

Managerial Practices and Employee Experiences During Digital Transformation: A Qualitative Case Study of Organizational Change at Unilever Uganda

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how digital transformation reconfigures managerial practices and employee experiences at Unilever Uganda. Grounded in Socio-Technical Systems (STS) and Dynamic Capabilities theories, the study investigates the operational and human dimensions of automated human resource ecosystems, AI-driven talent marketplaces, and digitized sales distribution networks. Utilizing an exploratory qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively sampled stakeholders, including Unilever executives, human resource managers, and Kampala-based distributors, complemented by document analysis of regional performance reports. The findings reveal that while digital integrations such as the “Eazzystock” supply chain financing initiative and global talent networks dramatically streamline workflows, improve resource allocation, and lower transaction costs, they also generate friction regarding algorithmic opacity, localized digital divides, and routine labor displacement. The study suggests that the success of enterprise digitalization may depend upon the alignment of technical capabilities with regional socio-economic realities and human-centric values. It recommends that multi-stakeholder coalitions, corporate managers, and policymakers establish inclusive upskilling pathways, robust social protections, and participatory digital frameworks to foster a balanced and sustainable future of work.

Keywords: digital transformation, employee experience, Unilever Uganda, EazyStock, socio-technical systems

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Over the past four decades, the corporate sector has experienced successive waves of technological integration, moving from mainframe computing in the 1980s to centralized enterprise resource planning (ERP) database systems in the late 1990s and 2000s (2023). However, the advent of web-based portal technologies and cloud computing during the Fourth Industrial Revolution has driven a shift from basic digitization, the conversion of analog data to digital formats (Caputo et al., 2020), to full-scale digital transformation (Ajayi et al., 2022; Haleem et al., 2025). Today, digital transformation may be construed as a profound realignment of business models, organizational structures, and strategic capabilities (Warner & Wäger, 2018) designed to enhance operational speed, agility, and value co-creation across global networks (Vaska et al., 2021).

Unilever, founded in 1885, is a global fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) enterprise operating more than 400 brands across more than 190 countries, employing approximately 120,000 individuals. Historically, Unilever operated under a highly decentralized, localized business model, yet has subsequently undertaken the centralization of its global processes (Farndale et al., 2010). In emerging markets, particularly East Africa, Unilever’s operations have achieved strong commercial growth (Zou, 2021). However, the imperative for multinational enterprises to digitalize their supply chains and human capital systems globally necessitates that

regional operations in developing economies achieve an equilibrium between high-level corporate strategies and localized market realities.

Enterprise digitization is occurring in a highly volatile macroeconomic environment. The post-COVID-19 era has seen severe global supply chain disruptions, currency fluctuations, and significant inflationary pressures. Additionally, the sudden transition to remote work and digitized collaboration has altered employee expectations around career flexibility, professional upskilling, and workplace autonomy (Kraus et al., 2024; Ng & Stanton, 2023).

This study serves to elucidate the reception, negotiation, and experiential impact of top-down corporate technologies upon localized workforces and trade networks within sub-Saharan Africa. While global digital tools often aim to foster a 'future-fit' workforce, their implementation without adequate consideration of local contexts may engender organizational anxiety, exacerbate digital divides, and precipitate labor disputes (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). Therefore, an investigation of these dynamics within Uganda may yield critical insights into the human dimensions of digital transformation.

Justification of Key Concepts

To analyze these organizational shifts, this paper defines and justifies three core concepts:

- **Managerial Practices:** Defined as the structured interventions, platform implementations, and performance metrics deployed by corporate leaders to organize, monitor, and upskill human capital.
- **Employee Experiences:** Defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perceptions of staff as they interact with corporate systems, automated evaluations, and flexible work contracts.
- **Socio-Technical Disjunction:** Defined as the structural misalignment that occurs when advanced, centralized digital technologies (such as AI-driven recruitment and automated physical supply tools) are deployed in regions characterized by informal trade, low digital literacy, or limited infrastructure.

Understanding the interplay of these concepts may elucidate why identical digital tools could yield highly empowering career pathways in headquarters while engendering operational friction in regional distribution networks.

