements are not only technological or organizational innovations but also mechanisms through which firms can access wider labor markets, retain skilled employees, and enhance competitiveness. However, the successful adoption of such work models depends on leaders’ ability to manage distributed teams, maintain trust, support employee well-being, and align flexible work practices with organizational performance. Therefore, examining leadership competencies in remote and hybrid work environments is directly relevant to the broader challenges of business development, organizational transformation, and managerial modernization in economies undergoing structural change.

Despite the growing body of research on digital leadership, virtual leadership, employee well-being, and remote work management, the existing literature remains fragmented across several parallel streams of inquiry. Previous studies have examined leadership competencies in digital environments, the psychological consequences of remote work, and the role of emerging technologies in organizational transformation. However, these dimensions are often investigated separately, resulting in a limited understanding of how technological, interpersonal, and organizational competencies interact within contemporary remote and hybrid work environments.

A further limitation of existing research is that much of the literature focuses either on technological aspects of digital transformation or on individual leadership behaviors without providing an integrated framework capable of explaining leadership effectiveness under conditions of increasing virtual distance, organizational

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uncertainty, and AI-driven change. While concepts such as digital empathy, virtual leadership, organizational resilience, and digital transformation have gained considerable scholarly attention, there remains a need for a more comprehensive perspective that connects these concepts within a unified leadership competency framework.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a narrative literature review approach to synthesize contemporary research on leadership in remote and hybrid work settings. The purpose of the study is to identify and conceptually integrate the key leadership competencies required for effective management of distributed teams in the post-pandemic work environment. By bringing together insights from research on digital leadership, digital empathy, organizational resilience, artificial intelligence literacy, and performance management, the study develops a comprehensive understanding of the competencies that support organizational effectiveness and employee well-being in remote work contexts.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in the integration of previously fragmented research streams into a coherent conceptual perspective on leadership in digitally mediated work environments. Specifically, the study contributes to the literature by synthesizing emerging evidence on technological, human-centered, and organizational dimensions of leadership and by highlighting their interdependence in shaping leadership effectiveness. In addition, the article provides practical insights for leadership development programs and organizational strategies designed to enhance the performance, resilience, and engagement of distributed teams in 2025–2026.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a narrative literature review methodology aimed at synthesizing and conceptually integrating contemporary research on leadership competencies in remote and hybrid work environments. Unlike systematic literature reviews, which focus on exhaustive identification and quantitative assessment of existing studies through predefined protocols, narrative reviews provide an interpretive framework for theory integration and conceptual development in rapidly evolving research fields. This approach is particularly appropriate for topics characterized by conceptual diversity, emerging theoretical perspectives, and ongoing organizational transformation.

The field of digital leadership has expanded considerably following the global shift toward remote and hybrid work arrangements after the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the literature has become increasingly fragmented across multiple research streams, including digital leadership, virtual leadership, organizational resilience, employee well-being, digital communication, artificial intelligence, and human-centered management. The objective of this study is not to evaluate the statistical effect sizes reported in previous research, but rather to identify common themes, theoretical patterns, and emerging leadership competencies that characterize effective leadership in contemporary distributed work environments (Abbu et al. 2025; López-Figueroa et al. 2025; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

The study employs a qualitative and interpretive review strategy that enables the integration of insights from diverse academic disciplines, including management studies, organizational psychology, leadership research, and digital transformation literature. Through this approach, the article seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership competencies required in remote and hybrid work contexts and to propose a conceptual framework that integrates technological, organizational, and human-centered dimensions of leadership.

2.2 Literature Search Strategy

The literature review draws upon academic publications and international organizational reports published primarily between 2020 and 2025. This period was selected because it captures the most significant phase of transformation in work arrangements following the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects the emergence of new leadership challenges associated with remote and hybrid work (Eurofound 2026; World Economic Forum 2025; Gallup 2025).

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Relevant sources were identified through searches conducted in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Additional materials were obtained from reports and publications issued by internationally recognized organizations and consulting institutions, including Deloitte, McKinsey & Company, Eurofound, Gallup, the World Economic Forum, and other organizations actively engaged in research on the future of work and leadership transformation.

The search process was guided by combinations of keywords and thematic expressions such as “digital leadership,” “e-leadership,” “virtual leadership,” “remote work leadership,” “hybrid work,” “distributed teams,” “digital empathy,” “artificial intelligence in leadership,” “organizational resilience,” “employee well-being,” and “remote team management.” The search strategy aimed to identify publications addressing both theoretical and practical dimensions of leadership in digitally mediated work environments.

