

Exploring the Interplay of Digital Leadership, Digital Workplace and Employees' Dynamic Digital Capabilities in Malaysian Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has become an essential expectation in Malaysian public universities, but its implementation is often shaped by the everyday realities of administrative officers who must interpret and navigate shifting technological demands. This study explores how digital leadership, the digital workplace, and dynamic digital capabilities interact to influence officers' experiences as they manage systems that promise efficiency but often exhibit instability. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the study draws on reflective accounts that reveal how leadership clarity, system usability and peer support shape officers' confidence and capacity to adapt. The findings show that digitalisation is not experienced as a straightforward transition but as a relational and emotional process influenced by workload pressures, uneven system alignment and the degree of guidance provided by leaders. Officers build capability gradually, drawing on trial-and-error and informal learning networks as they respond to ongoing changes in their work environment. The study suggests that meaningful digital transformation requires coherent alignment between technological tools, leadership practices and opportunities for experiential learning. It highlights the need for institutions to closely attend to the human conditions that sustain digital work and to support the development of environments where capability can grow in practical, sustainable ways.

Keywords: digital leadership, digital workplace, dynamic digital capabilities, public universities

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become an ordinary part of administrative work in Malaysian public universities, although the pace of change often feels uneven to those who live with it every day. Officers now complete most tasks through digital platforms, sometimes without noticing how much their routines have shifted from the manual habits of years before. Yet beneath that surface change, their experiences reveal a more complicated story. Digital tools help them work faster at times, but they also introduce new forms of pressure when systems slow down, fail to integrate or require steps that do not match the flow of daily tasks. What seems like a simple shift in technology becomes, in practice, a process that reshapes how people negotiate expectations, interpret their roles and manage uncertainty at work.

Universities globally are moving toward data-driven governance, automated processes and digital administration, and Malaysian institutions are following the same path. Much of the motivation comes from the need to improve efficiency and respond to rising expectations from students, policymakers and the public. However, the reality of digitalisation depends heavily on the people who use these systems each day. Officers described moments when technology genuinely made work lighter, such as when data could be retrieved quickly or approvals no longer required the physical movement of documents. They also recalled days when systems slowed them down or when deadlines clashed with unexpected system changes. These inconsistencies shape how officers learn, adapt, and decide how much they are willing to explore unfamiliar features.

A recurring point in officers' accounts is the variation in digital leadership across departments. Some leaders take time to explain the purpose of new systems, allow room for learning and acknowledge the challenges staff face. When this happens, officers approach changes with more confidence and less hesitation. Others introduce expectations abruptly or rely on general statements that sound motivating but do not give staff enough guidance to act. Officers often interpret these differences as signals of how prepared they should feel. Clear leadership reduces uncertainty. Ambiguous or rushed instructions, by contrast, create a sense of instability, especially when systems are already difficult to navigate. This variation aligns with observations from wider digital leadership research, but within universities, it becomes more visible because officers must respond to immediate operational demands.

The development of dynamic digital capabilities among officers is also influenced by practical constraints. These capabilities involve sensing digital opportunities, seizing them through meaningful tool use, and transforming work routines accordingly. Officers generally want to improve their skills, but their ability to do so depends on time, system stability and the availability of support. Many explained that they learn best when they can try a function at their own pace or watch a colleague demonstrate how something works. However, tight schedules and heavy administrative loads often leave little room to explore. When formal training arrives after a system has already gone live or when it focuses on theory rather than real tasks, officers fall back on shortcuts or rely on peers to fill the gap. Their learning thus becomes highly relational, shaped by the immediate workplace culture rather than by formal training alone.

The digital workplace itself presents another layer of complexity. Officers described systems that appear advanced but do not align with how tasks are performed. Some platforms require repeated data entry, others lack integration, and some introduce additional verification steps that prolong work rather than shorten it. When systems behave this way, officers feel that digitalisation becomes more about managing the system than managing the task. This mismatch between system design and real workflow encourages staff to revert to manual methods, especially when accuracy and speed are required. It also weakens motivation to explore new functions because officers become cautious about making mistakes or losing work due to instability.