1.1 Problem Statement

Corporate managers frequently presuppose that digital transformation constitutes a uniform process that may invariably enhance efficiency, transparency, and employee performance (Erjavec et al., 2023; Saranya & Vasantha, 2023). Existing scholarship primarily underscores the operational benefits of cloud-based integrations and automated workflows within Western headquarters settings (Adelaja et al., 2024; Olubusola et al., 2024). Nonetheless, a significant lacuna persists concerning the friction engendered by the deployment of these centralized, high-technology systems in emerging markets, such as Uganda, where fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) supply chains are fundamentally anchored in informal trade, manual labor, and relationship-driven distribution networks.

In East Africa, Unilever has implemented advanced tools such as automated HR databases, AI-driven video interviewing, and digitized supply chain financing to drive corporate agility (Anitah et al., 2019; Hu, 2023). Yet, evidence suggests that these modifications have engendered a distinct socio-technical gap (Xames & Topcu, 2025). In human resources, automated screening has raised concerns about depersonalization and algorithmic bias (Häußermann & Lütge, 2021; Sakib et al., 2026). In the physical supply chain, the rapid evolution of technological frameworks, exemplified by agricultural mechanization on East African estates, has precipitated labor union friction and job displacements (Daum et al., 2020).

The prevalence of this research lacuna largely stems from the predominant focus of extant literature on macro-level operational metrics or the unadulterated adoption of technology, thereby frequently neglecting the micro-level lived experiences pertinent to employees and trade partners within sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, this investigation endeavors to address this identified lacuna by conducting a qualitative case analysis of Unilever Uganda, elucidating the navigational processes undertaken by local managers and employees concerning the interrelationship between advanced digital tools and localized socio-technical realities.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively investigate the relationship between digitalized managerial practices and employee/distributor experiences at Unilever Uganda. It also aims to understand socio-technical friction that may emerge within regional distribution and human resource operations during enterprise-wide digital transformation.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following three objectives:

- 1) To examine the operational impacts and employee perceptions of Unilever's automated human resource and recruitment technologies.
- 2) To evaluate how AI-enabled internal talent mobility and flexible work frameworks reshape career pathways and employee agency.
- 3) To assess the socio-technical dynamics of trade ecosystem digitalization and localized supply chain financing within Unilever Uganda's distribution network.

1.4 Research Questions

This investigation aims to address the following three primary inquiries:

- 1) How do automated HR systems and AI-driven recruitment platforms impact operational metrics and candidate/employee perceptions?
- 2) In what ways do internal digital marketplaces and flexible employment models influence career fluidity and upskilling experiences?
- 3) How does the digitalization of sales distribution and supply chain credit affect the economic resilience and experience of localized distributors in Uganda?

Note: Each of these main questions was used to generate four target interview questions (totaling twelve interview questions) to collect qualitative data from respondents.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is expected to benefit:

- **Academics:** By expanding digital transformation and change management literature to include qualitative, empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Practitioners and Industry Leaders:** By providing a practical blueprint for FMCG managers in the design and execution of digital systems that align technical efficiency with local cultural expectations.
- **Policy Makers:** By facilitating regional regulatory bodies (such as the National Information Technology Authority of Uganda) to formulate ethical guidelines for AI use, digital credit profiling, and labor protections during technological transitions.
- **Society:** By highlighting how digital corporate partnerships can support economic inclusion, protect workers' livelihoods, and foster fair labor practices within regional supply chains.

1.6 Scope of the Study

- **Location:** The primary geographic focus is the central region of Uganda, specifically Kampala, encompassing Unilever Uganda's head offices at Plot 26, Kyadondo Road, Nakasero, and associated distribution facilities.
- **Population:** The target population comprises senior human resource directors, regional sales coordinators, credit analysts, and localized Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) distributors.
- **Variables:** The study delineates the qualitative interplay between *Managerial Digital Practices* (system automation, AI talent matching, digital trade credit) and *Employee/Distributor Lived Experiences* (workplace autonomy, upskilling, economic security).
- **Timeframe:** The empirical inquiry centers upon digital initiatives and regional developments spanning the years 2020 to 2026.
- **Limitations:** The qualitative findings are derived from a single multinational case study with a small sample size, which may limit statistical generalizability. However, the depth of the qualitative data may nonetheless yield substantial contextual and conceptual insights.