Given the conceptual nature of the study, particular attention was paid to highly cited academic publications, recent review articles, conceptual papers, and empirical studies that contributed to the understanding of leadership competencies, organizational adaptation, and employee experiences in remote work settings.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of literature was guided by relevance to the study’s objectives rather than by strict systematic review procedures. Sources were included when they met one or more of the following criteria:

- addressed leadership practices in remote, virtual, or hybrid work environments;
- examined digital leadership competencies and behaviors;
- investigated employee well-being, engagement, trust, or organizational performance in distributed teams;
- discussed technological developments influencing leadership, including artificial intelligence and digital communication platforms;
- provided conceptual, theoretical, or empirical insights relevant to contemporary leadership challenges.

The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, scholarly book chapters, conference papers, and reports produced by reputable international organizations. Preference was given to publications written in English and published during the period from 2020 to 2025, although a limited number of foundational theoretical works were included when necessary to establish conceptual foundations.

Publications were excluded if they focused exclusively on technical aspects of digital technologies without managerial implications, addressed remote work without reference to leadership processes, or lacked sufficient academic or professional credibility. Studies unrelated to organizational leadership or workplace management were also excluded from consideration.

2.4 Analytical Approach

The collected literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. This method enables the identification of recurring concepts, relationships, and theoretical patterns across diverse sources while preserving the contextual richness of individual studies. The analytical process involved repeated reading of the selected literature, comparison of findings, identification of common themes, and integration of theoretical perspectives emerging across different research traditions.

The analysis revealed several recurring dimensions of effective leadership in remote and hybrid work environments. These dimensions include digital leadership and technological fluency, digital empathy and emotional intelligence, management of distributed teams, organizational resilience and adaptability, artificial intelligence literacy, and performance management through goal-oriented frameworks such as Objectives and Key Results (OKR) and Key Performance Indicators (KPI) (Abbu et al. 2025; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Rachmad 2017; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025; FranklinCovey n.d.).

Based on the synthesis of these themes, the study develops an integrated conceptual perspective on

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leadership competencies required in contemporary remote work environments. Rather than focusing on isolated leadership skills, the review emphasizes the interdependence of technological capabilities, human-centered leadership behaviors, and organizational mechanisms that collectively contribute to employee well-being, engagement, and organizational performance. This integrative perspective serves as the foundation for the subsequent analysis and strategic recommendations presented in the article (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Abbu et al. 2025; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

3. Literature review

3.1. The Theoretical Landscape of Digital Leadership: Genesis and Definitions

The concept of leadership in the digital environment has undergone significant evolution, progressing from simple definitions of “remote management” to more complex multidimensional constructs. In contemporary literature (2025), three key terms are commonly identified that are often used interchangeably, although they carry distinct conceptual meanings: e-leadership, digital leadership, and virtual leadership (López-Figueroa et al. 2025).

- E-leadership (electronic leadership) traditionally focuses on the process of social influence mediated by advanced information technologies (AIT), aimed at changing the attitudes, emotions, and performance of individuals or groups (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a).
- Digital leadership is understood as a broader concept encompassing leadership in the era of digital transformation, where technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and cloud computing become an integral part of an organization’s DNA (Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).
- Virtual leadership specifically focuses on a leader’s ability to guide geographically distributed teams that interact primarily in virtual environments (López-Figueroa et al. 2025).

The foundational theoretical framework for understanding these processes remains the Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) proposed by DeSanctis and Poole, which has been reinterpreted in the context of 2025 research. According to this theory, there is a symbiotic relationship between leadership behavior and the use of technology: technologies shape the ways in which leaders interact with followers, while leaders, in turn, adapt and appropriate technologies to perform managerial functions. This co-evolutionary process implies that leadership in digital environments is not a static set of skills but a dynamic practice that continuously evolves in response to new communication tools (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; DeSanctis and Poole 1994).

Systematic reviews published between 2020 and 2025 indicate that the field of digital leadership research is in a phase of rapid development and theoretical consolidation. At the same time, a noticeable shift in research focus can be observed, from predominantly technological aspects toward the increasing role of the human factor in digital environments. The contemporary research agenda highlights several key areas shaping the discourse, including digital transformation, digitization processes, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), virtual team management, and creativity development. A key conclusion emerging from these studies is that the effectiveness of digital leadership is determined not merely by the level of technological sophistication within organizations, but rather by leaders’ ability to effectively integrate digital tools into social processes, thereby fostering trust, engagement, and sustainable team interactions in remote work settings (López-Figueroa et al. 2025).

