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The role of digital leaders' emotional intelligence in mitigating employee technostress

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Emotional intelligence;
Digital leadership;
Digital transformation;
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Abstract Digital leadership involves dealing with complex challenges and anticipating trends that arise from emerging technologies. Amid the accelerated pace of digital transformation, consequences such as technostress have become apparent to organizations and their leaders. *Emotional intelligence* (EI) is an essential characteristic for enabling digital leaders to hone the necessary skills to lessen employees' technostress by developing higher levels of consciousness of emotions—both one's own and those of others. By synthesizing research-based knowledge of EI and leadership, we contribute to a broader understanding of competency requirements for digital transformation by bringing employees and the role of digital leadership through EI into the picture. This article also presents new EI strategies for digital leaders to mitigate employee technostress in digital transformation via communication, transparency, and trust.
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1. Digital transformation challenges leadership

Digital transformation is an omnipresent phenomenon poised to intensify in speed and magnitude in the years to come. Arguably, the most profound digital leap during the 21st century was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent shift to remote work. *Digital transformation* is driven by

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rapid developments in digital technologies and entails a "process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies" (Vial, 2019, p. 118). This requires a complex combination of changes at multiple organizational levels, such as in structures, processes, and employees (Matt et al., 2015; Selander & Järvenpää, 2016).

Senior management within organizations is often enthusiastic about the opportunities offered for value creation and competitive advantage via digital technologies (Matt et al., 2015; Vial, 2019). However, this may lead to an overemphasis on technology without proper analysis of the benefits for employees. Aligning the digital transformation strategy and overall organizational strategy is not always straightforward (Matt et al., 2015), as friction may develop. One example of this friction is *technostress*, defined as stress stemming from the inability to cope with information and communication technology (ICT) use (see Brod, 1984).

Several studies have shown the antecedents, determinants, or consequences of technostress (Bhatt & Kothari, 2022; Nastjuk et al., 2023; Nisafani et al., 2020; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). With a few notable exceptions (Harper, 2000; Pirkkalainen et al., 2019; Rohwer et al., 2022), the extant literature on technostress is largely silent on the ways in which leaders may identify and implement mitigation strategies to target the sources of technostress. According to a recent review by Nastjuk et al. (2023), leaders are key in implementing methods to alleviate employee technostress. Successful digital transformation depends on a leader's ability to support employees' adjustment to ongoing sociotechnical change and new organizational realities (Karimi & Walter, 2015). A need has, therefore, developed to review the digital leadership competencies required to support change across the organization.

In this article, we argue that leadership in digital contexts needs urgent attention to understand employee technostress as an unintended consequence of digitalization. Leaders' emotional intelligence (EI) warrants in-depth examination to explore the qualities needed for mitigating technostress. Research shows that leadership's support for employees is essential in reducing technostress and mitigating its impacts (Rohwer et al., 2022). However, research also indicates that the traditional skill sets of leaders are insufficient for thriving in a digital transformation context (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). As such, we argue that leaders must develop new EI competencies to sense employee technostressors and determine appropriate responses.

Given the topicality of digital leadership and technostress, the intersection between the two appears to be important to scrutinize but has thus far remained underexplored. The aim of this article is to conceptually examine the role of leaders' EI in mitigating employee technostress, opening avenues for further scrutiny of the topic. To guide our investigation further, we developed the following research question: What is the role of digital leaders' EI in mitigating employee technostress within a digital transformation context? To answer this question, we first present a thematic analysis of the literature (Paré et al., 2015) to uncover the different sources of technostress that have been studied in previous research, as well as theoretical models for understanding the nature of digital leaders' EI. We then develop strategies for outlining how digital leaders' EI can help mitigate employee technostress. Building on insights from our thematic analysis of the literature, we present three contributions that will be of interest to both academics and practitioners. First, we identify salient concepts and theories for understanding technostress in its various forms, as well as digital leaders' EI. Second, we synthesize these to identify essential attributes of digital leadership and core EI competencies. EI is argued to be an essential skill for digital leaders to navigate the challenges experienced in organizations as they pursue digitization and its benefits. In addition, we present strategies for digital leaders to develop EI via communication, transparency, and trust. Each of these contributions provides leaders with a clear approach to how to develop competencies for digital transformation in an ever-changing organizational landscape. This article proceeds as follows: we begin with an exploration into different sources of technostress, followed by an analysis of digital leadership literature and a review of EI models. The relationship between digital leaders' EI competencies and employee technostress is then discussed, before introducing strategies for digital leaders to lessen employee technostress. We conclude with several avenues for future research.

