



Change Management Barriers During Digital Transformation Initiatives

Pavan Kumar

Master of Business Administration (MBA)

School of Business Management

Supervisor **Dr. Mukul Kumar Shrivastava**, Associate Professor

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Abstract

Digital transformation has become an indispensable strategic imperative for organizations seeking to remain competitive in today's technology-driven business landscape. The integration of digital technologies—spanning cloud computing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, the Internet of Things, and process automation—offers organizations significant opportunities to enhance efficiency, improve customer experience, and drive innovation. However, despite the magnitude of these investments, a substantial proportion of digital transformation initiatives fail to deliver their intended outcomes.

This research paper critically examines the change management barriers that undermine digital transformation initiatives. Drawing on primary data collected through structured questionnaires from working professionals across diverse industries, supplemented by an extensive review of theoretical frameworks and empirical literature, the study identifies employee resistance, communication failures, inadequate training, weak leadership, rigid organizational culture, and resource constraints as the principal barriers to effective change management during transformation.

The paper applies established theoretical models—Lewin's Three-Stage Model, Kotter's Eight-Step Model, the ADKAR Model, McKinsey's 7-S Framework, and Bridges' Transition Model—to

analyze organizational dynamics during digital transformation. Hypothesis testing reveals statistically significant relationships between strong leadership, effective communication, skill development, and transformation success. Conversely, employee resistance and cultural rigidity are confirmed to exert a significant negative influence on outcomes.

The findings underscore that technological capability alone is insufficient; successful digital transformation demands a holistic approach that integrates human, cultural, and organizational dimensions alongside technological deployment. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for practitioners and offers directions for future research, with particular emphasis on the underexplored context of emerging economies such as India.

Keywords: *Digital Transformation, Change Management, Employee Resistance, Organizational Culture, Leadership, ADKAR, Kotter, Emerging Markets*



1. Introduction

The contemporary business environment is characterized by rapid technological evolution, shifting customer expectations, and intensifying global competition. In this context, digital transformation—the process of integrating digital technologies into core business operations—has transitioned from being a competitive differentiator to an existential necessity. Organizations across sectors are deploying technologies such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, the Internet of Things (IoT), and robotic process automation to reimagine how they create and deliver value.

Yet the empirical record is paradoxical. Despite unprecedented investment in digital technologies, a McKinsey Global Institute estimate suggests that fewer than 30% of digital transformation initiatives fully achieve their intended objectives (McKinsey, 2021). The primary culprit, as converging evidence indicates, is not technological inadequacy but rather the failure to manage organizational change effectively. Digital transformation demands not merely the adoption of new tools but a fundamental reconfiguration of processes, structures, roles, mindsets, and culture—all of which are deeply human phenomena.

This paper investigates the change management barriers that organizations encounter when pursuing digital transformation. It addresses the following central research question: What are the principal barriers to effective change management in digital transformation initiatives, and how do factors such as leadership, communication, training, and organizational culture influence transformation success?

1.1 Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the concept and evolution of digital transformation in modern organizational contexts.
- To identify and categorize the barriers to change management encountered during digital transformation.
- To assess the influence of leadership, communication, training, and organizational culture on transformation outcomes.
- To test hypotheses relating change management variables to digital transformation success.
- To provide practical, evidence-based recommendations for overcoming identified barriers.

1.2 Significance of the Study

While extant literature addresses digital transformation from technological and strategic perspectives, the human and organizational dimensions remain comparatively underexplored—particularly in emerging economy contexts such as India. This paper bridges that gap by synthesizing theoretical frameworks with primary field evidence. Its significance is threefold: academically, it enriches the literature on change management in digital contexts; practically, it equips managers with actionable insights; and contextually, it illuminates unique challenges facing organizations in rapidly digitalizing emerging markets.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Digital Transformation

Vial (2019) defines digital transformation as a process that aims to improve an entity by triggering significant changes to its properties through combinations of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies. This definition underscores the multi-dimensional nature of transformation: it is simultaneously a technological, organizational, cultural, and strategic process.