Table 1. Conceptual characteristics of digital leadership types

Typology of leadership	Conceptual definition	Key emphasis	Level of analysis

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E-Leadership	The process of social influence mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT)	Influence through technological mediation	Individual / group
Digital Leadership	Leadership in the context of digital transformation aimed at integrating technologies into organizational strategy and processes	Organizational change and digital transformation	Organization
Virtual Leadership	Leadership in distributed teams operating primarily in virtual environments	Distance and distribution management	Group / network

Table 2. Mechanisms, Technologies, and Theoretical Foundations

Typology of leadership	Technological environment	Behavioral mechanisms	Theoretical basis
E-Leadership	ICT, digital communication platforms (email, Zoom, Teams)	Trust, communication, coordination, social influence	Adaptive Structuration (AST), social influence theory, socio-technical systems
Digital Leadership	AI, Big Data, cloud platforms, digital ecosystems	Change management, digital culture, innovation, data-driven solutions	Dynamic capabilities, innovation theory, digital transformation frameworks
Virtual Leadership	Virtual work environments (Zoom, Slack, MS Teams)	Involvement, trust, coordination, boundary management	Media richness theory, social presence theory, virtual team theory

3.2. Digital Empathy Theory

In conditions of spatial dispersion among employees, empathy becomes a particularly important leadership resource, enabling the compensation of limitations inherent in virtual interaction. The absence of physical presence and non-verbal cues creates a so-called psychological gap that complicates mutual understanding among communication participants. Within the emerging theoretical perspective of digital empathy, this phenomenon is understood as the ability to recognize, interpret, and appropriately respond to the emotional states of others in technology-mediated communication environments. Unlike traditional forms of empathy, which rely on direct

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perception, its digital counterpart requires a more conscious and analytical approach to interpreting messages, including textual expressions, vocal tone in speech-based communication, as well as pauses and the absence of responses in online interactions (Dilan Consulting Group 2025; Rachmad 2017).

The key principles of digital empathy theory involve the integration of emotional intelligence components into online communication processes, the development of ethical sensitivity to the needs of others, and the maintenance of authentic interaction in technology-mediated environments. Leaders with a high level of digital empathy are able to interpret the emotional states of team members through indirect signals, such as changes in message patterns or reduced activity levels in digital communication channels, and to take timely actions aimed at supporting employees (Rachmad 2017; Great Transitions Strategies 2025).

Contemporary models of empathic leadership (2025) are based on the mechanism of “self–other distinction,” which refers to a leader’s ability to maintain a boundary between their own emotional experiences and those of employees. This psychological process enables deep empathic engagement without the risk of emotional fusion or secondary traumatization. Maintaining such a distinction plays a key role in preventing professional burnout (compassion fatigue) and contributes to the stability of leadership roles in prolonged crisis situations. Leaders who possess this capability demonstrate so-called “empathic curiosity,” characterized by awareness of the limits of their own understanding of others’ experiences and an active effort to interpret them more accurately through open and reflective dialogue (Mishra 2025; Howick et al. 2025a; Howick et al. 2025b).

Table 3. Indicators and effects of digital empathy leadership

Indicators of digital leader empathy	Operational variables	Organizational effects
Interpreting emotional signals in digital communication	Accuracy of message tone recognition; ability to detect hidden emotional markers (response delays, message brevity)	Reducing the frequency of conflict interactions; improving the quality of communication
Empathic response of the leader	Speed and relevance of feedback; proportion of supportive and proactive messages	Increased organizational commitment; increased employee satisfaction
Formation of psychological safety and emotional connection	Level of perceived psychological safety (surveys); frequency of open discussions and feedback	Increased employee engagement and increased innovative activity
Recognizing and supporting employees in digital channels	Frequency of positive feedback (e.g., in Slack/Teams); percentage of messages recognizing employee contributions	Reduced feelings of social isolation; increased team cohesion

Source: Developed by the author based on Howick et al. (2025a); López-Figueroa et al. (2025); Rachmad (2017).

Empirical studies in recent years indicate that the expression of empathy in virtual environments contributes to the development of trust and improves the quality of interactions within distributed teams. In particular, leaders who demonstrate the ability to consider employees’ emotional states in digital communication

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contexts create a more favorable psychological climate, which positively affects levels of engagement and team cohesion. Additionally, it has been shown that regular positive feedback and recognition of employees' contributions in digital channels strengthen the sense of belonging to the team and reduce the risks of social isolation. Thus, digital empathy extends beyond an individual "soft skill" and becomes a strategically important competence that ensures the sustainability and effectiveness of leadership in remote and hybrid work settings (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; Rachmad 2017; Howick et al. 2025a).

3.3. Leadership Competency Framework 2025

Based on contemporary research on digital leadership and recent empirical data, a comprehensive model of digital leader competencies is emerging, in which human-centered characteristics play a central role. One of the key instruments for operationalizing these competencies is the Digital Leadership Scale (DLS), a validated tool for assessing leadership qualities in the context of digital transformation. This model primarily focuses on human aspects of leadership, such as a growth-oriented mindset, ethical use of technology, and employee participation. At the same time, the literature emphasizes the need to integrate these dimensions with business-oriented competencies, including strategic management and the achievement of organizational outcomes (Abbu et al. 2025).

3.3.1. Human-Centered Competencies

A positive attitude toward change and cognitive flexibility (growth mindset) are considered key characteristics of digital leadership. This approach implies viewing digital transformation as an opportunity for development, as well as a willingness to embrace new challenges, use feedback, and continuously improve managerial practices. The ethical use of technologies and artificial intelligence involves ensuring fairness, transparency, and accountability in the application of algorithms, including employee performance evaluation processes. Leaders must minimize the risks of algorithmic bias and ensure trust in digital management tools (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; Abbu et al. 2025).