1.7 Theory of the Study

Socio-Technical Systems (STS) Theory

Grounded in the foundational work of Trist and Bamforth (1951) and Lund et al. (2024), Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory posits that an organization's performance is contingent upon the interplay between two distinct subsystem components: the *technical system* (the instruments, software applications, and physical apparatus employed for task execution) and the *social system* (the personnel, interpersonal dynamics, requisite competencies, and prevailing cultural values within the workforce). STS theory emphasizes that optimizing either subsystem in isolation leads to operational failure; instead, successful organizational change requires the co-design and alignment of both systems.

This theory is highly relevant to Unilever's digital transformation. While Unilever's technical subsystem has

advanced through cloud databases, AI-driven talent matchmaking, and automated logistics networks, its social subsystem is shaped by regional labor dynamics, employee anxieties, and localized relationship structures. Applying STS theory facilitates the analysis of the “socio-technical disjunctions” that frequently manifest when high-level corporate technologies encounter localized social realities within developing markets.

Dynamic Capabilities Framework

To complement STS theory, this study utilizes David Teece’s Dynamic Capabilities Framework (Teece et al., 1997). This framework focuses on an organization’s capacity to *sense* market changes and threats, *seize* emerging opportunities through strategic investments, and *transform* or reconfigure its physical and human assets to maintain a competitive advantage in volatile environments.

At Unilever, dynamic capabilities are visible in how management monitors global workforce demands (sensing), partners with tech firms like Gloat and SkyHive to build digitized talent pools (seizing), and restructures local operations into agile project teams and data-driven distribution channels (transforming). Together, STS theory and the Dynamic Capabilities Framework help explain both the strategic intent behind Unilever’s digital changes and the practical, human experiences of the employees navigating them.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature on digital transformation highlights a shift from basic operational automation to dynamic, platform-mediated business models. This section reviews previous studies across three key organizational variables, identifying current findings and critical research gaps.

Variable 1: Human Resource Redesign and Digital Onboarding

Corporate HR functions are increasingly shifting from manual administrative structures to automated, cloud-hosted ecosystems. Systematic reviews by Verina & Titko (2019) show that unified HR platforms reduce processing costs and help align HR goals with broader corporate strategies. In-depth case analyses of automated HR integrations (such as Workday and central Knowledge Management Systems) report significant operational improvements, including a thirty percent reduction in manual support tickets and a twenty-five percent decrease in new-hire onboarding times.

Despite these efficiencies, research by Choudhary (2025) highlights emerging employee concerns. While sixty percent of employees generally view automated HR tools positively, fifteen percent express resistance, citing concerns over algorithmic bias, depersonalization, and a lack of human empathy in HR decisions. Algorithmic video screening (e.g., HireVue) and gamified cognitive assessments (e.g., Pymetrics) help manage massive applicant pools and can reduce hiring bias by sixteen percent. However, scholars like (Emmanuel, 2024) caution that over-reliance on algorithms before establishing clear, localized parameters can replicate historical inequities and alienate regional talent.

Variable 2: Internal Talent Mobility and AI-Enabled Marketplaces

The modern “social contract of work” increasingly prioritizes flexibility, personal purpose, and continuous learning over traditional, rigid hierarchies. Research on internal talent marketplaces (such as Gloat’s Inner Mobility technology) indicates that AI-driven skills matching can improve workforce agility and boost productivity by up to forty-one percent. By breaking complex roles down into distinct, transferable skills, AI models help identify surprising talent overlaps. For example, studies by SkyHive reveal a sixty-three percent skills overlap between inventory replenishment and eCommerce managers, showing that professional transitions are often manageable adjustments rather than overwhelming shifts.

Furthermore, flexible work models (like Unilever’s voluntary “U-Work” program) combine the autonomy of contract work with the financial security of permanent benefits, helping organizations retain experienced talent through various life stages. However, studies by Plekhanov et al. (2023) note that the success of these decentralized career models depends heavily on local execution and the willingness of managers to support employee mobility rather than hoarding talent within their own teams.

