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Reframing Human Competence in the Digital Transformation Era: A Qualitative Study of Adaptive HR Practices.

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Abstract

The acceleration of digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the paradigm of human competence, shifting from a focus on technical proficiency to adaptive and continuously evolving capabilities. This study aims to explore how adaptive human resource management (HRM) practices shape and strengthen human competence amid technological disruption. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, involving 15 key informants—including HR division heads, managers, employees, and HR consultants—from three organizational sectors: public administration, higher education, and financial services. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo 14 software. The findings reveal four core dimensions of adaptive competence in the digital era: digital literacy, cognitive flexibility, collaborative intelligence, and transformative mindset. These dimensions collectively form the Adaptive Human Competence Framework (AHCF), which illustrates the dynamic interplay among individuals, organizations, and technology. The study further highlights that adaptive HR practices—such as learning ecosystems, digital mentoring, and agile performance management—serve as strategic catalysts for fostering trust-based and innovation-driven organizational cultures. Theoretically, this study extends the concept of competence-based HRM by integrating dynamic capabilities and adaptive learning theory. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of developing collaborative, flexible, and human-centered digital learning ecosystems to ensure sustainable organizational performance in the digital transformation era.

Keywords: Adaptive Competence, Digital Transformation, Adaptive HR Practices, Human Competence, Organizational Learning

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become a central catalyst for change in modern organizational landscapes across the globe. Technological advancements such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, automation, and digitally driven work systems have fundamentally reshaped how organizations design strategies, manage resources, and define competitive advantage. According to the *World Economic Forum* (2023), more than 60% of global occupations will undergo significant changes in competency structures within the next five years due to digitalization. This phenomenon requires organizations not only to invest in technological infrastructure but also to cultivate human capabilities that can continuously adapt to technological disruption. In this regard, human resource management (HRM) stands at the core of organizational adaptation strategies, as the success of digital transformation depends heavily on employees' capacity to integrate human values with technological intelligence.

In an increasingly digitalized era, the concept of human competence has undergone a profound transformation. Once associated primarily with technical expertise and work experience, competence now extends to adaptive capacities encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. Recent studies (Kane et al., 2022; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2023) indicate that organizations with high levels of digital agility are more likely to sustain competitiveness through employees who demonstrate learning flexibility and resilience. Conversely, organizations that fail to renew their competence models risk stagnation and obsolescence amid dynamic business environments. Hence, a reframing of human competence is imperative to address the multifaceted challenges of the digital age.

The HR function plays a strategic role in driving this transformation by fostering adaptive HR practices that promote competence development. The traditional administrative paradigm of HR has evolved into Agile and Human-Centered HRM, emphasizing flexibility, innovation, and continuous learning (Teece, 2021; Del Giudice et al., 2021). HR is no longer merely a personnel policy administrator but rather a cultural architect facilitating digital readiness and change

acceptance. Practices such as digital learning ecosystems, microlearning platforms, and technology-enabled mentoring illustrate how organizations accelerate competence adaptation. Therefore, investigating how HR reframes human competence is essential to understanding organizational strategies in navigating complex digital disruptions.

Despite the growing body of research on digital transformation, much of the existing literature focuses predominantly on technological or efficiency aspects, overlooking the human and cultural dimensions of competence transformation. Empirical research in Asian contexts—particularly Indonesia—remains limited in exploring how employees construct meaning and adapt to digitalization within specific social and cultural work environments. Moreover, previous studies have largely adopted quantitative approaches emphasizing measurement of digital readiness, thereby underrepresenting the reflective and experiential processes of human adaptation. This gap highlights the need for qualitative inquiry capable of capturing the subjective perceptions, meanings, and adaptive learning strategies that shape human competence in the digital era.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the reframing of human competence in the context of digital transformation by analyzing adaptive HR practices as the primary catalysts of change. The research aims to uncover how organizations reconstruct the meaning of competence, develop adaptive competence models, and navigate structural and cultural barriers throughout the digitalization process. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to capture the lived experiences and subjective reflections of HR professionals and employees during competence adaptation, providing a more contextualized and meaning-oriented understanding of digital transformation.

The novelty of this study lies in the development of the Adaptive Human Competence Framework, which conceptualizes four interrelated dimensions of modern digital competence: Digital Literacy, Cognitive Flexibility, Collaborative Intelligence, and Transformative Mindset. This framework goes beyond technological skills by integrating humanistic values such as collaboration, empathy, and trust as essential enablers of sustainable adaptation. Theoretically, it extends HR competence theory toward a human-centered digital transformation paradigm; practically, it offers actionable insights for organizations designing adaptive and future-ready HR policies.