Transparency and openness (transparent agenda) become particularly important in remote work settings, where continuous face-to-face interaction is absent. In this context, leaders are expected to ensure information accessibility, clearly communicate strategic objectives, and maintain a high level of employee awareness. A participative leadership style involves actively engaging employees in decision-making processes and organizational interaction. This approach contributes to increased trust, reduced feelings of isolation, and the formation of more resilient and adaptive teams (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; Abbu et al. 2025).

3.3.2. Technological and Strategic Competencies

Technological and strategic competencies of contemporary leaders are increasingly associated not with the mastery of individual tools, but with an understanding of their role in creating sustainable growth and organizational value. In particular, digital literacy in the field of artificial intelligence is considered a necessary condition for informed managerial decision-making, as leaders must be able to interpret data and use technologies to improve business efficiency and enhance customer experience. At the same time, the importance of strategic foresight is growing, enabling organizations to adapt to rapidly changing environments and develop long-term trajectories under conditions of uncertainty. In this logic, management shifts from process control to results-oriented governance, where clearly defined objectives, performance metrics, and regular feedback play a central role in ensuring alignment between employee actions and overarching strategic priorities. Finally, an important element of leadership practice is employee development, in which the leader acts less as a controller and more as a mentor and facilitator, creating conditions for professional growth, autonomy, and team engagement (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Henderson 2025; West et al. 2025).

Table 4. Key competencies of a digital leader and their organizational significance (2025)

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Competence	Theoretical justification	Organizational effect
AI fluency (artificial intelligence literacy)	The increasing use of artificial intelligence requires leaders to be able to interpret data and integrate digital tools into managerial processes	Improving the quality of management decisions and operational efficiency
Change Management	The acceleration of technological and organizational transformations requires high adaptability and the ability to manage uncertainty	Increasing organizational resilience and reducing resistance to change
Learning Agility	The rapid obsolescence of skills necessitates continuous professional development and reskilling	Maintaining the relevance of personnel competencies and increasing competitiveness
Complex Problem-Solving	The increasing complexity of tasks and interdisciplinary interactions requires systems and analytical thinking	Reducing management risks and improving the quality of strategic decisions
Emotional Intelligence	The increasing importance of the human factor in digital environments requires the development of empathy and interpersonal skills.	Increased employee engagement, reduced turnover, and a stronger organizational culture

Source: Author's elaboration based on West et al. (2025) and Henderson (2025).

3.4 Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution

The contemporary literature on leadership in remote and hybrid work environments has expanded considerably in recent years. Existing studies have examined a wide range of topics, including digital leadership, virtual leadership, employee well-being, digital transformation, artificial intelligence adoption, and organizational resilience. These contributions have significantly improved understanding of the challenges associated with managing geographically dispersed teams and digitally mediated organizational processes. However, a review of the current literature reveals several important limitations. First, many studies focus on specific dimensions of leadership in isolation. Research on digital leadership primarily emphasizes technological capabilities and organizational transformation, whereas studies on empathic leadership focus on interpersonal and psychological processes. Similarly, investigations of organizational resilience and adaptability often examine structural mechanisms without adequately connecting them to leadership competencies. As a result, the literature remains fragmented across multiple theoretical perspectives (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Abbu et al. 2025).

Second, the rapid evolution of remote and hybrid work has generated new leadership demands that are not

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fully addressed by traditional leadership models. The increasing importance of artificial intelligence, digital communication platforms, employee well-being, and flexible work arrangements requires a more integrated understanding of leadership effectiveness. Existing frameworks frequently emphasize either technological adaptation or human-centered leadership behaviors but rarely examine how these dimensions interact within a single conceptual structure (Abbu et al. 2025; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Gallup 2025; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

Third, despite growing recognition of concepts such as digital empathy, stagility, and AI fluency, limited attention has been devoted to understanding their combined role in shaping leadership effectiveness in post-pandemic organizations. Consequently, there remains a need for a comprehensive framework capable of integrating technological competencies, interpersonal capabilities, and organizational mechanisms within contemporary remote work environments (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

This study seeks to address these gaps through a narrative synthesis of recent academic literature and international reports. Rather than examining leadership competencies as independent constructs, the article adopts an integrative perspective that highlights the interdependence of technological, human-centered, and organizational dimensions of leadership (Abbu et al. 2025; López-Figueroa et al. 2025; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

The theoretical contribution of the study is threefold. First, it consolidates fragmented research streams into a unified conceptual perspective on leadership in remote and hybrid work settings. Second, it identifies and systematizes the core competencies required for effective leadership in digitally mediated environments, including digital empathy, AI fluency, change management, learning agility, emotional intelligence, and strategic adaptability. Third, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework linking leadership competencies with organizational outcomes such as trust, employee engagement, well-being, resilience, and performance (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Gallup 2025).