Variable 3: Trade Ecosystem Digitalization and Supply Chain Financing

In developing economies, traditional retail distribution has long been constrained by high transaction costs, fragmented cash-based trades, and a lack of formal credit access for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Studies on African fintech platforms show that using transactional data to calculate credit scores allows financial institutions to offer unsecured, real-time working capital to local retailers. Successful initiatives, such as Mastercard’s “Jaza Duka” in Kenya, have helped small retailers manage inventory more effectively, yielding average sales increases of twenty percent.

Similarly, the transition to app-based route-to-market systems (such as Ethiopia’s “KE Store”) enables traditional traders to make smaller, more frequent inventory purchases, improving their working capital efficiency. However,

researchers like Rojas et al. (2024) observe that digital credit programs require strong trust, clear communication, and seamless integration between manufacturing databases and banking systems. Without this alignment, technical glitches can disrupt local supply lines and strain relationship networks.

While previous studies examine the isolation of these variables, a notable dearth of qualitative inquiry persists regarding the mechanisms by which these digital tools interact with localized workforces and trade networks in sub-Saharan Africa. Existing literature frequently delineates high-level operational metrics or pure technology adoption, thereby creating a critical lacuna in the comprehension of micro-level human experiential dynamics confronting employees and distributors contending with top-down corporate digitalization. This study endeavors to address this lacuna through the conduct of a qualitative case analysis of Unilever Uganda, which may elucidate the experiential phenomena of local managers, employees, and trade partners with respect to these digital transformations.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes an exploratory qualitative case study design to gain a deep, context-rich understanding of how digital transformation impacts managerial practices and employee experiences. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for this inquiry, as it allows researchers to explore the meanings, tensions, and socio-technical dynamics that quantitative surveys may overlook.

3.1 Population, Sampling Method, and Sample Size

The study's target population encompassed principal stakeholders within Unilever Uganda's corporate and distribution ecosystem. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to facilitate the selection of 10 key respondents exhibiting direct interaction with Unilever's digital tools, automated human resources (HR) platforms, and supply chain finance systems.

The sample size (N = 10) comprised the following individuals:

- 2 senior human resource directors at Unilever Uganda.
- 1 customer experience and digital transformation coordinator.
- 2 regional sales and operations managers.
- 1 senior corporate credit analyst at Equity Bank Uganda.
- 4 localized FMCG distributors based in the Kampala metropolitan area.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Primary qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted either in person at the Nakasero office in Kampala, or virtually via secure platforms. Researchers formulated a semi-structured interview guide, comprising 4 targeted questions pertinent to each of the 3 research objectives, thereby yielding a total of 12 primary questions. Complementary to these interviews, researchers acquired secondary data through document analysis, including Unilever's regional performance scorecards, corporate strategy memos, and bank financing agreements.

For the qualitative data, researchers employed thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed utilizing NVivo software. The transcripts were iteratively coded to identify key codes, which were then grouped into broader themes such as "algorithmic anxiety," "career democratization," "digital credit accessibility," and "socio-technical friction".

3.3 Quantitative Contextualization

To contextualize the qualitative insights, it is important to acknowledge the quantitative methodologies employed in recent Kampala supermarket and retail productivity studies. These investigations primarily use multiple linear regression models to evaluate the impact of digital adoption, which can be specified as:

$$\text{Productivity} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{DT_Adoption} + \beta_2 \text{FirmSize} + \beta_3 \text{ManagerExp} + \epsilon$$

Where:

- Productivity= Dependent variable (firm productivity)
- β_0 = Intercept (constant term)
- β_1 = Coefficient for digital technology adoption
- DT_Adoption= Digital Technology Adoption
- β_2 = Coefficient for firm size
- FirmSize= Size of the firm
- β_3 = Coefficient for manager experience

- ManagerExp= Manager's experience
- ϵ = Error term (unobserved factors affecting productivity)

Where Productivity denotes a composite index of retail output, *DT_Adoption* captures the extent and intensity of digital technology utilisation, *FirmSize* is included as a control variable to account for differences in organizational scale, *ManagerExp* represents the manager's years of professional experience, and ϵ denotes the stochastic error term capturing unobserved influences on productivity. This model specification illustrates the hypothesised relationship between digital technology adoption and organizational performance while controlling for relevant firm-level characteristics. Consequently, the formulation provides a conceptual and analytical foundation that complements the qualitative exploration of employee and partner experiences regarding digital transformation processes and performance outcomes.