Despite these challenges, officers also conveyed a strong sense of adaptability. Many shared examples of learning through trial and error, asking colleagues for help or discovering more efficient functions by experimenting outside peak hours. Peer networks, informal discussions and shared troubleshooting become essential parts of the digital workplace. These practices help officers navigate gaps in training or system design, although they also highlight how much of digital adaptation occurs outside official structures. In places where leaders encourage open discussion and treat mistakes as part of learning, officers feel more comfortable experimenting. In workplaces where the culture emphasises speed and compliance, officers often avoid exploring beyond what is necessary to complete tasks.

What emerges from these experiences is a digital environment shaped not only by technology but by relationships, communication patterns, cultural norms and the everyday pressures of administrative work. Officers do not simply adopt digital systems; they interpret them, negotiate around their limitations and adjust their own expectations based on what is realistically possible. Their capability grows when leadership provides clear direction, when systems behave in predictable ways and when the workplace culture allows space for learning. It weakens when these elements drift apart or when changes occur faster than staff can absorb.

For these reasons, understanding digital transformation in Malaysian public universities requires close attention to the human experience behind the systems. The shift toward digital work is rarely linear. It unfolds through moments of clarity and confusion, efficiency and delay, confidence and hesitation. This study responds to that reality by examining how digital leadership, workplace systems and dynamic digital capabilities interact within the lived environment of administrative officers. Their narratives offer insight into why digital transformation succeeds in some situations and falters in others, and why capability development cannot be separated from the organisational conditions that surround it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discussions on digital transformation in higher education have grown steadily as universities respond to rapid technological change, evolving governance requirements and increasing expectations for efficient service delivery. Much of the literature agrees that digital transformation extends beyond the deployment of technology. It is a social and organisational shift that requires alignment between leadership intentions, workplace structures and

the development of employee capabilities. This section reviews three central constructs that frequently appear in empirical and conceptual work on digital change, namely digital leadership, the digital workplace and dynamic digital capabilities. Together, these strands offer insight into why digitalisation in public universities often progresses unevenly across departments and why some units adapt more fluidly than others.

Digital leadership is often described as a key determinant of institutional readiness for transformation because it shapes the narratives through which employees interpret technological change. Studies show that digital leadership influences digital culture by guiding how employees make sense of new tools and their role in supporting institutional goals, as demonstrated by Shin, Mollah and Choi (2023). Leaders who express a clear digital vision help staff understand not only which systems to use, but also why these systems matter and how they contribute to broader organisational improvements. This interpretive clarity reduces uncertainty and encourages staff to view digital expectations as part of a coherent institutional direction. In another study, Qiao, Li and Hong (2024) explain that employees show stronger commitment when digital leadership aligns reforms with meaningful performance contributions. Their findings underscore that the psychological framing of change significantly influences whether employees embrace or resist new practices.

Beyond shaping culture, digital leadership also affects workflow and innovation outcomes. Benitez and others (2022) find that when leadership capability is supported by strong platform digitisation capability, organisations experience higher innovation performance. Their study suggests that leaders guide not only the pace of digital adoption but also the strategic application of digital resources. Leadership also plays an important role in helping employees navigate the complexities of digital systems. According to Li, Yang, Yang and Zhao (2024), middle managers support digital adoption when they communicate expectations with empathy and clarity. Their findings highlight that leadership effectiveness varies across organisational layers, which helps explain why digital readiness can differ between departments within the same university. These insights show that digital leadership is not monolithic. It depends on leaders' ability to interpret digital policy that supports employees' learning needs and manage the pressures associated with administrative workflows.

While leadership shapes the interpretive climate, the digital workplace forms the structural and technological environment in which administrative tasks unfold. The digital workplace comprises core systems, communication platforms and workflow tools that facilitate coordination and information processing. Research shows that system design significantly affects organisational performance. Chatterjee, Chaudhuri, Vrontis and Giovando (2023) report that employees respond more positively when platforms are perceived as stable and intuitively aligned with daily routines. Their findings highlight a recurring tension in digitalisation: the sophistication of technology does not guarantee usefulness unless system logic mirrors real administrative processes.