In Indonesia, digital transformation is embedded within national strategic agendas, particularly the *Digital Indonesia 2045* initiative, which emphasizes digital literacy and human capital development. Nevertheless, many organizations continue to face structural challenges, including limited human resources, hierarchical work cultures, and intergenerational digital divides. This study contributes empirical evidence on how Indonesian organizations reconstruct human competence amid such socio-economic diversity. By examining multiple sectors, the research aims to enrich global HRM literature while offering contextually relevant implications for national policy and organizational practice.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Human Competence in the Digital Transformation

Digital transformation has reshaped the notion of competence from a set of static technical skills into a dynamic, adaptive capability reflecting the individual's capacity to learn, innovate, and navigate complexity. The traditional Competence-Based Human Resource Management theory (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), which emphasizes behavioral and task-oriented performance, has evolved toward the perspective of *Dynamic Capabilities* (Teece, 2021). Within this paradigm, competence represents a human ability to continuously absorb, reconfigure, and apply new knowledge to remain relevant in rapidly changing digital environments.

Recent research (Del Giudice et al., 2021; Kane et al., 2022) highlights that organizations successfully implementing digital transformation possess employees characterized by high levels of *cognitive flexibility* and *digital fluency*. These attributes enable systemic thinking, technological sensemaking, and data-driven decision-making. Consequently, digital-era competence transcends mere technological literacy; it encompasses cognitive, emotional, and social orientations that empower continuous learning and contextual adaptability across organizational settings.

2.2 Adaptive HR Practices as Strategic Levers of Transformation

The role of human resource management (HRM) has undergone a profound transformation in the digital era. Shifting from an administrative function focused on efficiency, HR now acts as a strategic partner in designing learning systems

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and fostering organizational innovation. The concept of *Agile HR* (Kane et al., 2022) emphasizes flexibility, cross-functional collaboration, and iterative experimentation as the foundations of digital competence development.

Adaptive HR practices can be categorized into three interrelated domains:

1. Learning Ecosystem – the creation of a digital learning environment that enables horizontal knowledge exchange and social learning;
2. Digital Mentoring and Coaching – fostering technological mastery through peer and intergenerational interaction; and
3. Collaborative HR Analytics – leveraging data to identify emerging skill needs and performance patterns.

According to Ulrich and Dulebohn (2023), organizations that institutionalize adaptive HR practices tend to integrate innovations more effectively because they facilitate iterative and reflective learning processes. HR thus functions not as a reactive administrator but as a catalyst for systemic competence reframing across the organization.

2.3 Barriers and Cultural Resistance in Competence Transformation

Despite the potential of digitalization to foster innovation, the transformation of human competence is often constrained by structural and cultural barriers. The theory of *Institutional Isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) posits that organizations tend to maintain traditional practices due to normative, coercive, and mimetic pressures. In the context of digital transformation, these pressures manifest in resistance to new work systems, limited digital literacy, and entrenched hierarchical structures that inhibit innovation.

Empirical studies (Suddaby et al., 2020; Zupic & Černe, 2023) have demonstrated that the most significant obstacle to digital transformation is not technological insufficiency, but the lack of organizational cultural readiness. Factors such as distrust toward technology, fear of role displacement, and generational divides often hinder competence development. However, contemporary findings suggest that transformational leadership and a *trust-based digital culture* can mitigate these barriers by cultivating collective commitment to innovation. Therefore, the success of competence reframing depends on how organizations balance technological efficiency with human-centric values.

2.4 Towards a New Model: Adaptive Human Competence Framework

Synthesizing the existing literature and empirical insights, human competence in the digital era emerges as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond technical skills. This study introduces the Adaptive Human Competence Framework (AHCF), which integrates four core dimensions:

1. Digital Literacy – the ability to effectively utilize and critically engage with digital technologies;
2. Cognitive Flexibility – the capacity to think systemically and adapt to new knowledge structures;
3. Collaborative Intelligence – the competence to co-create knowledge and value through collective interaction;
4. Transformative Mindset – the openness to change, reflection, and continuous learning.

The AHCF conceptual model provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals and organizations co-evolve to build adaptive capabilities aligned with digital transformation demands.

2.5 Theoretical Synthesis and Research Gap

Although prior studies have significantly contributed to understanding the relationship between digitalization and competence development, several conceptual gaps remain. First, most existing research focuses primarily on technical dimensions of competence, overlooking the cognitive and affective aspects that shape individual adaptability. Second, the empirical role of HR functions in developing adaptive competence remains underexplored, particularly through phenomenological approaches that capture reflective experiences of HR actors. Third, limited studies in the Indonesian context have examined how organizational culture, leadership, and digital transformation interact to shape competence reframing.