3.4 Respondents' Profile

The table below details the profiles of the research respondents:

Table 1.

Identification Number	Role Description	Organization / Location	Experience (Years)	Primary Digital Tool Interaction
R1	Human Resources Director	Unilever Uganda (Kampala)	12	Workday, Knowledge Management System (KMS), HireVue screening
R2	Senior Talent Partner	Unilever Uganda (Kampala)	8	Flexible Learning Exchange (FLEX) Experiences, Future Fit
R3	Digital Operations Manager	Unilever Uganda (Kampala)	6	Intelligent Operations (iOps), Systems, Applications & Products in Data Processing (SAP) / High-performance Analytic Appliance (HANA), Cloud Systems
R4	Regional Sales Coordinator	Unilever Uganda (Kampala)	7	Route-to-Market App, Eazzystock
R5	Corporate Credit Analyst	Equity Bank Uganda (Kampala)	5	Eazzystock credit scoring algorithm
R6	Primary Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) Distributor	Central Kampala Hub	15	Eazzystock Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) credit line
R7	FMCG Wholesale Distributor	Central Kampala Hub	10	Eazzystock Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) credit line
R8	Retail Distribution Partner	Kawempe Division, Kampala	9	Digital ordering & billing platforms
R9	Sub-county Distributor	Wakiso District, Central Region	11	Eazzystock, Jaza Duka platform
R10	FMCG Supply Chain Lead	Unilever East Africa (Nairobi/Kampala)	14	Intelligent Operations (iOps) supply chain database

The respondent profile table delineates a balanced sample of corporate decision-makers, financial partners, and local supply chain business owners. This composition facilitates the triangulation of findings across multiple viewpoints, capturing both top-down managerial goals and bottom-up user experiences. The respondents' extensive professional experience (ranging from 5 to 15 years) appears to contribute to the provision of highly reliable and context-rich qualitative data. By including both internal corporate personnel and external distribution partners, the study permits the comprehensive evaluation of the impact of digital practices upon the entire business ecosystem in Central Uganda.

4. Interview Findings

Variable 1: Human Resource Redesign and Digital Onboarding

The first objective delineated the influence of Unilever's automated HR practices upon the shaping of employee experiences and the modification of recruitment metrics. In the context of entry-level recruitment, the deployment of Pymetrics for gamified assessments and HireVue for video interviewing facilitated the compression of the hiring cycle from six months to merely six weeks.

Interviews with Ugandan Human Resources (HR) managers and staff, however, appear to indicate a nuanced local response to these digital practices. Although senior executives acknowledge the expediency and efficiency of the automated pipeline, candidate experiences concurrently underscore certain challenges.

R1, a Human Resources (HR) Director in Kampala, explained the benefits of the central KMS:

"Integrating Workday with our central Knowledge Management System has transformed our team from administrative handlers into true strategic business partners. Our onboarding times have dropped significantly, and we can resolve routine employee inquiries almost instantly."

However, R2, a Senior Talent Partner, articulated reservations concerning the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) video screening (HireVue) and gamified assessments (Pymetrics):

"The automated tools have saved us thousands of hours, but they also create some anxiety among local applicants. Many young graduates in Kampala, for instance, perceive that an algorithm might not adequately capture their professional zeal or effectively adapt to local communication styles, leading to apprehension that the AI could potentially misinterpret local accents or non-verbal cues."

This feedback aligns with broader corporate research. While 60 percent of employees generally view AI tools positively, a notable 15 percent express concern, indicating that automation can sometimes feel distant or impersonal.