The literature also underscores the importance of cultural readiness in digital workplaces. Trenerry, Chng, Wang, Suhaila and their colleagues (2021) argue that successful transformation depends on an environment that promotes openness to experimentation, access to resources and psychological safety. They suggest that digital change is as much an experiential process as it is a technical one. When staff feel supported and have room to learn, their digital engagement increases. These observations are particularly relevant in public university settings, where multiple systems coexist and employees must reconcile the demands of digital reporting, student management and policy compliance under tight, sometimes inflexible timelines.

A significant portion of research has also focused on dynamic digital capabilities as mechanisms that enable employees to respond to evolving technological demands. Building on the dynamic capabilities theory originally developed by Teece and colleagues, scholars have adapted the construct to describe how individuals sense digital opportunities, seize them through purposeful action and transform their work practices accordingly. Albannai, Raziq, Malik, Scott-Kennel and Igoe (2024) conceptualise dynamic capability as a behavioural response shaped by an individual's ability to interpret technological cues and adjust practices in response to changing digital environments. Their findings show that employees with strong dynamic digital capabilities tend to experience greater confidence and perform more effectively during periods of transition.

Dynamic capability has also been examined as a mediating factor between leadership and digital performance. Wang, Mansor and Leong (2024) find that employees build capacity more effectively when leaders communicate

expectations clearly, support learning opportunities and give staff space to experiment. Their findings resonate with the realities of public universities, where employees often manage numerous digital tasks that require both procedural accuracy and adaptive problem-solving. Similarly, Mollah, Choi, Hwang and Shin (2023) highlight that learning environments play a central role in capability building. They observe that employees develop adaptability when they work in contexts that normalise inquiry, peer support and open discussion of challenges. Their findings underscore that capability growth is not a fixed personal attribute, but an experiential process shaped by interactions with leaders, colleagues and systems.

Scholars have attempted to consolidate these insights through integrative frameworks. Blanka, Krumay and Rueckel (2022) show that the success of digital transformation interventions depends on the alignment between leadership expectations and workplace affordances. When systems provide clear cues for behaviour and leaders reinforce learning, employees build confidence gradually and more consistently. In a related vein, Gyamerah, Afshari, and Asante (2025) explain that leadership shapes digital strategy, which, in turn, influences capability development and transformation outcomes. Their work positions capability building as a deliberate organisational process rather than an incidental by-product of technological rollout.

Despite the depth of knowledge offered by these studies, gaps remain in understanding how these constructs operate within higher education, particularly among administrative officers. Many existing studies are grounded in corporate or technologically intensive industries, leaving limited insight into how employees in public universities experience digital change. Administrative officers occupy a unique organisational position because their work involves navigating policy requirements, managing student and academic processes, and ensuring the accuracy of records and reporting. Their interaction with digital systems is often multilayered and shaped by departmental norms, system constraints and workload pressures.

The literature also reveals ongoing debates about the nature and expectations of digital leadership and the workplace. Some scholars argue that effective digital leadership requires technical expertise, while others stress the primacy of relational behaviours. Similar debates exist regarding the digital workplace, with some prioritising system usability while others emphasise culture, readiness and collaborative learning. Questions about dynamic capability also persist, particularly whether it should be conceptualised as an individual cognitive skill or as an outcome of organisational design and learning culture. These discussions highlight the need for context-specific studies that examine how these constructs interact in environments where technological, cultural and leadership variables do not evolve uniformly.

Overall, the literature depicts digital transformation as a relational, context-dependent process influenced by the interplay among leadership, workplace conditions, and employee capability. While each construct has been studied extensively in isolation, its integrated effects remain less understood in the context of Malaysian public universities. This study addresses that gap by examining how these elements shape the lived experiences of administrative officers and, in doing so, contributes to a deeper understanding of digital transformation as a human-centred organisational journey.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to understand how administrative officers interpret and respond to digital transformation in their everyday work. A qualitative design is appropriate because digitalisation in public universities unfolds through experiences rather than measurable variables, and officers' accounts offer insight into how meaning is constructed through daily encounters with systems, leaders and workplace expectations. Therefore, the study focuses on capturing these interpretations in their natural context rather than imposing predetermined categories or hypotheses.