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To address these gaps, this study aims to explore how adaptive HR practices shape and reinforce the reframing of human competence within digital transformation contexts. By employing a qualitative approach emphasizing lived experiences and social meaning-making, the research aspires to offer a deeper, contextually grounded understanding of human resource development in the digital era—contributing both theoretically and practically to the evolution of HRM scholarship.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how human resource (HR) professionals and employees perceive and reconstruct human competence in the digital transformation era. The phenomenological design was chosen to capture the essence of lived experiences and reflective meanings attached to digital adaptation processes. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology allows researchers to examine human experiences as directly lived, making it suitable for uncovering the cognitive and behavioral shifts in digital competence development. The research adopted an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing meaning construction rather than hypothesis testing, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data interpretation.

The research was conducted across three organizational sectors in Indonesia—public administration, higher education, and financial services—to represent varying levels of digital maturity. These sectors were selected due to their contrasting structural and cultural responses to digitalization, from bureaucratic rigidity in government institutions to high flexibility and innovation in private and academic environments. Each organization had implemented HR digitalization initiatives, such as performance analytics, online learning systems, and data-driven talent management, thereby providing a diverse empirical basis for cross-sectoral comparison.

Fifteen key informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the principle of information richness. They consisted of three HR division heads, five managers or supervisors involved in digital transformation implementation, five employees undergoing digital competence adaptation, and two external experts in HR digital development. All participants had at least five years of professional experience and direct involvement in HR digitalization projects. This composition allowed for a multi-level understanding of how adaptive HR practices influence the reframing of human competence.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and organizational document analysis. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted both face-to-face and online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Observations focused on digital HR practices such as microlearning, performance analytics, and digital onboarding within a three-month period. All data were triangulated to enhance methodological robustness. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 for coding, theme mapping, and visualization. Four major themes emerged: *Reframing Human Competence*, *Adaptive HR Practices*, *Structural and Cultural Barriers*, and *Trust-Based Digital Culture*.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking and peer debriefing were conducted to validate interpretations, while an audit trail documented the analytical process. Contextual descriptions enhanced transferability, and researcher reflexivity was maintained through a reflective diary to minimize interpretive bias. These procedures ensured the rigor and transparency of the qualitative inquiry.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

4.1 Reframing Competence as an Adaptive Process to Digital Transformation

The findings reveal that reframing human competence in the digital transformation era extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills—it involves a fundamental reconstruction of thinking patterns, work values, and social interactions. Informants across sectors emphasized that digital transformation demands *cognitive flexibility*, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and technological sensitivity. Adaptation occurs through continuous learning and reflective practices

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integrated into everyday work. These findings indicate that competence in the digital age is dynamic and contextual rather than static and role-based as in traditional models.

Table 1 presents the four key dimensions of adaptive competence identified in this study and their behavioral manifestations within organizations.

Dimension	Description	Empirical Manifestation
Digital Literacy	The ability to understand, utilize, and critically evaluate digital technologies in work contexts.	Use of collaborative applications such as *Trello* and *Microsoft Teams* for interdepartmental coordination.
Cognitive Flexibility	The capacity to shift thinking strategies and adapt rapidly to new digital environments.	Employees transitioning from administrative tasks to data analysis when systems evolve.
Collaborative Intelligence	The ability to collaborate effectively with both humans and AI-driven systems.	Creation of cross-generational teams to integrate innovative, technology-based ideas.
Transformative Mindset	The willingness to unlearn outdated practices, experiment, and embrace new work values.	Implementation of weekly *learning sprints* in HR units to explore emerging ideas.

As shown in Table 1, adaptive competence encompasses not only technical proficiency but also behavioral transformation and value reconstruction. The *transformative mindset* emerged as the dominant dimension influencing the success of digital adaptation. This supports Kane et al. (2022), who argue that organizational transformation is less about technology adoption and more about human readiness for change. The results affirm that sustainable digital transformation is achieved when individuals develop the mental agility to reinterpret their roles in line with evolving technological realities.