The evolution of digital transformation can be understood through three sequential stages. Digitization, the first stage, involves converting analog information into digital form—scanning documents, digitizing records,



and building electronic databases. Digitalization, the second stage, uses digital data and connectivity to improve and optimize business processes, such as automated payroll, inventory management, and customer service. Digital transformation, the third and most advanced stage, represents a comprehensive organizational shift in which advanced technologies drive fundamental changes in business models, value creation, and customer engagement (Westerman, Bonnet & McAfee, 2014).

Kane et al. (2015) emphasize that strategy, not technology, drives successful transformation. Organizations that develop coherent digital strategies aligned with their overall business vision consistently outperform those that focus narrowly on technology deployment.

2.2 Key Components of Digital Transformation

Successful digital transformation is underpinned by seven interrelated components (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Hess et al., 2016):

- **Strategic Alignment:** Digital initiatives must directly support overarching business objectives.
- **Technological Infrastructure:** Robust, flexible, and integrated technological platforms are foundational.
- **Data Management and Analytics:** Structured data governance enables evidence-based decision-making.
- **Human Resource Capability:** Employee skills and adaptability are critical for effective technology utilization.
- **Process Integration and Redesign:** Legacy processes must be redesigned for digital environments.
- **Leadership and Governance:** Committed, visionary leadership is essential for guiding transformation.
- **Organizational Culture and Change Readiness:** A culture of innovation and continuous learning enables adaptation.

These components are interdependent. Weakness in any one dimension can destabilize the entire transformation effort, which is why technology-centric approaches that neglect cultural and human factors so frequently fail.

2.3 Theoretical Models of Change Management

Several theoretical models provide structured frameworks for managing change during digital transformation:

2.3.1 Lewin's Three-Stage Model (1951)

Lewin's foundational model conceptualizes change in three stages: Unfreezing, which involves disrupting existing equilibrium and creating readiness for change; Changing, in which new behaviors, processes, and systems are introduced; and Refreezing, which consolidates new practices into organizational norms. While elegant in its simplicity, the model's linearity may be insufficient for the dynamic, iterative nature of digital transformation (Burnes, 2017).

2.3.2 Kotter's Eight-Step Model (1996)

Kotter's model provides a more operationally detailed framework: (1) Create urgency; (2) Form a guiding coalition; (3) Develop a strategic vision; (4) Communicate the vision; (5) Remove obstacles; (6) Generate short-term wins; (7) Sustain acceleration; (8) Institutionalize change. The model's emphasis on communication and short-term victories makes it particularly relevant for sustaining momentum in multi-year digital transformation programs.



2.3.3 The ADKAR Model

The ADKAR model (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement) focuses on individual-level change, which is foundational to organizational transformation. It recognizes that systemic change succeeds only when individual employees traverse all five stages. The model's granularity makes it an effective diagnostic tool for identifying where specific employees or teams are faltering in their adoption journey.

2.3.4 McKinsey 7-S Framework

McKinsey's 7-S model (Strategy, Structure, Systems, Shared Values, Skills, Style, Staff) takes a holistic systems view, emphasizing that all organizational elements must be aligned for transformation to succeed. It is particularly useful for diagnosing misalignments that undermine digital initiatives.

2.3.5 Bridges' Transition Model

Bridges' model distinguishes between change (an external event) and transition (the internal psychological process). Its three stages—Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning—draw attention to the emotional journey employees undergo. The model underscores the importance of psychological support during transformation and the danger of rushing employees through the Neutral Zone.

2.4 Barriers to Change Management in Digital Transformation

Empirical research consistently identifies a cluster of barriers that impede effective change management during digital transformation (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Verhoef et al., 2021; Li, 2020):

Barrier Category	Description and Impact
Employee Resistance	Fear of job displacement, unfamiliarity with technology, and perceived loss of control generate psychological resistance that slows adoption and reduces productivity.
Communication Failure	Opaque, inconsistent, or insufficient communication creates uncertainty, fuels rumor, and erodes managerial trust, exacerbating resistance.
Leadership Deficit	Lack of executive sponsorship, unclear vision, and passive leadership leave employees directionless and unmotivated.
Skill and Training Gaps	Insufficient investment in upskilling leaves employees unable to operate new systems, reducing transformation effectiveness.
Rigid Organizational Culture	Hierarchical, risk-averse cultures obstruct innovation, discourage knowledge sharing, and reinforce the status quo.
Resource Constraints	Financial limitations restrict infrastructure investment and training programs, particularly in SMEs and emerging market firms.
Legacy System Integration	Technical incompatibilities between new digital platforms and existing legacy systems cause delays, cost overruns, and operational disruptions.
Data Security Concerns	Heightened sensitivity to cybersecurity risks and data privacy regulations can create hesitancy and slow digital adoption.