2. Technostress as an unintended consequence of digital transformation

2.1. Definitions of technostress

According to Brod (1984, p. 16), technostress refers to "a modern disease of adaptation caused by an

inability to cope with new computer technologies in a healthy manner" and is further described as "a toxic phenomenon [...] suggested to stem from exposure to and interaction with technology" (Boyer-Davis, 2018, p. 48). Technostress stems from stressors that individuals experience when they are unable to "cope with the demands of IT use" (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019, p. 1180). Individuals may use the same technology yet have different experiences of technostress (Tyler et al., 2020), as it has implications for both individuals and the organization. Some of the negative consequences of technostress for individuals are fatigue, irritability, intolerance, distress, despair, and depression, to name but a few (Boyer-Davis, 2018; Brod, 1984; Salanova et al., 2013). A systematic literature review by Bhatt and Kothari (2022) found that technostress, at an individual level, includes dissatisfaction with the job and negative self-evaluations, decreased organizational commitment and headaches, and back pain or eyestrain caused by excessive technology use. For organizations, technostress can result in reduced productivity and innovation, a lack of employee commitment, poor job performance, increased absenteeism, and high job turnover (Boyer-Davis, 2018; Pirkkalainen et al., 2019; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). Compared to other types of stress, distinguishing features of technostress are the increased pace of technological change and constant exposure to technology in the workplace. The accelerated pace of technology development—specifically the plethora of digital products and services—leads organizations to continually adopt new technologies. This requires employees to constantly update their ICT competencies.

2.2. Types of technostress experienced by employees

Ragu-Nathan and colleagues (2008) identified five dimensions of technostressors: (1) *techno-overload* (i.e., technology that forces employees to work faster and longer); (2) *techno-invasion* (i.e., technology that allows employees to be reached at any time, blurring work-life boundaries); (3) *techno-complexity* (i.e., technology-related complexities that make users doubt their skills, forcing them to put time and effort into understanding technology); (4) *techno-insecurity* (i.e., the threat of job loss due to automation or unachievable levels of tech-savviness); and (5) *techno-uncertainty* (i.e., constant technology upgrades that require continuous learning). The omnipresence of digital technologies in many jobs means that individuals are often exposed to techno-overload and techno-invasion (see Bhatt & Kothari, 2022; Nisafani et al., 2020). The surge in mobile technologies and flexible work hours—including remote work arrangements—enables employees to always be available, which further blurs the line between work and leisure. On the one hand, employees fear that they will miss important work-related information during nonworking hours and constantly check their work emails for fear of missing out (FOMO). On the other hand, several European countries—including France, Portugal, and Belgium—as well as some company-wide policies, have proposed the "right to disconnect," meaning employees do not need to be permanently reachable. There is an apparent tension between individually imposed exposure to technology (to avoid FOMO) and the structural right to disconnect. Digitalization can further contribute to techno-complexity, such as technology-related demands (Rohwer et al., 2022), negative IT incidents (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019), and work overload (Rasool et al., 2022). A related feature of technostress is that it creates techno-insecurity (see Chiu et al., 2023; Harper, 2000). Techno-insecurity is positively associated with both job- and technology-related technostress (Chiu et al., 2023), and job and task automation have a negative effect on perceived job insecurity (Lingmond & Alexiou, 2020). In addition, new types of technostressors are continually emerging, such as surveillance (Charbonneau & Doberstein, 2020) and the challenges that automation and artificial intelligence (AI) pose to the credibility of knowledge professionals (Cadieux et al., 2021). If employees are unsure about how to deal with digital transformation, they may also be unmotivated and unengaged, leading to complacency in their work. Techno-uncertainty can occur if employees are unable to engage in continuous learning during the digital transformation. Rasool and colleagues (2022) showed that training is perceived as both a challenge faced by employees and a strategy to overcome technostress. Insufficient training and low technical skills cause stress and impact productivity, whereas training provision helps employees use complex systems effectively, learn new skills, and perform complex tasks (Rasool et al., 2022). Many organizations provide ICT training and support end-users in all technology-related matters.