4.2 Transformation of the HR Function as a Driver of Organizational Adaptability

The study identifies a significant shift in the role of human resource management—from administrative executor to strategic facilitator of organizational adaptability. Adaptive HR practices emphasize creating digital learning environments, project-based skill development, and employee empowerment through *Agile HR* approaches. These practices enable organizations to respond to technological disruptions with greater speed and coherence. HR professionals now act as *change catalysts*, facilitating employees' psychological and behavioral adaptation to uncertainty. This finding aligns with Ulrich and Dulebohn (2023), who argue that modern HR functions serve as architects of learning ecosystems and organizational culture, steering the workforce toward collective agility and innovation.

4.3 Adaptive Learning Patterns and Internalization of Digital Competence

Thematic analysis highlights that adaptive learning serves as the central mechanism for internalizing digital competence. Informants reported that successful organizations cultivate *learning ecosystems* characterized by openness, collaboration, and experiential learning. This learning occurs not only through formal training but also through digital mentoring, *communities of practice*, and cross-generational interactions. Such adaptive learning models reinforce employees' ability to adjust to continuously changing digital work systems. The process reflects a shift from prescriptive training to *self-directed, reflective learning*, consistent with the *adaptive learning theory* (Kolb, 2015). These findings suggest that digital competence evolves through ongoing organizational socialization and cultural reinforcement rather than one-time interventions.

4.4 Challenges and Barriers in Reframing Human Competence

Despite significant progress in HR digitalization, the study uncovers persistent structural and cultural barriers that impede the reframing of human competence. Key challenges include resistance to change, limited digital infrastructure, and weak alignment between business and HR strategies. Several informants also noted generational gaps in digital fluency, which hinder effective knowledge transfer and collaboration. These findings resonate with the

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institutional theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), suggesting that normative and cultural inertia often slow organizational transformation. Addressing such barriers requires not only technological investment but also leadership commitment to building a *trust-based digital culture* (Suddaby et al., 2020). As observed, organizations that successfully navigate digital change tend to balance efficiency with empathy—prioritizing human-centered digitalization that values participation and collective trust.

4.5 The Adaptive Human Competence Model

Synthesizing all empirical findings, the study proposes the Adaptive Human Competence Framework (AHCF), which encapsulates four interrelated dimensions—Digital Literacy, Cognitive Flexibility, Collaborative Intelligence, and Transformative Mindset—as the foundation of sustainable competence development in digital organizations.

This model conceptualizes competence as a *dynamic capability* (Teece, 2021) emerging from continuous interactions among individuals, HR systems, and organizational culture. It bridges humanistic values with technological agility, positioning HR not as a supporting function but as a strategic enabler of organizational resilience. Figure 1 (not shown here) visually represents the cyclical relationship between *adaptive HR practices*, *human competence development*, and *organizational innovation*.

The AHCF framework advances both theory and practice: theoretically, it enriches the competence-based HRM model with insights from *dynamic capability* and *adaptive learning* theories; practically, it offers a blueprint for HR leaders to design policies fostering employee adaptability, psychological safety, and continuous learning in digitalized workplaces.

Discussion

a. Reframing Competence as a Conceptual Evolution in the Digital Era

The findings of this study reinforce the view that human competence in the digital era is no longer a static *skill set* but rather a dynamic and reflective system of adaptive capabilities. This aligns with the *Dynamic Capabilities Theory* (Teece, 2021), which emphasizes the importance of an organization's ability to sense, seize, and transform in response to environmental changes through continuous learning. In the context of human resource management (HRM), the reframing of competence reflects a shift from traditional role-based models to *capability-based frameworks*, where individuals must continuously re-learn and redefine their roles in accordance with technological advancement.

This transformation also signifies a fundamental paradigm shift in performance management. Whereas traditional organizations focused primarily on efficiency and measurable output, contemporary organizations now evaluate success based on the ability to generate new value through digital collaboration and innovation (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2023). Consequently, this study contributes theoretically by redefining competence as a *dynamic entity* that emerges from the interplay of digital experiences, social learning, and self-reflection.

b. Adaptive HR Practices as Mechanisms for Competence Development

The empirical findings highlighting the strategic role of HR as a facilitator of change expand upon the *Agile HR* framework (Kane et al., 2022), which underscores structural flexibility in talent management during digital transformation. Practices such as *digital mentoring* and the establishment of *learning ecosystems* were found to be effective mechanisms for accelerating digital competence internalization, as they position employees as active agents in the learning process. In this sense, HR no longer serves as an administrative function but as a *strategic enabler* mediating the relationship between technology, people, and organizational innovation.

The creation of collaborative learning ecosystems also supports Bandura's *Social Learning Theory*, recontextualized for the digital age through online platforms and *communities of practice*. This study demonstrates that learning occurs not only through formal training but also through cross-generational social interactions, which are essential for overcoming digital divides in the workplace. Therefore, adaptive HR practices serve as a "strategic bridge" linking technological transformation with human readiness to navigate digital uncertainty.