By synthesizing recent developments in digital leadership research and connecting previously separate theoretical perspectives, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership effectiveness in contemporary distributed organizations (Abbu et al. 2025; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

3.5 Integrated Leadership Competency Framework for Remote and Hybrid Work Environments

Building upon the reviewed literature, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that explains leadership effectiveness in remote and hybrid work environments through the interaction of technological, human-centered, and organizational competencies. The framework is based on the assumption that leadership effectiveness in digitally mediated work settings cannot be explained by a single category of competencies. Instead, effective leadership emerges from the simultaneous integration of technological capabilities, interpersonal skills, and organizational coordination mechanisms. These dimensions collectively influence employee well-being, trust, engagement, and organizational performance (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Gallup 2025; López-Figueroa et al. 2025).

The first dimension comprises technological competencies. These include digital literacy, AI fluency, strategic understanding of digital transformation processes, and the ability to utilize technological tools to support communication, decision-making, and organizational coordination. Contemporary leaders are increasingly expected not only to understand digital technologies but also to evaluate their organizational implications and ethical consequences (Abbu et al. 2025; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

The second dimension consists of human-centered leadership competencies. This category includes digital empathy, emotional intelligence, transparent communication, participative leadership, coaching abilities, and psychological safety creation. These competencies enable leaders to overcome the limitations of virtual interaction and maintain strong interpersonal relationships within geographically dispersed teams (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b).

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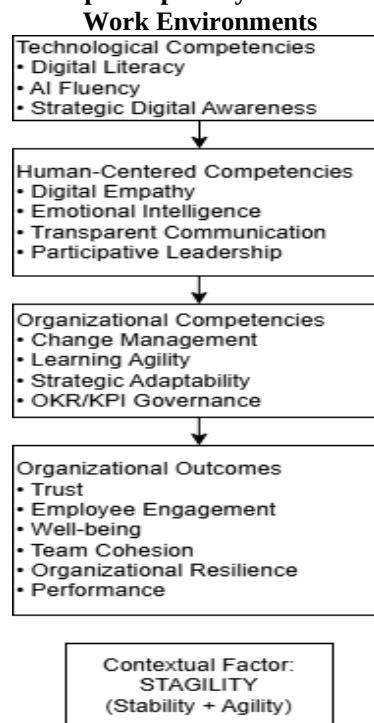


The third dimension encompasses organizational competencies. These include change management, learning agility, strategic adaptability, resilience-building practices, and performance management systems such as OKR and KPI frameworks. These competencies allow organizations to maintain alignment, accountability, and operational effectiveness under conditions of uncertainty and continuous change (Deloitte 2025b; FranklinCovey n.d.; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

The interaction among these dimensions contributes to several organizational outcomes, including employee trust, engagement, psychological well-being, team cohesion, organizational resilience, and overall performance. At the same time, these relationships are influenced by the broader organizational context characterized by increasing uncertainty, technological disruption, and the need to balance stability and flexibility. In this regard, the concept of stagility serves as an important contextual mechanism supporting the integration of leadership competencies within remote and hybrid work environments (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Deloitte 2025d; Gallup 2025).

The proposed framework provides a conceptual basis for understanding how multiple leadership competencies interact to shape organizational effectiveness in distributed work settings and serves as a foundation for the practical recommendations presented in subsequent sections (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

Figure 1. Integrated Leadership Competency Framework for Remote and Hybrid



Source: Developed by the author based on the literature reviewed in this study.

4. Analysis of remote work transformation

4.1. Statistical Analysis of Remote Work Formats (2020–2025)

Global and European Trends: Dynamics and Paradoxes

The dynamics of remote employment expansion after 2020 are characterized by a phase of rapid growth,

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followed by relative stabilization and partial correction. According to Eurofound data, in 2024 there is a decline in opportunities for fully remote work, despite the continued high level of employee preference for such arrangements. In particular, the share of respondents in the European Union working exclusively on-site increased from 36% in 2023 to 41% in 2024, which may indicate a broader trend toward strengthening organizational return-to-office policies. At the same time, hybrid work arrangements remain the dominant model for occupations classified as teleworkable jobs (Eurofound 2025a; Eurofound 2025b).

A notable observation is the growing gap between employee preferences and organizational practices: the share of employees who prefer to work exclusively from home increased from 13% in 2020 to 24% in 2024. At the same time, the majority of workers in the European Union prefer a hybrid work arrangement, involving remote work several days per week. This dynamic reflects an emerging tension between managerial strategies aimed at returning employees to the office and workers' expectations oriented toward greater autonomy and work-life balance (Deloitte 2025a; Eurofound 2025b; Eurofound 2026; Eurofound 2025c).