With AI and the automation of digital tasks, employees face increasing levels of technostress. This includes concerns about job displacement, pressures to upskill to meet the demands of new job responsibilities, the need to develop strategies to deal with large volumes of data under increasing time pressures, and a sense of losing control and

reduced personal accountability with the escalation of automatic processes. AI also raises fears and questions about information accuracy, fairness, privacy, and security—all of which increase technostress, heighten anxieties, and cultivate mistrust (Malik et al., 2021). *Technological complexity* (i.e., ICTs with too many or too complex features) causes further stress (Rasool et al., 2022). Developing user-centric technologies may also lessen stress, as potential users are involved early and their needs inform technology design (Brod, 1984; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008).

There is an emerging literature stream on the importance of leadership in the modern ICT-saturated workplace (see Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Iannotta et al., 2020). Rohwer and colleagues (2022) found that leadership in particular plays a vital role in buffering the negative effects of technostress. Ideally, digital leaders operate as "positive social influencers" to champion digital transformation initiatives and support employees during periods of change (Rohwer et al., 2022, p. 21). Bauwens et al.'s (2021) empirical study on the role of empowering leadership in reducing technostress among care professionals found that nondirective leader behaviors are essential in mitigating technostress. Based on these findings, we propose that leadership in the digital context needs more attention and the EI of leaders warrants a more in-depth examination.

3. Digital leadership and emotional intelligence

3.1. Essential attributes of digital leadership

Digital leadership is a combination of technological expertise, strategic vision, and effective leadership skills (Duan, 2005; Wilson et al., 2004), alongside stakeholder engagement (Larjovuori et al., 2016). The social aspects of the digital transformation are pivotal to success (Bhatt & Kothari, 2022; Eden et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021), and digital leadership is expressed as advancing a value-based culture (Bethlem Tigre et al., 2022). Additionally, a digital-first culture promotes the ideals of experimentation, risk-taking, and curiosity, with a growth-centered mindset to empower employees (Eberl & Drews, 2021). Building on our thematic review of literature, we identify three essential attributes for a digital leader to build strong relationships with their employees amid digital transformation: communication, transparency, and trust.

3.1.1. Communication

Communication has a foundational role in digital leadership (Bethlem Tigre et al., 2022; Davison et al., 2023). There is a need for speed, flexibility, and easy access to information on digital technologies across the organization (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Leaders must prioritize soft skills to engage employees in digital transformation initiatives, and require an overwhelming focus on the importance of communication skills and EI (Priyadarshini, 2022). However, there are several digital communication tools and channels, and different collaborators prefer different channels. As such, information and knowledge are dispersed. Communication is central to ensuring that everyone holds the latest information, which can be achieved via open information sharing.

3.1.2. Transparency

Transparency must be promoted using coordinated communication across all organizational departments (Bethlem Tigre et al., 2022). To keep the team motivated and emotionally invested, transparency regarding the objectives and progress of digital transformation is especially important. Together, these factors support leadership with a clear vision and digital transformative strategy, which are vital for organizational survival (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Kane et al., 2019).

3.1.3. Trust

Compared to traditional leadership that employs a linear hierarchy, digital leaders empower networks of individuals that thrive on trust rather than control (Bethlem Tigre et al., 2022). Trust and transparency are especially intertwined in dispersed teams that interact virtually (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Oberer and Erkollar (2018) suggest that digital leaders express traits such as agility, digital literacy, and adaptability and encourage cross-hierarchical work, team-orientation, and collaborative approaches. Digital leaders must be people-focused, serve as role models for lifelong learning and knowledge building, support teamwork in distributed and heterogeneous teams, and excel at collaborative communication and virtual networking (Eberl & Drews, 2021). Focusing on people also builds trust (Bhatt & Kothari, 2022; Kane et al., 2019).