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c. Structural and Cultural Barriers as Determinants of Transformation Success

The study reveals that resistance to change remains a major challenge in the process of reframing competence. This finding echoes Suddaby et al. (2020), who argue that digital transformation often fails not due to technological limitations but due to insufficient cultural readiness. Such resistance stems from misalignments between formal systems (structures, policies) and informal systems (values, trust, and individual behaviors).

Interestingly, the study also identifies a contrasting phenomenon: organizations with strong hierarchical structures can still foster adaptive competence through *transformational leadership*. This finding supports the concept of *Digital Leadership* (Zupic & Černe, 2023), which posits that leaders play a pivotal role in articulating shared vision and facilitating the internalization of digital values. Hence, the success of competence transformation depends less on technological infrastructure and more on leadership behavior and organizational learning culture.

d. The Adaptive Competence Model as a Novel Conceptual Contribution

The conceptual model derived from this study—comprising four key dimensions: *Digital Literacy, Cognitive Flexibility, Collaborative Intelligence,* and *Transformative Mindset*—offers a significant theoretical contribution to contemporary competence theory in HRM. It extends the *T-shaped Competence* framework (Del Giudice et al., 2021) by introducing the *transformative mindset* dimension as the psychological foundation for reflective learning and continuous adaptation.

The *transformative mindset* emerged as the most distinctive finding, suggesting that psychological readiness and learning orientation are more decisive than technical proficiency in enabling digital adaptation. This supports the growing view that the future of competence management will evolve toward a *human-centered digital transformation paradigm*, where technology serves to augment, rather than replace, human values. Practically, this model implies that organizations must design HR policies that balance digital efficiency with social sustainability through a *trust-based digital culture*.

e. Contributions and Implications for HRM Scholarship

This study contributes significantly to HRM literature by demonstrating that adaptive competence constitutes the foundation of successful digital transformation. From a practical perspective, it provides HR professionals with a framework to design long-term capability-building strategies that transcend short-term technical skill development. The proposed model of adaptive competence can also function as a diagnostic tool to assess an organization's readiness for digital transformation systematically.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce HRM's evolving position as a discipline that not only manages human resources but also orchestrates the dynamic interplay among people, technology, and organizational strategy. This confirms the need for an interdisciplinary approach combining strategic management, organizational psychology, and information technology theories to capture the complex phenomenon of human competence in the digital era. Thus, the study not only enriches conceptual understanding but also opens pathways for future empirical research—particularly through *mixed-method* designs—to validate and refine the *Adaptive Human Competence Framework (AHCF)* in diverse organizational contexts.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study underscores that reframing human competence in the era of digital transformation transcends the mere acquisition of technical skills; it entails a fundamental restructuring of mindsets, behaviors, and interaction patterns within technology-mediated workplaces. Human competence in digital organizations is constructed through four synergistic dimensions—digital literacy**,** cognitive flexibility**,** collaborative intelligence**,** and transformative mindset**—**which collectively form the foundation of adaptive capability. Adaptive HR practices such as *learning ecosystems*, *digital mentoring*, and *agile performance management* play a pivotal role in enhancing reflective capacity and fostering a trust-based organizational culture. These findings affirm that HR innovation is not simply about implementing technology but about *humanizing technology* within the work context. From a theoretical perspective,

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this research extends the competence-based HRM paradigm by integrating insights from *dynamic capabilities* (Teece, 2021) and *adaptive learning theory* (Kolb, 2015). The resulting Adaptive Human Competence Framework (AHCF) conceptualizes how individual adaptability, adaptive HR practices, and organizational innovation interact as a unified system of capability renewal. This model advances the understanding of human competence as a dynamic, socially constructed process embedded within the digital transformation journey. From a practical standpoint, the study offers actionable implications for organizations and HR leaders. It highlights the importance of developing collaborative digital learning ecosystems, implementing flexible and feedback-oriented performance systems, and fostering leadership that cultivates trust and continuous learning. Organizations are encouraged to redesign their HR strategies to focus on nurturing *adaptive mindsets* rather than enforcing rigid competency standards. In conclusion, digital transformation should be understood fundamentally as *a human transformation*. Adaptive human competence emerges as the strategic foundation for organizational resilience, innovation, and sustained competitiveness in an era marked by disruption and uncertainty. The long-term success of digital transformation thus depends not on technological sophistication alone, but on the organization's capacity to continuously learn, adapt, and rehumanize the digital experience.

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