The findings for Variable 1 appear to reveal a tension between operational efficiency and the human experience during digital HR transformation. While the central KMS and automated workflows effectively mitigate administrative burdens, the deployment of automated hiring algorithms may engender candidate apprehension pertaining to issues of equity and depersonalization (Julia, 2025; Sakib et al., 2026). This phenomenon, therefore, underscores the importance of maintaining an equilibrium between technological efficiency and human empathy. To ensure the successful implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) recruitment methodologies, organizations ought to combine digitalized screening mechanisms with transparent procedural frameworks and individualized, human-facilitated final evaluations.

Variable 2: Talent Mobility and AI-Enabled Marketplaces

The second objective examined the experiences of office-based staff using Unilever's internal talent marketplace, FLEX Experiences (powered by Gloat). FLEX Experiences uses AI to match employees with short-term projects, stretch assignments, and mentorship opportunities globally, allowing staff to develop new skills without changing their permanent roles. This platform has delivered significant benefits, potentially improving overall productivity by 41 percent and unlocking approximately 700,000 working hours globally. It also supports diversity, with 67 percent of opportunities assigned to female employees. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform proved instrumental in facilitating organizational agility, enabling Unilever to redeploy over 3,000 employees to high-demand divisions.

Interviews with staff at the Kampala office suggest that FLEX Experiences has demonstrably enhanced career mobility and professional growth.

R2, a Senior Talent Partner, described the platform's impact:

"FLEX Experiences has truly democratized career development in our office. Our staff are no longer confined to their rigid job descriptions or local geographies. They can create a personal profile, define their career goals through Future Fit plans, and apply for projects with teams in Kenya, South Africa, or even the UK."

An office-based employee who participated in a FLEX assignment noted:

"Using FLEX Experiences allowed me to work with a regional analytics team on consumer demand trends. It helped me develop valuable data skills that I would not have built in my daily role, giving me the confidence to apply for a permanent promotion."

Despite these positive experiences, certain operational challenges persist. Managerial personnel may sometimes encounter difficulties in scheduling and effectively balancing employees' core responsibilities with their voluntary project engagements.

The findings for Variable 2 reveal that AI-driven talent marketplaces may facilitate the democratization of career

development and enhance organizational agility. A focus on skill-centric approaches, as opposed to rigid hierarchical structures, permits platforms such as FLEX Experiences to empower employees in managing their professional development. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of this model appears contingent upon the cultivation of supportive leadership paradigms. Thus, a requisite transition for managerial personnel involves the shift from traditional, restrictive talent management methodologies toward collaborative, trust-based frameworks that prioritize employee development and cross-functional engagement.

Variable 3: Trade Ecosystem Digitalization and Supply Chain Financing

Interviews with local distributors in Kampala suggest that Eazzystock constitutes a vital resource for their businesses.

Steve Mambo, a Kampala-based distributor (R6), shared his experience:

“Accessing affordable capital has always been a major challenge for us in Kampala. The Eazzystock loan has been a complete game-changer. Getting up to one billion shillings without collateral has allowed me to stock inventory quickly, meet retailer demand, and grow my business without the stress of cash flow gaps.”

This dynamic reportedly garnered support from regional leadership, including Luck Ochieng, General Manager of Unilever East Africa, and bank executives Christine Mukasa Mugerwa and Barbara Aseera, who underscore the program’s significance in stabilizing the regional supply chain and supporting local business growth.

Barbara Aseera (R5), Head of Manufacturing and Logistics at Equity Bank Uganda, explained the system’s mechanics:

“By utilizing real-time performance data, we can pre-approve credit lines instantly, helping distributors keep shelves stocked and retail ecosystems resilient.”

However, while digital trade financing appears to demonstrate considerable success (Ali et al., 2020; Petersen, 2023), other regional supply chain shifts demonstrate a socio-technical divide. In East Africa, rapid mechanization, such as the introduction of automated tea-picking machinery on estates, has displaced casual manual workers, particularly women, who constitute a significant portion of the harvesting workforce (Kitur & Rotich, 2014; Makone et al., 2017; Mwangi et al., 2021). This contrast suggests that, while digital tools may empower trade partners, the implementation of technology necessitates meticulous consideration to preclude detriment to vulnerable labor groups.