Dealing with uncertainty becomes a basic competency for digital leaders, as digitalization is characterized by high complexity, rapid pace, and

transformation. Northouse (2021) emphasized the importance of trust for effective leadership and building strong collaborative relationships. For a digital leader to foster trust, they must be transparent in their communication. Transparency can increase both the trust and support of team members in their leadership—ultimately intensifying the collective pursuit of digital goals (Norman et al., 2010). Overall, people skills are critical for all three of the focal attributes of digital leadership.[1] As such, EI is an essential leadership skill set in digital transformation contexts (Weritz, 2022).

3.2. Emotional intelligence

Based on the writings of Goleman (2020), Mayer et al. (2016), and Boyatzis (2008), EI is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's personal emotions as well as the emotions of others. Individuals with high levels of EI have the capacity to regulate both their own emotions and those of others (Mayer et al., 2016). EI can enhance key relationship management strategies, such as partnering, alliances, or integrated project delivery (Owusu-Manu et al., 2020). Better project performance can be attributed to positive emotions—particularly in circumstances with high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005), which are highly relevant in the digital context.

Building on our review of different theoretical perspectives, we identify five key translatable skills from EI that enable digital leaders to effectively navigate interpersonal relationships: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-reflection, (3) self-regulation, (4) social awareness, and (5) empathy. The first three resonate with individual EI, whereas social awareness and empathy are essential abilities for collaboration, organizational awareness, and leadership (Goleman, 2001).

3.2.1. Self-awareness

Self-awareness relates to our mood and our thoughts about our mood (Mayer et al., 2016). Self-awareness as an EI skill is the nonreactive, nonjudgmental attention to inner states (Mayer et al., 2016). This can have a powerful effect on strong emotions (e.g., feelings of anger can be counterbalanced using self-awareness to choose to let go of the emotion; Goleman, 2020). EI highlights the need to be aware of perceptions, one's emotional expressions, interpersonal skills, and the link between emotions and cognitions in decision-making (Bar-On, 1997).

3.2.2. Self-reflection

Self-reflection refers to an assessment of outcomes from EI based on their contextual practicality and the learning insights provided by EI (Nelson & Low, 2003). This includes learning strategies to either reduce or intensify emotional responses (Mayer et al., 2016). The relationship between the cause and consequence of EI can change over time, requiring individuals to use cognitive processes to prioritize appropriate responses.

3.2.3. Self-regulation

Self-regulation is akin to a goal-directed, self-imposed delay of gratification by regulating emotional behaviors (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999). This EI skill helps individuals self-manage emotions, reduce stress, and achieve life goals (Bar-On, 1997; Epstein, 1998; Goleman, 2020). Reactions developed via self-control and self-regulation provide evidence for the cognitive side of EI, which supports emotional independence without the need for external validation (Goleman, 2020).

3.2.4. Social awareness

Social awareness is the vital ability to understand and respond to the needs of others (Goleman, 2020) and is seen as an essential component of relationship management. EI highlights critical factors such as context, culture, and the appropriate displays of EI for self-management and the management of others' EI (Mayer et al., 2016). Assertiveness is considered a key component of this approach, whereby individuals express themselves in confident, respectful ways.

3.2.5. Empathy

Empathy is defined by Goleman (2020, p. 4) as the ability "to sense other's feelings and perspectives, taking an active interest in their concerns." Empathy is constructed of both cognitive and affective components: understanding others and sharing emotions. Table 1 provides a summary of the five EI skill sets and their theoretical underpinnings.

4. Strategies for digital leaders to mitigate employee technostress

Leadership has a major influence on stress in the workplace by either alleviating or introducing new

[1] See also Nisafani et al. (2020) regarding the inhibitors of technostress.