A Basic Qualitative Inquiry design was selected to provide sufficient structure for systematic exploration while allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. This design supports studies that seek to deepen understanding of existing concepts such as digital leadership, the digital workplace and dynamic digital capability, especially when these concepts intersect in complex organisational settings. It avoids the philosophical constraints of more specialised traditions and enables the researcher to explore practical, relational and emotional aspects of digital work that might otherwise remain invisible.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with administrative officers who regularly engage with core digital systems in public universities. The interviews encouraged participants to recount specific episodes, reflect on challenges and describe moments that shaped their understanding of digital expectations. This method allowed the conversations to follow a consistent direction while still leaving room for detail and clarification when participants raised issues related to system stability, leadership behaviour or capability development. Informal observations of participants' work environments were used to support interpretation, offering contextual cues about how digital tasks were performed and how officers interacted with systems and colleagues during routine operations.

Purposive sampling was used to identify 11 officers with deep, sustained involvement in digital administrative processes. The goal was not to achieve representativeness but to gather rich accounts from individuals who could speak meaningfully about the realities of digital transformation. Saturation was reached when later interviews began to echo recurring concerns about workload, system alignment, leadership clarity and learning conditions, indicating that additional interviews would not yield substantially new patterns.

Data were analysed through manual thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify meaningful segments related to digital leadership, workplace usability and capability formation. Open codes were generated line by line before being grouped into broader categories that reflected similarities across participants' accounts. These categories were then refined into themes that captured recurrent patterns cutting across individual stories. Manual coding was chosen to maintain close engagement with participants' language and to preserve the subtle emotional and interpretive cues embedded in their narratives. This hands-on approach supported a deeper understanding of how officers make sense of digital systems and expectations under real workplace conditions.

Ethical considerations were integrated throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their rights, including their right to confidentiality and to voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, and identifying details were removed to protect anonymity. All digital files were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

Taken together, the methodological choices reflect an intention to capture digital transformation as a lived experience rather than as an abstract institutional trend. The combination of purposive sampling, rich interviewing, contextual observation and systematic thematic analysis provides a coherent approach for examining how digital leadership, workplace systems and dynamic digital capabilities interact in the daily realities of administrative officers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that administrative officers experience digital transformation not as a straightforward shift from manual procedures to digital processes but as a complex and often uncertain journey shaped by the movement of systems, expectations and organisational rhythms. Officers do not merely work with technology. They live with it, negotiate around it and carry its consequences into their daily decisions. Their accounts show a digital environment that is functional enough to anchor administrative tasks yet fragile enough that the smallest disruption can alter the pace, confidence and emotional tone of the day. Through their stories, digital transformation emerges not as a clean organisational strategy but as a layered human experience unfolding amid the pressures and constraints of public university administration.

Officers described how the systems they relied on behaved inconsistently, requiring constant vigilance. They often began tasks with an awareness that delays or failures were possible, adjusting their expectations even before interacting with the system. This anticipation shaped the rhythm of their work and created a form of mental readiness that was both protective and taxing. They spoke about preparing backup versions of documents, duplicating entries for safety and saving screenshots as evidence that tasks were performed correctly. These practices were not formal requirements but practical decisions made after repeated encounters with system instability. The emotional undertone of their narratives suggests that digital tools meant to ease often introduced subtle forms of tension. Officers continued to carry out their responsibilities, yet the process required them to manage a parallel layer of uncertainty that accompanied each digital action.

The accounts also illuminate how system instability influences capability development. When systems behave unpredictably, officers spend mental energy managing disruptions rather than learning new features or exploring

more efficient ways to complete tasks. As a result, capability growth becomes uneven and reactive, shaped by moments of forced adaptation rather than steady learning. This finding aligns with arguments in the literature suggesting that digital readiness depends not only on the presence of technology but on its reliability. Systems that function consistently invite experimentation and confidence, while systems that fail sporadically narrow the space for professional growth. Officers' stories show that these dynamics are not abstract ideas but lived realities that influence how they navigate each day.