Table 5. Distribution of Remote Work Among Employees in Teleworkable Jobs in the EU (2024, %)

Indicator	Meaning, %
Men: Never work from home	42.8
Men: Partially or fully work from home	57.2
Women: Never work from home	49.0
Women: Partially or fully work from home	51.0
Average across all observations: Never work from home	45.9
Average across all observations: Partially or fully work from home	54.1

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurofound (2025a).

Calculated mean values indicate that among employees in occupations classified as teleworkable, the majority use remote work at least partially. At the same time, men are, on average, slightly more likely to work from home (approximately 57%) than women (approximately 51%), while the proportion of employees who never use remote work remains relatively high, particularly among women. The results suggest that remote work in the European Union has become a significant but not universal practice. Despite the widespread adoption of digital forms of employment, a substantial share of employees continues to be tied to on-site work arrangements, reflecting both structural constraints of certain occupations and specific organizational policies.

4.2. Psychological Aspects and Paradoxes of Remote Work: "Stagility" and Well-Being

One of the central issues discussed in 2025 is the so-called "remote work paradox." Gallup data indicate that fully remote employees demonstrate higher levels of engagement compared to employees in other work arrangements. However, only about 36% of fully remote workers describe their overall condition as "thriving," whereas this figure reaches 42% among hybrid employees. This discrepancy points to a contradiction between work engagement and subjective well-being: despite the potential for increased productivity, remote work may also be associated with higher levels of stress, social isolation, and loneliness (World Economic Forum 2025; Gallup 2025).

To address this challenge, leaders should apply the concept of "stagility" (stability + agility). In an Corresponding author. ian.dolganov@yahoo.com



increasingly boundaryless work environment, traditional sources of stability—such as fixed job descriptions and permanent workplaces—are gradually diminishing. Under these conditions, leaders are required to create new “anchors” of stability by fostering a sense of belonging, predictability, and psychological safety, thereby providing employees with the foundation necessary for flexibility and innovation.

In the context of high uncertainty and accelerating digital transformation, increasing attention in studies conducted in 2024–2025 has been given to the need to balance flexibility and stability in leadership practices. Deloitte reports emphasize that contemporary leaders operate in an environment of constant tension between adaptation demands and the need for stability, leading to the emergence of the concept of “stagility,” understood as the integration of stability and agility. Within this framework, the leader’s key task is not only to ensure organizational adaptability but also to establish new sources of stability in the absence of traditional structures such as fixed workplaces and rigidly defined roles. In this regard, leadership is increasingly viewed as the process of creating an organization’s “psychological infrastructure,” including clear goals, transparent interaction norms, and stable value orientations. These elements function as “anchors of stability,” enabling employees to maintain a sense of belonging, predictability, and psychological safety even under conditions of high dynamism and uncertainty. The presence of such stabilizing mechanisms creates the conditions necessary for flexibility, initiative, and innovative behavior, as it reduces uncertainty and contributes to the development of a trust-based organizational environment (Deloitte 2025a; Deloitte 2025b; Deloitte 2025c; Deloitte 2025d).

Table 6. Key elements of "stagility" in leadership and their organizational effect

Elements of stagility in leadership	Implementation tools	Psychological effect
Predictability of communication	Regular synchronizations, fixed time intervals of interaction	Reducing the level of uncertainty and anxiety
Goal transparency	Visualization of goals and key results (OKR), with open access to strategic priorities	Formation of a sense of direction and meaningfulness of activity
Cultural rituals	Regular team practices and symbolic actions that support the organization's values	Reducing social isolation and strengthening team identity
Psychological safety	Regular feedback systems, including anonymous channels	Increased willingness to take initiative, learn, and experiment

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Deloitte (2025a, 2025b, 2025d).

The presented elements demonstrate that the combination of stable management practices and flexible forms of interaction helps reduce uncertainty while simultaneously stimulating employee engagement and adaptability.

4.3. Results-Based Management Methods: Integrating OKR and KPI

With the spread of remote work arrangements, traditional forms of control based on fixed physical presence are becoming less effective, requiring a shift toward more flexible models of performance management. In this context, contemporary leaders increasingly adopt a combined approach by integrating Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and Objectives and Key Results (OKR). KPIs are oriented toward monitoring ongoing processes

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and make it possible to assess the efficiency of routine operational tasks, thereby ensuring organizational stability and operational health. In contrast, OKRs serve as a strategic management tool aimed at setting ambitious goals and achieving qualitative improvements, facilitating alignment across organizational units and stimulating employees' innovative activity. Thus, the integration of KPI and OKR enables organizations to maintain operational efficiency while simultaneously supporting strategic development in distributed work environments (HR Future n.d.; FranklinCovey n.d.).