Table 1. Summary of some key concepts from theories of EI

Concept	Description	Theoretical underpinnings
Self-awareness	Accurately perceiving, understanding, and evaluating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.	• Five-factor theory of EI (Bar-On, 1997) • Four-stage ability model of EI (Mayer et al., 2016) • Five-step model of actualizing EI (Goleman, 2020)
Self-reflection	Using deep, conscious, and nonjudgmental self-examination to foster self-awareness, personal growth, and the development of EI.	• Emotional skills assessment process — EASP (Nelson & Low, 2003) • Four-stage ability model of EI (Mayer et al., 2016)
Self-regulation	Managing and controlling one's emotions, impulses, and behaviors in alignment with personal values.	• Five-factor theory of EI (Bar-On, 1997) • Cognitive-experiential self-theory — CEST (Epstein, 1998) • Delay of gratification (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999) • Five-step model of actualizing EI (Goleman, 2020)
Social awareness	Sensing and understanding others' emotions to effectively navigate the social landscape. This is achieved by perceiving nonverbal cues, observing social and cultural dynamics, and demonstrating empathy for others.	• Four-stage ability model of EI (Mayer et al., 2016) • Five-step model of actualizing EI (Goleman, 2020)
Empathy	The capacity to understand and resonate with others' emotions, foster compassion, facilitate social interactions, and build relationships.	• Four-stage ability model of EI (Mayer et al., 2016) • Five-step model of actualizing EI (Goleman, 2020)

sources of stress (Boyer-Davis, 2018). Therefore, mitigating different forms of employee technostress requires leadership to respond to this unintended consequence of digital transformation. How leaders should go about reducing employee technostress remains underexamined, however. We posit that EI is a missing conduit for leadership in mitigating the technostress experienced by employees by facilitating their ability to manage and respond to stressors (Turel & Gaudioso, 2018). We discuss the important roles that EI skill sets play in enhancing leaders' abilities to navigate interpersonal relations, facilitate trust, and foster a positive work environment (Goleman et al., 2013; Nelson & Low, 2003).

Next, we present three EI leadership strategies for mitigating employee technostress: (1) EI through communication, (2) EI through transparency, and (3) EI through trust. The strategies focus on five different types of technostress (see Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008) that digital leaders should prepare for and act on to mitigate employee technostress amid digital transformation (see Figure 1). All three strategies focus on encouraging meaningful leadership from within the organization, shaping its working environment and culture. However, a leader with EI competency can impact all levels of the organization (e.g., the overall climate of the workplace, work teams and dyads, and emotional contagion; Cropanzano et al., 2020). With deliberate practice, EI skills can be developed (Nelson & Low, 2003).

4.1. EI through communication

The role of continual communication is important for addressing employees' concerns (Bhatt & Kothari, 2022; Nisafani et al., 2020). An emotionally intelligent leader can use verbal and nonverbal skills to articulate knowledge and understand the emotions of others. As such, EI digital leaders must be clear and effective speakers with a listening ear who care about and support employees, as well as embrace change via employee engagement and participatory decision-making (Htahet & Johansson, 2023). Leaders can promote open discussions about technostress and provide a safe space for employees to express their concerns, demonstrating a leader's social

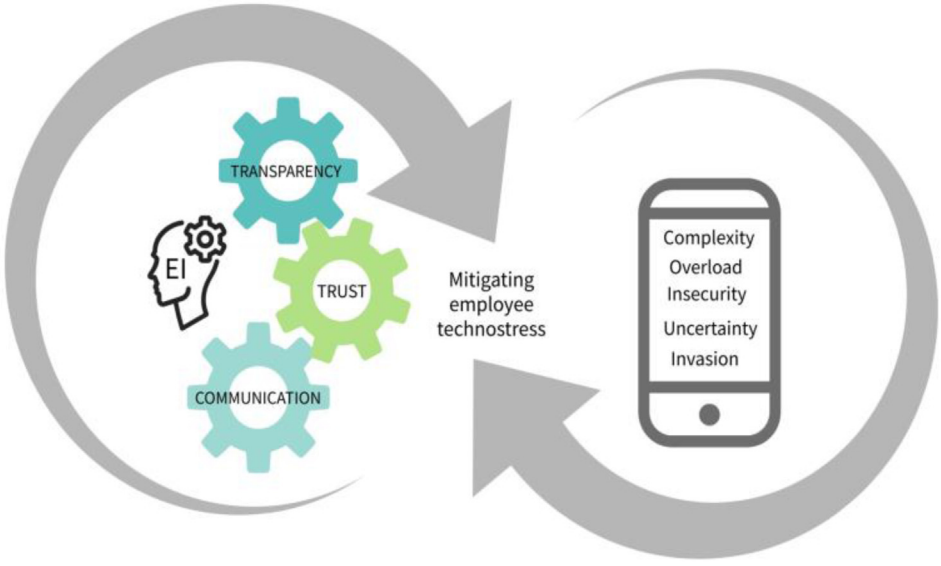
awareness. Workshops can help identify common emotions during periods of IT change, such as venting distress (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019), blaming IT/oneself (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019), or expressing fear and anxiety (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2010). This requires leaders to be adept at regulating their emotions through self-reflection to ensure that they sense the needs of a situation beyond personal emotional filtering. Leaders must also communicate the importance of the right to disconnect, which signifies the need for a healthy work-life balance and shields employees from techno-overload and techno-invasion. As suggested by Rasool and colleagues (2022), leaders can communicate the importance of self-efficacy and time management to overcome technology overload. This requires ongoing communication between employees and leaders to ensure the message is heard and implemented. Beyond technology, the social aspects of digital transformation are increasingly recognized as pivotal to success (Eden et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Employees play a central role in the adoption and implementation of digital technologies—particularly regarding their effective use (Gfrerer et al., 2021). Bhatt and Kothari (2022), as well as Kane and colleagues (2019), found that digital policies should emphasize people over technology so employees can navigate the complexities of digital transformation. By reflecting on their emotions, a leader can adjust their message to suit the context while also being cognizant of others' feelings through empathy (Petrovici & Dobrescu, 2014). Therefore, leadership must act with honesty, integrity, and consistency in their values to help mitigate technostress among employees (Turel & Gaudioso, 2018).