Leadership plays a central role in mediating these experiences. Officers repeatedly emphasised that their interpretation of digital expectations was shaped by how leaders communicated, responded and positioned themselves during periods of transition. When leaders offered a clear explanation, demonstrated patience and remained available for questions, officers felt more grounded. They were more willing to experiment, ask for help, and attempt tasks that were new to them. Leadership clarity served as an emotional anchor, helping counterbalance system instability. Officers described feeling reassured when leaders acknowledged difficulties or explained the rationale behind new procedures. These gestures, though simple, created a sense of shared direction, strengthening the officers' confidence.

In contrast, when leaders issued sudden directives without context or shifted expectations without adequate explanation, officers felt exposed. They hesitated to seek clarification and focused on completing tasks with minimal risk rather than on understanding or exploring. This defensive posture limited their capability development and fostered a form of digital survival rather than digital growth. The influence of leadership tone is evident throughout their accounts. Officers internalised not only the content of leadership instructions but also the emotional signals embedded in them. Supportive leaders fostered environments where learning could occur despite system irregularities, while inconsistent leaders amplified the stress that officers already faced. This interplay underscores a recurring insight in digital transformation research: the behaviour of leaders matters as much as the behaviour of systems.

The digital workplace itself added another layer of complexity. Officers navigated an ecosystem of systems that required constant switching between platforms with different interfaces, structures and procedural logics. A single task could require multiple logins, multiple forms of information entry and multiple verification steps. Officers described how these fragmented processes created cognitive strain and slowed workflow, especially when systems did not integrate seamlessly. Many officers developed their own mapping systems, using notes, self-generated checklists or personal spreadsheets to track progress and reduce confusion. These informal strategies reveal how administrative officers serve as the connective tissue between systems that were not designed to fully communicate with one another.

Data quality issues also featured prominently in their narratives. Officers often received information from different units in inconsistent formats, requiring additional work to clean, reorganise or validate data before it could be entered into digital systems. This invisible labour consumed time yet remained unrecognised in formal workflow design. System rigidity further complicated these tasks. Officers noted how certain platforms allowed no room for error, making it impossible to reverse a mistaken entry without lengthy intervention from technical units. This rigidity discouraged exploration and reduced officers' willingness to interact with unfamiliar functions. It created a cautious digital environment where officers did what was necessary but avoided anything that felt risky.

Despite these challenges, informal peer networks emerged as critical sources of support. Officers frequently sought help from colleagues who had mastered specific systems or had experience solving similar problems. These exchanges were spontaneous and grounded in a shared understanding of what digital work felt like in practice. They offered reassurance, clarified confusion and helped reduce the emotional weight of digital tasks. These networks also accelerated capability development because they provided practical, contextual, and immediately usable information. The reliance on peer learning highlights how capability formation is a collective rather than an individual process. Officers learn by observing one another, testing solutions, and sharing insights that emerge from everyday challenges.

The capability itself emerged in the findings as a fluid, context-dependent process. Officers did not describe capability as technical expertise. Instead, they described it as confidence that grows slowly as they learn to interpret system patterns, anticipate problems and apply strategies that have worked in the past. Capability was shaped by repeated

exposure, reflection and the presence of emotionally supportive leadership. Officers noted that during quieter periods, they had space to explore and understand system functions more deeply. During peak periods, they relied heavily on familiar routines and avoided experimenting with new features. This pattern supports theoretical perspectives suggesting that dynamic capability depends on the rhythm of work and the conditions that surround it.

The narratives also reveal how capability is intertwined with emotion. Officers felt more capable when systems behaved consistently and when leaders communicated clearly. They felt less capable when they faced unpredictable system behaviour or unclear leadership direction. Therefore, capability does not emerge solely from skill but from the emotional climate in which learning occurs. This finding reinforces the idea that capability is not fixed. It adjusts in response to environmental conditions, leadership behaviour and the stability of digital systems.