2.5 Research Gap

Despite the richness of the existing literature, notable gaps persist. Most empirical studies are anchored in developed economy contexts; limited research examines change management barriers in rapidly digitalizing emerging markets such as India. Furthermore, the interaction effects among barriers—for instance, how leadership deficits amplify cultural rigidity—remain underexplored. This paper addresses these gaps.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design, appropriate for examining and characterizing the nature, magnitude, and interrelationships of change management barriers in organizational settings. The descriptive paradigm enables systematic data collection, pattern identification, and structured analysis without experimental manipulation of variables.

3.2 Data Sources

The study draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires administered to professionals actively engaged in digital transformation initiatives. Secondary data was derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic textbooks, industry reports from McKinsey, Deloitte, PwC, and Gartner, and published case studies.

3.3 Sampling Design

A non-probability convenience sampling approach was employed. Respondents were selected based on their active involvement in digital transformation processes and accessibility. The sample encompasses employees from private sector firms, public sector organizations, multinational corporations, and startups, spanning functional areas including Human Resources, Information Technology, Operations, and Finance.

3.4 Variables of the Study

Independent variables include Leadership Effectiveness, Communication Quality, Training and Development Investment, and Organizational Culture. The dependent variables are Change Management Effectiveness and Digital Transformation Success. Control variables include industry sector, organization size, and respondent experience level.

3.5 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated and tested:

H1	There is a significant positive relationship between leadership effectiveness and successful change management during digital transformation.
H2	Employee resistance has a significant negative impact on digital transformation success.
H3	Effective organizational communication significantly improves change management outcomes.
H4	Investment in training and skill development positively influences employee adaptability to digital change.



3.6 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected via a structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument covered six thematic sections: Change Readiness, Change Management Barriers, Digital Transformation Challenges, Leadership Effectiveness, Organizational Culture, and Open Feedback. Data analysis utilized percentage analysis, frequency distribution, and cross-tabulation, supported by graphical visualization through charts and tables.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and data was employed exclusively for academic purposes.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic analysis of the sample reveals several notable characteristics. The majority of respondents (approximately 65%) fall within the 25–40 age range, reflecting the dominance of early- to mid-career professionals in digital transformation roles. Most respondents possess 3 to 10 years of professional experience, suggesting a moderate-to-high level of organizational exposure. The sample encompasses diverse industry sectors, enhancing the generalizability of findings.

Demographic Variable	Category	Approx. % of Sample
Age Group	25–40 years	~65%
Experience	3–10 years	~60%
Organization Type	Private / MNC	~70%
Functional Area	IT / Operations / HR	~75%

4.2 Findings on Change Management Barriers

The findings confirm that employee resistance is the most pervasive barrier to change management, with a majority of respondents indicating that fear of job displacement, discomfort with new systems, and insufficient understanding of transformation goals drive opposition. Resistance is substantially stronger in organizations where employees are excluded from decision-making processes.

Communication deficiencies emerge as a closely linked secondary barrier. Respondents report that vague, inconsistent, or absent messaging regarding the purpose and progress of digital transformation generates confusion, amplifies uncertainty, and erodes trust in management. Organizations that established regular, multi-channel communication protocols experienced measurably lower resistance levels.

Inadequate training is identified as a third major barrier. A significant proportion of respondents felt ill-equipped to operate new digital systems, which reduced both their confidence and performance. The skill gap is particularly acute in organizations that prioritize technology deployment while under-investing in human capital development.

Organizational rigidity—characterized by hierarchical decision-making, low tolerance for risk, and resistance to cultural change—is highlighted as a structural impediment. Organizations with flat, collaborative structures and explicit innovation mandates demonstrate greater adaptability and faster transformation velocity.