Table 7. Comparative characteristics of OKR and KPI in a remote work environment

Criterion	OKR (Objectives and Key Results)	KPI (Key Performance Indicators)
Focus	Strategic development, transformation and innovation	Maintaining stability, control and operational efficiency
Structure	Well-defined objectives, complemented by measurable key results	Selected quantitative performance indicators
Time horizon	Short-term cycles (usually quarterly), high adaptability	Medium and long term periods (monthly, annually), lower flexibility
Scope of application	Implementation of strategic initiatives, launch of new products and changes	Operational activities and monitoring of standard process performance (SLA)
Management risks	Failure to achieve ambitious goals due to insufficient coordination	Overemphasis on metrics at the expense of qualitative aspects of performance.

Source: Author's elaboration based on FranklinCovey (n.d.) and HR Future (n.d.).

The comparison indicates that OKR and KPI serve complementary functions: the former is oriented toward strategic change and development, whereas the latter ensures control and stability of ongoing operations. Their combined use enables organizations to simultaneously maintain operational efficiency and achieve long-term objectives in remote work environments.

4.4 Relevance for South East European and Transition Economies

The findings of this study are particularly relevant for South East European and transition economies, where firms face simultaneous pressures of digital transformation, labor market restructuring, EU-oriented convergence, and managerial modernization. In these contexts, remote and hybrid work arrangements are not only post-pandemic organizational practices but also mechanisms for improving access to skilled labor, retaining employees, and increasing competitiveness.

The Western Balkans illustrate this challenge. OECD research shows that the region has made progress in digital connectivity, but its broader digital transformation remains modest compared with the EU average, particularly in areas such as digital engagement, skills, business technology adoption, and AI uptake. The European Training Foundation similarly reports limited digital uptake and low rates of digital upskilling in the region. These findings suggest that the key barrier is not only technological access, but also the organizational and managerial capacity to use digital tools effectively (European Training Foundation 2024; OECD 2025).

Therefore, leadership competencies are especially important for firms in South East European and transition-economy contexts. Digital literacy and AI fluency can support technology adoption; digital empathy

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and emotional intelligence can strengthen trust and engagement in distributed teams; and organizational competencies such as change management, learning agility, and OKR/KPI-based governance can help align flexible work with business performance. The framework proposed in this study therefore contributes not only to the general literature on remote leadership but also to debates on business modernization and competitiveness in economies undergoing structural change.

5. Strategic leadership mechanisms

5.1. Organizational Mechanisms and Algorithms for the Transition to Remote Teams

The transition to remote work arrangements implies not only the development of individual managerial competencies but also the formation of resilient organizational mechanisms. Contemporary research emphasizes the importance of clearly differentiating roles and responsibilities in the management of distributed teams (López-Figueroa et al. 2025).

In remote work settings, responsibility is redistributed among the key actors within the organizational system. Employees are responsible for organizing their own work environment, effectively managing their time, and complying with information security requirements. Managers, in turn, act as coordinators and facilitators of processes, providing teams with necessary resources, structuring communication, and removing barriers to interaction. At the same time, the team as a whole is viewed as an autonomous unit that collectively shares responsibility for achieving common goals, adhering to established norms, and enhancing overall performance through cooperation and mutual support (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; West et al. 2025).

5.2.

Five-Stage Transition Algorithm (2025)

To effectively implement remote work arrangements, organizations should adopt a phased approach that includes the following elements:

Strategic assessment and preparation. At the initial stage, the economic feasibility of implementing remote work is assessed, the key competencies required from employees and managers are identified, and performance indicators—such as Key Performance Indicators (KPI) or Objectives and Key Results (OKR)—are established to evaluate the outcomes of the transition.

Development of the regulatory framework. Internal regulations are developed to define the conditions of remote work, data protection requirements, employee expense compensation procedures, and mechanisms for maintaining work–life balance, including the right to disconnect.

Development of technological infrastructure. Organizations provide employees with the necessary digital tools, including equipment, cloud services, cybersecurity solutions, and technical support to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of distributed teams.

Psychological adaptation and employee support. Particular attention is given to maintaining employee well-being, developing managerial skills in digital interaction, and creating conditions that support teamwork in virtual environments.

Monitoring and continuous adjustment. Implementation is accompanied by regular evaluation of employee engagement and productivity, as well as the adaptation of organizational practices in response to changing conditions and feedback (López-Figueroa et al. 2025; West et al. 2025).

5.3. Strategic Recommendations for Leadership Development (2025–2026)

Based on the literature reviewed and the integrated leadership competency framework proposed in this study, leadership development initiatives for 2025–2026 should focus on the systematic development of technological, interpersonal, and organizational competencies. The findings suggest that effective leadership in remote and hybrid work environments requires not only adaptability but also the establishment of organizational mechanisms that support employee well-being, trust, and performance (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Deloitte 2025b; Gallup 2025).

The first strategic priority concerns the development of digital leadership capabilities. Organizations should implement structured training programs focused on AI literacy, digital communication, cybersecurity

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awareness, and data-informed decision-making. Given the growing integration of artificial intelligence into managerial processes, leaders should be capable of understanding the opportunities and limitations of AI-supported decision systems and ensuring their ethical application within organizations (Abbu et al. 2025; Tsekouropoulos et al. 2025).