Taken together, the findings show that digital transformation in public universities is sustained not only by systems and policies but by the emotional, cognitive and relational labour of administrative officers. These officers bear the practical burden of digitalisation, interpreting expectations in conditions of uncertainty and shaping their own methods to maintain workflow continuity. They construct meaning and capability not through formal training alone but through lived encounters with systems that sometimes support them and sometimes complicate their tasks. Leadership behaviour influences how they negotiate these conditions, while the structure of the digital workplace shapes the pace and effectiveness of their work.

Across all accounts, digital transformation appears as an ecosystem rather than a technical upgrade. Stability, communication, integration and learning conditions must converge for transformation to be meaningful. Officers' lived experiences illustrate that misalignment in any one of these dimensions places pressure on the others. When systems falter, leadership clarity becomes more important. When leadership is inconsistent, peer networks become essential. When workflow design does not align with real demands, officers compensate by using workarounds. These interdependencies highlight the human nature of transformation and the need for organisational strategies that acknowledge its complexity.

The synthesis of findings and theory reveals that administrative officers engage with digitalisation through processes that mirror the dynamic capabilities cycle. They sense new expectations through system behaviour and leadership signals. They seize opportunities by experimenting with system functions when conditions allow. They transform their practices gradually as they accumulate experience and confidence. Their journey shows that capability is not a destination but an ongoing negotiation among people, tools, and organisational structures.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that the success of digital transformation depends on understanding the experiences of those who carry it out day to day. Their stories challenge the view of digitalisation as a purely technical shift and point to the importance of designing environments where capability can grow, where leadership serves as a steady guide and where systems align with the realities of administrative work. The insights from this study invite universities to see digital readiness not as a checklist of technological upgrades but as an ongoing human process grounded in clarity, stability and collective learning.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to understand how digital leadership, the digital workplace and dynamic digital capabilities interact to shape the lived experiences of administrative officers in Malaysian public universities. Through the narratives examined in this study, it becomes clear that digital transformation is not a process that unfolds solely through policy directives or the introduction of new technological systems. Instead, it is a human journey marked by negotiation, emotional calibration and ongoing adaptation to changing expectations. The findings reveal that transformation is never a purely technical shift. It is routed through daily routines, shaped by relationships and sustained by the unseen labour of individuals who attempt to make sense of evolving demands while balancing the pressures of service delivery.

The study demonstrates that officers do not encounter digitalisation as a straightforward transfer of functions from manual to digital platforms. They navigate systems that fluctuate in performance and vary in their alignment with real administrative tasks. These systems influence not only efficiency but also the emotional tone of daily work, with moments of smooth operation providing a sense of relief while disruptions prompt hesitation and cognitive strain.

This insight expands the understanding of digital workplace usability by showing that system behaviour carries psychological consequences. The nature of system stability becomes intertwined with officers' confidence, pace and sense of control. This reinforces the idea that digital tools cannot be evaluated merely for their technical capacity. They must be assessed for the human experience they shape.

Leadership emerges in this study as a decisive factor that frames how officers negotiate periods of uncertainty. Leaders who communicate clearly and acknowledge the difficulties of digital change help stabilise their teams and create a sense of collective direction. Their involvement frames digitalisation as a shared process, reducing the perception of burden and cultivating space for learning. Conversely, leadership approaches that introduce instructions without adequate context heighten anxiety and push officers into a state of defensive performance. This pattern underscores that leadership in digital environments must be grounded in empathy, clarity and responsiveness. It is not enough for leaders to envision transformation. They must accompany their teams through their practical complexities.

The digital workplace, as experienced by officers, reveals the hidden gaps between institutional aspirations and the actual flow of administrative work. Systems that do not reflect the logic of existing processes introduce friction that officers must absorb through informal strategies. These workarounds are effective in the moment but signal deeper structural misalignment. They demonstrate that administrative officers often serve as the connective tissue between systems meant to communicate, but that do not. This finding extends current debates on digital workplace design by showing that usability extends beyond attractive interfaces. It involves careful attention to workflow sequences, data quality and the temporal pressures of routine administrative cycles.