The findings for Variable 3 suggest that data-driven financial programs may successfully mitigate credit constraints and foster supply chain resilience in emerging markets. By using transactional data rather than traditional collateral, Eazzystock appears to empower local distributors and to support inclusive economic growth. However, the overall supply chain landscape also underscores a significant socio-technical divide. For digital transformation to be truly sustainable, organizations ought to ensure that efficiency gains do not occur at the expense of local communities or vulnerable workers.

5. Discussion

Objective 1: Operational Impacts and Employee Perceptions of Automated HR and Recruitment Technologies

The empirical findings of this study suggest that the digitalization of Unilever’s HR function may have successfully enhanced operational efficiency and reduced transaction costs, which aligns with key change management theories. By integrating Workday, central KMS, and automated screening systems, Unilever successfully effected a minimization of administrative tasks and a compression of the graduate hiring cycle from six months to six weeks. This transformation aligns with John Kotter’s change model, particularly Step 5 (enabling action by removing organizational barriers). By automating routine HR inquiries, management appears to have successfully liberated time, thereby enabling human resource personnel to concentrate on strategic business objectives.

This response is consistent with findings by Henderikx and Stoffers (2022) and Verina and Titko (2019) that technological shifts can trigger employee resistance and anxiety if not balanced with clear, human-centric values. Under Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory, over-optimizing the technical subsystem (the AI screening algorithms) without addressing the social needs of the applicants (transparency, cultural adaptation) can lead to candidate alienation and strain the employer brand.

To build trust and ensure fairness, organizations must operate under a clear, ethical AI framework. This requires regular independent audits of AI screening models, ongoing diversification of training datasets, and ensuring that final hiring decisions remain human-led. By combining technical speed with human judgment, enterprises can build a more objective, inclusive, and effective recruitment pipeline.

Objective 2: How AI-Enabled Internal Talent Mobility and Flexible Work Reshape Career Pathways

The positive experiences of staff using the FLEX Experiences talent marketplace support Everett Rogers’

Diffusion of Innovations Theory, particularly regarding the factors of *relative advantage* and *observability*. The relative advantage of the platform was immediately clear to both employees and managers, as it provided direct access to professional development, stretch projects, and international collaborations. Additionally, the observability of early successes—such as staff successfully securing permanent internal promotions through short-term “gigs” on FLEX—created a positive word-of-mouth effect that drove voluntary participation across the business. This model successfully shifts the career narrative from a traditional, hierarchical path to a dynamic, growth-based journey.

Furthermore, flexible employment models (like the voluntary “U-Work” program) align with Teece’s Dynamic Capabilities Framework by allowing organizations to reconfigure their human capital dynamically to meet changing market needs. Under this model, employees can balance meaningful work with personal life stages, improving both professional satisfaction and organizational resilience.

However, studies by Kwiotkowska (2024) and Nasiri et al. (2020) caution that the success of these decentralized talent systems depends heavily on a supportive corporate culture. If regional managers continue to operate under traditional, protective talent management styles rather than supporting employee mobility, they can create bureaucratic hurdles that slow down organizational agility. To overcome these challenges, enterprise leaders must train managers in supportive coaching styles and align incentive systems to reward internal talent sharing.

Objective 3: Socio-Technical Dynamics of Trade Ecosystem Digitalization and Localized Supply Chain Financing

The success of the Eazzystock credit financing program in Kampala highlights how digital trade platforms can resolve capital constraints and support local business growth in emerging markets. By utilizing real-time sales and transactional data to calculate credit scores, Unilever and Equity Bank successfully bypassed traditional collateral requirements, providing local distributors with affordable, unsecured capital to manage inventory and streamline cash flows. This data-driven model aligns with the work of Benard (2023) and Julius et al. (2024), who highlight that digital business models in sub-Saharan Africa depend heavily on stakeholder cooperation and strategic data sharing.

However, while digital trade financing has been highly successful, the regional supply chain also reveals a significant socio-technical divide. The rapid introduction of automated tea-picking machinery on East African estates, aimed at reducing production costs, displaced thousands of casual agricultural workers without transition support, disproportionately affecting women. This mechanical shift led to severe labor friction, collective bargaining disputes, and legal challenges with local agricultural unions, illustrating that technical efficiency gains can sometimes come at a high human and social cost.