4.2. EI through transparency

Leaders can practice transparency by being open about the changes that will arise from digital transformation, especially those related to techno-complexity and techno-uncertainty. This can facilitate collective coping strategies for dealing with anticipated technostress by encouraging employee ownership, creating personalized work plans, and supporting team empowerment (Boyer-Davis, 2018). For instance, leaders can encourage employees to up-skill to deal with new technostressors proactively rather than reactively by venting negative emotions associated with digital transformation (reactively coping; Pirkkalainen et al., 2019). The end goal is to increase job satisfaction, commitment, and trust, and to avoid burnout by developing a people-focused culture.

Alrasheedi et al. (2022) suggest that competencies are a core characteristic of workforce transformation involving not only acquiring new skills but also developing a mindset that embraces change and continuous learning. This requires employees to develop competencies such as self-directed learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving. A digital leader can mitigate some technostressors by providing pathways for

Figure 1. Digital leader EI strategies for mitigating employee technostress



employee development and skill building (Higgs & Aitken, 2003), which can deliver significant improvements in empathy building, emotional expression, and regulation (Jordan & Troth, 2004). Cherniss (2001) found that training led to significant improvements in employee performance, including increased productivity and decreased absenteeism. Côté and Miners (2006) found that those who scored high in EI had better mental and physical health, higher job satisfaction, and lower turnover intentions. A high level of EI can include skills such as anticipation to proactively identify new sources of technostress, as well as strategies for developing effective responses.

A coaching style of leadership can also help employees cope with present and future technostressors. Improving a leader's social awareness and self-reflection can help them make better decisions and respond more effectively to employees' technostress. For instance, being in touch with their emotions makes a leader more empathetic, relatable, and calm during conflicts. In addition, they are better equipped to manage the stress of their employees when adapting to new technologies—leading to improved performance (Goleman et al., 2013) and competitive advantage (Alon & Higgins, 2005). Encouraging a supportive work culture in which employees feel comfortable asking for help or sharing technology-related challenges is a sign of good EI relationship management (Palmer et al., 2001).