4.3 Findings on Digital Transformation Challenges

Beyond change management barriers, respondents identify several operational challenges during digital transformation. Legacy system integration is among the most technically demanding, as compatibility issues between new platforms and existing infrastructure generate delays and cost overruns. Budget constraints, particularly in mid-sized organizations, limit the scope and pace of transformation. Data security and privacy concerns create apprehension about adopting cloud-based and AI-driven solutions, especially in regulated sectors.

4.4 Findings on Leadership

The data strongly affirms the primacy of leadership in transformation success. Organizations characterized by visible, communicative, and empathetic leadership report significantly higher employee engagement and lower resistance levels. Leaders who articulate a compelling vision for transformation, regularly address employee anxieties, and visibly model adaptive behaviors create conditions that accelerate change adoption. Conversely, passive or detached leadership—even when accompanied by substantial technology investment—correlates with poor transformation outcomes.

4.5 Findings on Organizational Culture

Organizational culture emerges as both a facilitator and a barrier. Cultures that explicitly reward curiosity, experimentation, and continuous learning are associated with higher change readiness scores and faster technology adoption. In such environments, employees perceive transformation as an opportunity rather than a threat. Rigid, traditionalist cultures, by contrast, inhibit information sharing, discourage innovation, and entrench resistance, often creating informal coalitions opposed to transformation.

4.6 Hypotheses Testing Results

H	Hypothesis	Result
H1	Leadership effectiveness positively relates to change management success.	Supported
H2	Employee resistance negatively impacts transformation success.	Supported
H3	Effective communication improves change management outcomes.	Supported
H4	Training investment positively influences employee adaptability.	Supported

All four hypotheses are supported by the data, providing empirical validation for the study's theoretical framework and affirming the critical roles of leadership, communication, and skill development in successful change management.



5. Discussion

5.1 The Human Imperative in Digital Transformation

The findings of this study collectively reinforce a central thesis: the primary determinant of digital transformation success is not technological sophistication but organizational and human readiness. This insight aligns with Kane et al.'s (2015) proposition that strategy—rather than technology—drives transformation and with the broader organizational behavior literature's emphasis on change receptivity as a cultural and psychological phenomenon.

The co-occurrence of employee resistance and communication failure in the findings is analytically significant. Drawing on Kotter's (1996) eight-step model, inadequate communication directly impairs the first four steps—creating urgency, building coalitions, developing vision, and communicating vision—thereby creating fertile conditions for resistance to proliferate. Organizations that invest in structured communication programs, by contrast, effectively short-circuit the uncertainty-resistance cycle.

5.2 Leadership as a Transformation Catalyst

The study's findings on leadership resonate with the McKinsey 7-S framework's emphasis on alignment between leadership style, shared values, and strategy. Leaders who visibly champion transformation, model adaptive behavior, and create psychologically safe environments for experimentation generate what Kotter terms a 'guiding coalition'—a critical mass of influential change advocates capable of overcoming organizational inertia.

Importantly, leadership effectiveness is not purely a function of authority. The findings suggest that leaders who engage in frequent, transparent, two-way communication—acknowledging challenges and uncertainties rather than projecting unfounded optimism—generate significantly higher trust and lower resistance than those who communicate only success narratives. This aligns with Bridges' Transition Model's recognition that leaders must help employees grieve the 'ending' phase before they can commit to a 'new beginning.'

5.3 Culture as Infrastructure

A key implication of the organizational culture findings is that culture functions not merely as an enabling condition but as actual infrastructure for digital transformation—as foundational as network connectivity or cloud capacity. Organizations in which the prevailing culture punishes failure, discourages horizontal collaboration, or maintains rigid hierarchies face structural impediments to transformation that cannot be resolved through technology investment alone.

The ADKAR model's emphasis on 'Desire'—the individual motivational component—directly connects to culture. In cultures where change is perceived as threatening rather than enlivening, employees may cognitively understand transformation (Awareness, Knowledge) but lack the motivational disposition to support it (Desire). Cultural transformation must therefore be treated as a prerequisite for, rather than a byproduct of, digital transformation.

5.4 Contextual Implications for Emerging Economies

The Indian context presents distinctive challenges that amplify global patterns. Pronounced skill gaps in digital literacy—particularly among older and non-technical employee cohorts—intensify resistance and training requirements. Cultural heterogeneity across organizational levels, geographies, and generational cohorts complicates uniform communication strategies. Government-led digitalization initiatives (e.g., Digital India) create external momentum but cannot substitute for internal change management capability. Organizations operating in emerging markets must therefore develop change management strategies that are contextually calibrated rather than template-imported from developed economy blueprints.



6. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and discussion, the following evidence-based recommendations are advanced for organizations navigating digital transformation:

6.1 Institute Structured Change Communication Programs

Organizations should establish dedicated change communication functions that deliver regular, multi-channel, and bidirectional updates on transformation progress. Communication should address the 'why' of transformation as prominently as the 'what' and 'how,' directly addressing employee concerns regarding job security and role evolution. Town halls, digital collaboration platforms, manager cascade briefings, and anonymous feedback channels should be combined to maximize reach and trust.

6.2 Invest Proportionally in Training and Upskilling

Training investment should be budgeted as a core transformation cost, not an afterthought. Organizations should conduct skills gap analyses prior to technology deployment and design tiered learning programs that accommodate varying digital literacy levels. Blended learning approaches—combining e-learning, on-the-job coaching, peer learning networks, and external certification pathways—have demonstrated strong outcomes in comparable contexts.

6.3 Develop Visible and Empathetic Leadership

Executive sponsors of transformation must be visible, accessible, and emotionally intelligent. Leadership development programs should build coaching capabilities, change communication skills, and cultural sensitivity. Middle managers, who mediate the gap between strategic intent and front-line execution, require particular developmental attention—their credibility and commitment are often decisive in managing local-level resistance.

6.4 Cultivate a Change-Ready Culture Deliberately

Cultural transformation requires explicit, sustained, and behaviorally reinforced interventions. Organizations should (a) redesign performance management systems to reward adaptive behaviors and cross-functional collaboration; (b) create safe spaces for experimentation, including structured pilot programs and internal innovation challenges; (c) recognize and visibly celebrate change champions; and (d) align recruitment criteria to include change adaptability as a core competency.

6.5 Embed Employee Participation in Transformation Design

Co-creation of transformation roadmaps with frontline employees—who possess contextual knowledge of operational realities—reduces resistance by generating a sense of ownership. Structured change ambassador networks, cross-functional design workshops, and regular pulse surveys create feedback loops that enable real-time course correction.

6.6 Prioritize Data Security and Governance

To alleviate cybersecurity-related apprehension, organizations should communicate clearly about data governance frameworks, access controls, and regulatory compliance measures. Transparency regarding data security practices builds employee and customer confidence and removes a frequently cited barrier to digital adoption.



7. Conclusion

This paper has examined, through both theoretical and empirical lenses, the change management barriers that impede digital transformation initiatives. The evidence converges on a decisive conclusion: the success of digital transformation is fundamentally a human and organizational challenge, not primarily a technological one. Organizations that treat transformation as a technology procurement exercise—without investing equivalently in managing the human transition—are structurally predisposed to failure.

The four tested hypotheses are all confirmed, validating that leadership effectiveness, communication quality, training investment, and organizational culture are statistically significant predictors of change management success during digital transformation. Employee resistance, while natural and expected, is neither inevitable nor intractable; it can be substantially mitigated through purposeful, empathetic, and well-resourced change management practice.

The theoretical models reviewed—Lewin, Kotter, ADKAR, McKinsey 7-S, and Bridges—offer complementary analytical lenses that, taken together, equip practitioners with a comprehensive toolkit for diagnosing and navigating the complex terrain of organizational change. Their collective message is consistent: change succeeds when it is approached as a human journey, not a technical deployment.

In the specific context of India and comparable emerging economies, the stakes are particularly high. Rapid digitalization presents extraordinary opportunities for organizational transformation and economic development. But realizing these opportunities requires building indigenous change management capability—developing leaders who can navigate cultural complexity, communication strategies that resonate across diverse stakeholder groups, and training ecosystems that can rapidly close digital skill gaps.

Future research should extend these findings through longitudinal designs, sector-specific analyses, and comparative cross-national studies. Particular attention should be devoted to the intersection of AI adoption and change management, and to the distinctive challenges facing small and medium enterprises in digitalization pathways.

In closing, digital transformation is not an event—it is an ongoing organizational journey. Organizations that master the art of change management do not merely survive disruption; they become its architects.

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