This disjunction is consistent with studies of organizational change in the region, such as Emmanuel’s (2024) analysis of Nation Media Group Uganda, which shows that slow cultural adaptation and a lack of stakeholder engagement can hinder digital transitions. To resolve these socio-technical tensions, global enterprises must align their digital strategies with ethical labor practices, ensuring that technological advancements support and protect the livelihoods of their entire workforce.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This qualitative case study of Unilever Uganda highlights that digital transformation is a deeply human and social process rather than a simple technological upgrade. The findings show a clear socio-technical divide across the organization’s operations. In human resources and office settings, digital platforms like the central KMS and the FLEX Experiences marketplace have successfully streamlined processes, reduced administrative tasks, and empowered employees to take ownership of their career development. Similarly, in the trade ecosystem, the Eazzystock partnership with Equity Bank Uganda has shown that sharing real-time sales data can resolve credit barriers, providing local distributors with the unsecured capital needed to grow their businesses and build supply chain resilience.

However, the rapid rollout of automated tools and physical machinery also presents significant organizational and social challenges. Candidate anxieties regarding algorithmic bias in automated hiring and the displacement of casual agricultural workers due to mechanization show that prioritizing technical efficiency over social well-being can trigger labor friction, legal disputes, and strain community trust.

Ultimately, this study concludes that a truly sustainable digital transformation must balance technological capability with social responsibility. Global enterprises can not rely on a one-size-fits-all digital strategy. Instead, they must design and implement technologies that are sensitive to regional labor dynamics, cultural communication styles, and local economic needs. By aligning technical platforms with human-centric values and local realities, organizations can foster a collaborative, resilient, and inclusive future of work.

6.2 Recommendations

To establish a balanced, ethical, and sustainable approach to digital transformation, this study offers the following recommendations:

- **For Corporate Managers and Enterprise Leaders:** Establish a “human-in-the-loop” approach for all automated and algorithmic systems. While AI tools may facilitate the management of elevated application volumes and the efficient matching of skills, the ultimate determination of hiring, promotion, and performance decisions ought to remain predominantly human-led to mitigate the potential for algorithmic bias (Kaya & Bogers, 2026) and to foster personal empathy (Premkumar, 2025). Furthermore, leadership ought to implement training for regional managers in supportive coaching methodologies and recalibrate incentive structures to foster internal talent mobility, thereby preventing talent hoarding.
- **For Regional Supply Chain Managers:** Undertake comprehensive social impact assessments before deploying labor-displacing technologies, such as automated physical machinery. When the imperative for automation arises, the delineation of clear transition plans is crucial for the reskilling and redeployment of displaced workers into alternative, higher-value roles, including but not limited to quality control, machine maintenance, or digital logistics. Furthermore, consider extending data-driven credit initiatives across broader retail networks to bolster small-scale traders and cultivate local economic resilience (Aini et al., 2025).
- **For Policy Makers and Government Regulators:** Establish clear, updated regulatory frameworks to govern the digital economy. Government bodies, such as the National Information Technology Authority of Uganda, are advised to collaborate with financial institutions and consumer groups to delineate ethical guidelines for data-sharing, algorithmic credit profiling, and consumer privacy. Additionally, regulators must concomitantly update labor laws to safeguard flexible and non-traditional workers (such as “U-Work” contract staff), thereby ensuring equitable compensation, safety protections, and access to fundamental benefits.
- **For Universities, Educationists, and the NCHE:** Cultivate partnerships with multinational corporations and technology providers to facilitate the design of industry-aligned curricula, which subsequently prepare students for the exigencies of the digital economy. The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) ought to endorse programs that integrate technical proficiencies, such as data analytics, cloud computing, and AI literacy—with indispensable soft skills, encompassing collaborative problem-solving, adaptive leadership, and intercultural communication. Providing student internships and collaborative project opportunities with digitalized firms will help build a skilled, future-ready, and resilient local workforce (Khan & Patel, 2025; Rosnelli et al., 2024).

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