4.3. EI through trust

Alleviating employees' concerns about the impacts of digital transformation on job security is necessary given the continual pace of technological development. An EI leader is a visionary who can inspire others to trust their superiors and feel comfortable sharing their insights and ideas. Trust and respect are valuable elements of *social capital* (i.e., the capacity and sustenance of relationships with others; Dent, 2001). An EI leader can motivate others by placing trust in them, which improves their self-confidence and encourages interdependence between coworkers, resulting in enhanced productivity (Herselman, 2003). Building employees' sense of confidence and creating a trustworthy environment can, in turn, mitigate the impacts of techno-insecurity. Servant leadership (see Eva et al., 2019; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014) is an important phenomenon in digitalizing an organization in that it can help mitigate technostress by moving from a leader-follower model to an EI collaborative (i.e., employees and digital leaders work together to resolve technostress via intra- and interpersonal social skills; see Bar-On, 1997). Relationship building and trust are both important competencies of servant leadership for EI (Bethlem Tigre et al., 2022; Kane et al., 2019). The EI skills base of servant leaders allows them to supplant the negative outcomes of technostress by utilizing social awareness (i.e., community building) and empathy (i.e., integrity and respect) to significantly benefit others (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018). Fostering a collaborative environment—where employees can support each other and share strategies for managing technostress—helps employees build resilience against technostressors. Servant leadership is positively associated with EI (du Plessis et al., 2015), meaning that individuals who demonstrate servant leadership behaviors are also more likely to have higher levels of EI.

This lies in contrast to leaders who believe employees cannot be trusted and use surveillance tactics to ensure digital transformation success. Such approaches center on the conventional top-down leadership style typically applied during the industrialization era. The effectiveness of such measures today is debatable, as some findings show that monitored employees are more likely to break the rules (Thiel et al., 2022). Research suggests that high levels of authoritative control can lead to negative emotional reactions (e.g., resentment among employees), which can cause delays (McCarthy et al., 2023; Murungi et al., 2019), while algorithmic control can lead to anxiety, precariousness, and performance fatigue in employees (Manley & Williams, 2022). Servant leaders instead seek to alleviate employee technostress by applying technology that empowers employees (e.g., providing wearable devices to increase employee's awareness of their health and well-being; Maltseva, 2020). Employees may later reevaluate their individual appraisals and response strategies to technology and overcome prior struggles to manage the increased complexity and versatility of digital technologies (McCarthy et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

To date, digital transformation leaders have primarily focused on the opportunities afforded by technologies for the creation or renewal of business models and value pathways (Vial, 2019). This may overlook the potential for employee technostress as an unintended consequence of digital transformation, brought on by continual

technological change and blurred boundaries between work and leisure time. Further research is necessary to understand how digital leaders can mitigate employee technostress and ensure that employees understand the need for change. They must be able to commit to it, accept risks, and be prepared for whatever challenges they face.

By synthesizing research-based knowledge on EI and leadership, we contribute to a broader understanding of people-focused digital transformation by bringing employees and the role of leadership EI into the picture. This perspective emphasizes the soft skills (Boyatzis, 2008; Goleman, 2020; Mayer et al., 2016) of digital leaders in building empathy and compassion with employees' experiences of technostress. More specifically, we highlight the crucial competencies required by digital leaders to mitigate employee technostress in digital transformation initiatives, acting as intermediaries between strategy and employee implementation. Developing new leadership competencies requires either the enhancement of existing skill sets or the development of new ones to meet upcoming challenges. This will help organizations thrive, not just survive. We further contribute a set of new leadership approaches for digital transformation in the form of EI strategies for mitigating employee technostress. Our work shows the importance of EI through communication, transparency, and trust to ensure employees can succeed in a digital future.

There are, nevertheless, limitations in our study. While we acknowledge that leaders themselves are also prone to experiencing technostress, the present study focuses on the role of leaders in managing employee technostress. This shortcoming is a call for future research to answer the following questions: What support mechanisms can help leaders cope with technostress? How can leaders develop coping strategies for technostressors? What are the differences between leaders' and employees' coping strategies for technostressors? Our conceptual analysis opens multiple avenues for future research. First, there is a need to empirically examine how leaders can effectively develop the EI skills outlined in the strategies above with attention to the requirements and complexity of the digital transformation context. Leaders face inconsistent, even contradictory, requirements, and the need to balance people and technology is challenging. Therefore, a leader using EI must be self-reflective in times of success and failure. Examining what kind of support leaders need for applying EI skills in their organizations is additionally related to this. Moreover, the bigger picture of success in digital transformation with enhanced leadership EI warrants further research. This provokes additional questions: What are the implications of leadership EI regarding sustainability, particularly for employee well-being? How do employees in different types of jobs (e.g., blue- and white-collar) experience technostress, and what leadership EI skills are required? Our review can serve as a basis for further research in this area.

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