Dynamic digital capabilities, often framed theoretically as a series of strategic abilities, appear in this study as a grounded process shaped by repeated exposure, peer collaboration and emotional resilience. Officers develop capability gradually, guided not only by formal training but by the rhythms of actual tasks and the presence of colleagues who offer reassurance and practical insight. This learning pattern highlights the crucial role of informal networks in supporting capability growth. Capability is strengthened when officers feel they have room to experiment and reflect. It becomes fragile when workloads intensify or when system changes occur without explanation. This study positions capability not as a static attribute but as a fluid outcome of environmental support, system stability and leadership engagement.

Synthesising these insights, the article contributes to a deeper conceptualisation of digital transformation as an ecosystem rather than a sequence of technical upgrades. The findings suggest that meaningful transformation depends on the reciprocal alignment of three domains. Systems must be stable and designed with real workflow in mind. Leaders must communicate clearly and remain emotionally attuned to the pressures officers face. Employees must be supported with opportunities for experiential learning and collaboration. Strengthening any one of these dimensions in isolation will not be sufficient. The ecosystem only functions when all elements reinforce one another.

For universities seeking to sustain digital progress, this study offers several implications. Institutions must begin by recognising that administrative officers experience transformation at a granular level, where systems, deadlines and expectations intersect. Policies and strategies will be more effective when they acknowledge the emotional and cognitive labour carried by frontline staff. Investment in technology must be accompanied by investment in people, not as an afterthought but as a core component of transformation. Leaders need to cultivate cultures that value open communication, steady guidance and shared learning. Systems must be refined not only for compliance but for genuine usability. Peer networks should be recognised as powerful sources of resilience that can be strengthened through structured opportunities for collaborative learning.

In conclusion, the study affirms that digital transformation in public universities is ultimately a human-centred endeavour. It grows through small acts of adaptation, shared struggles and gradual insights that accumulate into capability. It is shaped by the stability of tools, the presence of leaders and the collective wisdom of colleagues who learn from one another. Recognising this reality can help universities move beyond the assumption that technology alone will drive progress. Sustainable transformation requires attention to the human experience, respect for the complexity of administrative work, and a commitment to building environments where officers can flourish rather than simply cope as the digital landscape continues to evolve.

LIMITATION

The insights from this study need to be read with an awareness of several limitations arising from its qualitative orientation and contextual focus. The narratives reflect the experiences of administrative officers working within the particular organisational cultures and technological environments of Malaysian public universities. These accounts offer depth rather than breadth, and the strength of this approach lies in its ability to illuminate how individuals interpret digital change in real time. At the same time, this closeness to context means that the findings cannot claim to represent the experiences of all administrative units or institutions undergoing similar transitions.

A second limitation concerns the fluidity of the digital systems that shape officers' work. The study captures a period of transformation rather than a stable phase. Digital platforms evolve, leadership expectations shift, and procedures are revised as institutions refine their approaches. The officers' stories describe a moment within a longer trajectory of change. Their reflections provide valuable insight into how capability and confidence are formed, yet these reflections may evolve as systems mature or as support structures become more consistent. This temporal dimension places a natural boundary on how far the findings can be transferred to future conditions.

The study is also shaped by the interpretive nature of qualitative interviews. Officers spoke from positions shaped by workload pressures, team dynamics and personal histories with digital systems. Some experiences may have been emphasised while others remained unspoken, particularly if they involved sensitive dynamics within their departments. This is not a flaw in the design but an inherent feature of human-centred research that privileges meaning over measurement.

These limitations, however, are not weaknesses that diminish the study's value. Instead, they highlight areas where additional inquiry can deepen understanding. Future research may compare experiences across institutions with different digital maturities or examine how leadership cultures shape adaptation over longer periods. By openly acknowledging these boundaries, the study reinforces the idea that digital transformation is an evolving social process best understood through continued, context-sensitive exploration.

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