The second priority involves strengthening digital empathy and emotional intelligence. Organizations should incorporate leadership training modules that focus on empathic listening, recognition of emotional signals in virtual communication, management of difficult online conversations, and techniques for maintaining psychological safety in distributed teams. Managers should conduct regular one-to-one meetings with team members to identify potential risks related to burnout, disengagement, or social isolation (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Gallup 2025).

The third priority is the implementation of structured communication practices designed to reduce uncertainty and strengthen team cohesion. Leaders should establish regular communication routines, including weekly team meetings, monthly strategic alignment sessions, and quarterly performance reviews. Consistent communication rhythms can function as organizational anchors that support predictability and trust in remote work settings (Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025a; Bravo-Duarte, Tordera, and Rodríguez 2025b; Deloitte 2025b).

The fourth priority concerns the adoption of results-oriented management systems. Organizations should integrate Objectives and Key Results (OKR) and Key Performance Indicators (KPI) frameworks to balance employee autonomy with organizational accountability. While OKRs should be used to support strategic initiatives and innovation, KPIs should be applied to monitor operational effectiveness and service quality (FranklinCovey n.d.; HR Future n.d.).

To facilitate implementation, Table 8 presents specific leadership development recommendations and measurable indicators that organizations can use to evaluate progress.

Table 8. Practical Leadership Development Recommendations for 2025–2026

Target Group	Recommendation	Suggested Indicator
HR Departments	Conduct quarterly digital leadership assessments	Digital Leadership Scale (DLS) score
Team Leaders	Hold weekly one-to-one meetings with employees	Employee engagement score
Senior Management	Introduce organization-wide OKR cycles	Goal achievement rate
Organizations	Measure psychological safety twice annually	Psychological safety survey results
Learning and Development Units	Implement AI literacy training programs	Percentage of managers certified
Remote Team Managers	Establish communication protocols and response standards	Employee satisfaction with communication
Executive Leadership	Monitor remote work well-being indicators quarterly	Well-being and retention metrics

The implementation of these recommendations may contribute to stronger employee engagement, improved organizational resilience, higher levels of trust, and more sustainable performance in remote and hybrid work environments.

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6. Conclusion

The transformation of work arrangements following the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the nature of leadership in contemporary organizations. Remote and hybrid work environments have increased the importance of leadership competencies that extend beyond traditional managerial functions and require the integration of technological, interpersonal, and organizational capabilities. The findings of this study demonstrate that effective leadership in digitally mediated work environments depends not only on the adoption of digital technologies but also on the ability to create trust, maintain employee well-being, foster engagement, and support organizational resilience under conditions of uncertainty.

Through a narrative synthesis of contemporary literature, this study identified several leadership competencies that have become increasingly significant in remote and hybrid work settings. These include digital empathy, emotional intelligence, AI fluency, learning agility, change management, strategic adaptability, and the ability to establish psychologically safe and collaborative virtual environments. The analysis further demonstrates that leadership effectiveness emerges from the interaction of these competencies rather than from isolated skills or managerial practices.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in the integration of previously fragmented research streams into a coherent conceptual perspective on leadership in remote and hybrid work environments. While existing literature has often examined digital leadership, virtual leadership, employee well-being, organizational resilience, and technological transformation as separate areas of inquiry, this article synthesizes these perspectives within a unified framework. The proposed integrated leadership competency framework highlights the interdependence of technological competencies, human-centered leadership behaviors, and organizational coordination mechanisms in shaping organizational outcomes.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen leadership effectiveness in distributed work environments. The study emphasizes the importance of leadership development programs that combine technological literacy, empathic communication, performance management, and organizational resilience-building practices. The practical recommendations proposed in this article offer actionable measures that organizations can implement to improve employee engagement, psychological safety, team cohesion, and long-term organizational performance.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a narrative review methodology and therefore does not apply the systematic procedures associated with systematic literature reviews or meta-analyses. Second, the analysis primarily focuses on publications produced between 2020 and 2025, reflecting the post-pandemic period of organizational transformation. Third, the proposed conceptual framework has not been empirically tested and should therefore be regarded as an analytical model derived from existing literature.

Future research may build upon this framework through empirical validation in different organizational and cultural contexts. Particular attention should be devoted to examining the impact of generative artificial intelligence on leadership practices, the measurement of digital leadership effectiveness, and the long-term consequences of hybrid work arrangements for organizational performance and employee well-being. Further studies may also investigate how leadership competencies evolve across industries and organizational structures as digital transformation continues to reshape the future of work.

Overall, the study suggests that leadership in remote and hybrid work environments should be understood as a multidimensional organizational capability that integrates technological expertise, human-centered leadership, and adaptive organizational mechanisms. Organizations that successfully combine these dimensions will be better positioned to maintain resilience, engagement, and sustainable performance in an increasingly digital and uncertain world.

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